

## A Mile of Revelations

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### Summary

Follows HBP. The night of Dumbledore's death, Draco is given to Snape to mold into a better Death Eater. However, Snape instead abandons Draco at Number 4 Privet Drive. This is beginning of a most unlikely alliance. Harry/Draco PART 1 COMPLETE

### History and Story Information

"A Mile of Revelations" sits in the book category within the Harry Potter fandom. It was archived on **2006-05-23**, last updated on **2007-04-10** and has been visited **38881** times. It has 166 listed reviews, **23** chapters and a total of **138564** words.

Genre: Action/Adventure

Listed Characters: None

Average Vote: ★★★★★

## Chapter One

*"Run, Draco!"*

He felt dizzy. He couldn't do it. He'd barely made it just to here, and that was with Snape yanking him up by his robes, forcing him upright. And if he left, it would all be real. Dumbledore would be ... Draco bent at the waist and threw up. The familiar burn flared through his throat, and for a few blessed seconds he couldn't think. He could hear Potter screaming at Snape, and he could see the flames on Hagrid's house out the corner of his eye, but everything seemed muffled to him past the roaring in his ears.

It was the greenish glow of the Dark Mark that shook him into action. The mere sight of it made him flinch. The objective had been achieved, but he had failed. Panic gripped him and he began to half trot and half stagger to the gates. And yet he felt like he was running in a circle. If he stayed, he'd be captured and punished, and if he left he'd be hunted and punished by both sides. Wormtail's silver hand came to his mind followed by an unbidden image of his mother's pale face as she said goodbye to him at the start of the term. A hysterical laugh bubbled through his clenched teeth and into the frenzied night air. A bone-deep fear, at once cold and frantic, urged him on. The Dark Lord would never forgive the Malfoy family, but perhaps he could at least save his mother.

Draco slashed in the air with his wand, and the gates burst open, slamming into the high walls and bouncing back a few feet. The smell of freshly cut grass filled his nostrils, and the most asinine thought assailed him: he didn't know the rune for fire, but he did know the one for flight; what would happen to his broom? What would the house-elves do with all of his dirty laundry? He supposed Blaise might take it. They were the same size.

He could hear the heavy rumble of the other Death Eaters behind him, and as soon as he was beyond the school gate he Disapparated for the first time in his life.

*"Draco!"*

Draco looked up and saw that he was in one of the gardens at the Malfoy Manor. So, he had made it here without splinching himself. An absurd urge to laugh about Twycross's three D's possessed him, but the sight of his mother's exhausted and terrified face quelled the urge. The lit tip of her wand illuminated the dark circles under her eyes and that the skin was stretched tight over her cheekbones. In sum, she looked very similar to what he saw in the mirror these past few months. He saw his mother's eyes widen for a moment before she looked down at the ground and genuflected.

Draco turned around, and the Dark Lord sat in a whicker chair a few feet away from him with Nagini curled in his lap. Draco quickly sank to his knees, averting his eyes, and was thankful when the others Apparated in. The idea of being in an intimate audience with the Dark Lord used to thrill him, but now made him tremble in terror.

"Master," they all murmured, kneeling.

"Well?" Voldemort asked, pinning his attention on Draco.

The weight of the stare practically crippled Draco. "My Lord, Snape killed Dumbledore," said Draco in a high, quivering voice. He flinched when Voldemort frowned, and he tensed his muscles for his punishment.

"Snape?" In the absolute silence of the garden Voldemort's sibilant whisper seemed louder than Draco's voice. "Is this true?"

"Yes, Master," said Snape. He looked up at Voldemort with an indefinable expression on his face. "Draco disarmed him. He would have killed him, but Amycus, Alecto, and Greyback distracted him, interrupting his concentration needed for performing the Killing Curse. So I did it, Master."

A twisted look of joy contorted Voldemort's face as he looked at Snape. "Good. Excellent!" Voldemort cried. Snape bowed his head, looking please. "You shall be rewarded, Snape."

Snape crawled on all fours to Voldemort and kissed the hem of his robes. "Thank you, Master," he murmured. He turned his face up to Voldemort and Draco was stunned at the besotted look on Snape's face. Voldemort brushed the back of his hand against Snape's cheek, and Snape shivered in rapture before kneeling obediently at Voldemort's side like a faithful pet.

Nagini hissed and Voldemort cocked his head to the side, listening to her. He hissed something back, and Draco could feel a bead of sweat rolling between his shoulder blades. He shifted his weight, and the movement caught Voldemort's eye.

"I have been generous to the Malfoys, have I not, Narcissa?" Voldemort asked quietly, a sharp and cold bite to his voice.

"Most generous, Master," Narcissa agreed quickly. "Master, we are not worthy!"

"No, you're not."

Draco hunched his shoulders. This was it, then, he thought. The one thing he had to be grateful

for was that at least he and his mother would be together. He would have liked to see her face, or to give her a last look, or some chance to tell her what was very rarely said in the Malfoy family. He thought about turning around and telling it to her anyway. He had, after all, nothing to lose. He was intensely aware of everything around him, and he supposed people who are about to die feel this way, grasping onto everything as though trying to squeeze a few more seconds of life into their lives. He could feel every piece of gravel digging into his knees. The perfume of his mother's roses, a strong, rich smell, quite at odds with their delicate petals, was intoxicating, and he breathed deeply, filling his lungs with their beauty. He rolled his shoelace between his thumb and pointer finger, marveling at the dexterity and agility of his hands. A thousand other details he had never before appreciated now fascinated him, and he almost missed what Voldemort said next.

"But without Draco, my Death Eaters would not have made it into the castle, and Dumbledore would still be alive. Lord Voldemort rewards those who have been useful, even if not as useful as desired," said Voldemort quietly as he ran his forefinger along Nagini's scales.

Draco looked up at Voldemort, blinking, and he realized he had been crying. He heard his mother's strangled sob of relief and was dimly aware of her murmurings of gratitude. He heard his own groveling as though it were a faint echo while his mind tried to wrap itself around appreciating that he was not going to die today.

"But you have much to learn, Draco," Voldemort said coolly, ignoring Narcissa. "And I expect you to serve me better than Lucius ever did." He looked behind Draco to Narcissa. "Let us hope that Lucius' weaknesses were not carried in his seed."

Draco gritted his teeth and could feel the muscles in his cheek clench. It was bad enough that he had to endure taunts about Lucius at Hogwarts. Impossibly, Voldemort noticed. "Do you hate me, Draco?" he asked softly, rising from his chair. He glided over to Draco, and with every step, Draco felt his heart flutter like a panicked bird, beating itself against the bars of the cage that imprisoned it. "Do you wish you had never entered into my service?"

Draco was trembling. Everything his Aunt Bellatrix had taught him about Occlumency abandoned him, and with a horror that blossomed from the very pit of his stomach he knew that his mind was an open book for the Dark Lord to read. The Dark Lord could pick through all of his fears, and doubts, and frustrations. Voldemort would know everything, and then Draco and Narcissa really would die.

"Master," he choked, terror lancing his voice so that it rose several octaves higher than normal. "Master, I'm sorry!" He threw himself at Voldemort's feet and kissed the hem of his robe as he had seen Snape do just a few minutes earlier. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask for forgiveness when a stroke of brilliance touched him.

"Master, please, don't forgive me!" he begged.

He felt Voldemort tense in surprise; lowering the foot he had raised to kick Draco away.

"Please punish me so that I may serve you better," he implored. "Like Snape."

It wasn't really a lie. Draco would rather find a place where Voldemort couldn't touch him or his family, but such a world didn't exist. And while Voldemort went through his favorites rather quickly, he did reward them for the brief time they held his favor. What was a Crucio here or there if it would make him the Dark Lord's favorite? And Dumbledore was gone, so it was pointless to run to the Light side. He just didn't have any options, which put him exactly where he had been that day last summer when his mother came into his room and told him that the Dark Lord had a mission for him.

"Yes," he said so quietly that Draco was sure if it just wasn't wishful thinking on his part. "He will be your responsibility, Severus."

"Yes, my Lord," said Snape, not quite keeping his surprise from coloring his voice. It made no difference though because Voldemort had already stepped away from Draco and was facing the other Death Eaters who had been kneeling silently.

Draco darted a glance at Snape and was startled to meet Snape's eyes. The rage in those eyes was too much for Draco, and he turned away. The Dark Lord had made no mention of Snape's reward, and he had a sinking feeling he was supposed to be Snape's reward for defeating Dumbledore. Draco did not need to be told what a disappointment this must have been for Snape, and he flinched away from dwelling on how Snape would punish him. He rose to his knees and for the second time that night and that year, for he had not returned to the Manor that Christmas, he looked at his mother. But she was not looking at him but past him, at Snape, with a triumphant and fierce look in her eyes. She bore little resemblance to the elegant and refined woman he had known all of his life. He looked back over his shoulder to catch Snape's expression, but Snape's attention was focused on the Dark Lord. Dutifully, Draco focused on what Voldemort was saying.

Even though he was addressing a crowd, Voldemort's voice was quiet. Draco could hear the rustle of the leaves as the wind blew through the rose bushes.

"My Death Eaters, we have triumphed tonight. For a great many years, Dumbledore has thwarted my ambitions to purge the world of its taint and put Mudbloods and Muggles in their proper places." He paused and smiled coldly. "As our slaves."

A wave of approving murmurs swept through the garden. Draco couldn't help but be distracted

by glancing over at his mother. She seemed to be struggling to school her face into an expression of rapture and attention, but Draco caught flashes of that victorious look she had given Snape. Draco clenched his teeth and looked determinedly at Voldemort, forcing himself to pay attention to what he was saying.

"We will revolutionize Hogwarts, and make it into the place Salazar Slytherin, my ancestor, had intended it to be," said Voldemort.

Again, Draco's attention waned. He was truly exhausted. The fear of the Dark Lord that had spurred him on while he was at Hogwarts throughout the entire year, and the events of tonight had pushed him beyond his limits. He could feel himself teetering on the edge of consciousness, and he longed for a vial of Dreamless Sleep Potion and when he woke up he'd find everything had been a horrible nightmare.

He was reminded sharply of Dumbledore falling off the tower, and his gut wrenched painfully. After how hard it had been to fix the Vanishing Cabinet, Dumbledore had seemed too easy. Draco furrowed his brow, not even trying anymore to pay attention to Voldemort. Why had it been so easy to disarm the wizard who had killed Grindelwald? Dumbledore, the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared, had been disarmed by a sixteen-year old boy? Was it really old age, like Dumbledore had told Amicus? And why had there been that second broom? He thought of the look on Snape's face when he killed Dumbledore, and Draco's hands shook. That look was eerily similar to the one he had just given to Draco.

The rustling of robes roused Draco's attention, and he looked up. The Death Eaters were standing up, and Voldemort was striding past him, toward Nagini. Hurriedly, Draco got to his feet but staggered because his feet had fallen asleep.

"Come, Draco," Snape said, not looking at him. Draco stamped his feet, trying to get the blood circulating, and he hobbled over to Snape.

"Severus, wait!"

Draco turned to find his mother hurrying over to them. Her hands were outstretched before her, and Draco winced at the sight of her frail looking wrists. Even in his weakened state, he could crush the bones with one hand. Snape merely looked at her with a blank expression. Unexpectedly, Narcissa wrapped her arms around Draco. It was not a comfortable embrace; Narcissa's bony arms squeezed Draco's torso, and her cold cheek pressed against his neck. He cradled her smaller frame against him, careful not to hurt her. Her shoulders shook under his hands, and he was fiercely glad he had made it this far. If he had nothing else in the world than knowing she was safe, he would endure anything.

"Everything will be fine," she whispered into his ear. He could feel her tears running down his neck and soaking the collar of his school robes. He wanted to shake her for her maternal illusions.

"Yes, Mother," he sighed. She pulled away from him and looked in him the face. He opened his mouth, wanting to say it, to tell her that he loved her. Death had brushed past him so closely tonight that its effects were still lingering. Snape cleared his throat, and Draco stiffened. "Goodnight, Mother," he said formally.

"I love you, Draco," she said, ignoring Snape. "I know Lucius does, too, even if he won't say it. We love you."

Draco nodded. Snape drew in a small amount of air, and Draco knew he intended to speak. It was now, in that instant between breath and voice, or perhaps never. He stared at her tear-streaked face, at the weak flicker of hope in her eyes. How many years had it been since he'd said he loved her? He swallowed thickly, the words stuck in his throat. Maybe if Snape weren't there ...

"It's time to go, Draco," Snape said tightly.

"Draco," Narcissa said, a terrible plea in her voice. He could feel her hopeful gaze, and it was like a knife twisting in Draco's back. He didn't meet her eyes as he said goodbye, staring determinedly behind her at the white roses swaying gently in the summer wind.

Snape didn't say anything as they watched Narcissa walk slowly up the gravel path. When she disappeared into the house, Draco swallowed nervously. What was Snape going to do with him? Again, the image of Wormtail's silver hand came into his mind and his breath came out in shallow pants.

Snape gripped his arm, and Draco jumped in surprise.

"I'm going to take us to our destination," Snape said shortly, not looking at him. Draco nodded, trying not to think about where they were going. If he was going to be tortured it was best not to think about it. He closed his eyes, and not for the first time that night he wished this were all some terrible nightmare that he could forget when he woke up.

It hurt so badly he tried to scream, but there was no air in his lungs. He fought against the sensation, pressing against the pressure that surrounded him on all sides. There was a burning in his chest, and he felt as though he were suspended between an ever-growing gap between heartbeats. But in an instant, the pain was gone. If Snape weren't gripping him so tightly, Draco was sure he would have fallen over. How had he ever managed to Apparate on his own?

They were standing in grass and next to an old metal slide. Draco stared at the swing set. All but one was broken. He looked then at the sign warning children not to run barefoot in the grass for fear of broken glass. Where were they?

But Snape made no effort to explain himself, and Draco tried to take it in stride. Perhaps this was near where Snape lived? But why wouldn't they simply Apparate to his house?

"This way," said Snape, and he led the way out of the park and toward the street. Draco longed to question why they were in a Muggle neighborhood, and even went so far as to open his mouth, but a dark look from Snape silenced him, and they walked along the sidewalk without speaking.

Every time they came to a corner, Draco would look up at the street sign. So far, they had crossed Magnolia Road, Magnolia Crescent, Skyline Street, Juniper, and now they were on Privet Drive. All of the houses were in neat, even rows, with square front lawns and peculiar boxes on poles out by the street. Draco stared at the fourth house. It looked very clean and tidy. In fact, Draco rather thought that every blade of grass was the same height. The house reminded him of the sterilized white walls of the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts.

It was in front of this house that Snape stopped. Could this Muggle looking house be Snape's home? The very idea seemed preposterous to Draco. But Snape began to walk up the drive, past the extremely polished looking car, and up to the front door. Draco hurried to follow him, bursting with questions but leery of invoking Snape's wrath.

As he passed the car, his arm brushed it, and suddenly a tremendously loud wailing siren sounded, and Draco jumped onto the grass in surprise, his wand drawn. Snape shot him a filthy look before flicking his wand at the car.

"Silencio," he hissed.

Just in front of the door, Snape stooped over and plucked a petal from the begonias under the windowsill. He drew his wand and waved it over the petal and in its place stood a wired cage with a tag attached at the top. Draco felt relieved at its smallness. There was no way Snape could squeeze him into that.

He could hear voices inside the house, and he looked up at the window, but the curtains were drawn. Great thundering steps made the glass in the window rattle. Draco stepped back and looked nervously at the door. Snape looked annoyed and flicked his wand at the door, mumbling a spell. The door shook as whoever was on the other side of it tugged at the handle.

"Come here," Snape ordered. "And put your wand away."



Draco hesitated for a moment, looking nervously at the rattling door before obeying. Reluctantly, he put his wand in his pocket and looked up at Snape. Draco only had time to open his mouth and widen his eyes before Snape's wand descended and a terrifically loud BANG echoed in his ears.

"WHAT'S GOING ON? OPEN THIS BLASTED DOOR THIS INSTANT!"

Draco looked up at Snape, who was reaching down to him. Snape was enormous, much taller than he had been just a moment before. It was when Snape picked him up with one hand around Draco's middle that Draco saw the contrast between Snape's pale hands and his own pure white fur.

*"You turned me into a fucking ferret, you bastard!"*

Snape sneered at him. "Yes, because squeaking is so articulate." His grip tightened on Draco for a moment.

"Let this be a lesson for you, Draco. And when I see you next, I expect you to be a wiser little rodent than you are now." Draco continued to hiss at him and try to bit him, fighting with all the fury in his small body, but Snape shoved him inside the cage.

Draco twisted around, squeaking furiously as Snape walked down the driveway. Snape gave him one last old smile before waving his wand at the door and saying, "Alohamora!"

Then, he turned on the spot and Disapparated with a loud CRACK. At that moment, the door burst open, and light and shadow loomed over Draco. Draco backed into the corner of his age and hissed at the enormous man with no neck and beet juice colored face.

*"Stand back you filthy Muggle!"* For one glorified moment Draco thought he could wandlessly perform the Killing Curse on the enormous man, but nothing happened when he waved his paw except that he lost his balance.

"What is it, Dad?"

"It's a rat," the man said dubiously.

"What, lemme see!" An even larger whale of a human being shoved its way into the doorway, knocking the older Muggle out of the way. This one blocked most of the light from the house, and Draco decided instantly that he liked him even less than the first Muggle.

"Hey! It's for me!" the boy cried, picking up Draco's cage. Draco stared in horror as the round

face and watery eyes drew level with his own. If he weren't afraid of picking up some Muggle disease he would bite the boy.

"Look at the tag: 'Happy Birthday, Dudley!'"

A bony-faced woman appeared at Dudley's shoulder. She looked at Draco with revulsion in her eyes. "I don't like it," she said with a note of finality in her voice.

The humongous boy's face screwed up and he began to shout. "It's mine! I want it! You never give me anything!" His face turned red and he shook the cage, slamming Draco against the metal bars.

"Now, Dudley," his father began, his voice coming from inside the house.

Suddenly, Dudley began crying. No tears were leaking out of his eyes, but he sounded like a dying baboon, and lights came on at the other houses. His mother looked anxious and began to smooth her hand over his head, but Dudley howled even louder.

"For Pete's sake, Petunia, let him have it. I had a rat when I was a boy," the father said exasperatedly.

Petunia quickly agreed and dragged Dudley back into the house. She appeared most anxious to get the door closed before any of the neighbors could see what was going on, and even though his head was ringing, Draco made a mental note about Petunia's behavior. In the brief minutes he'd been with the family, he already hated passionately the boy, was reserving judgment about the father, although he'd already concluded that he was an idiot, and feared the mother. What if she tried to kill him when the son was out and then claimed that he died of natural causes? He'd have to make the boy like him, so that his mother would fear upsetting him.

When he got out of this, and he would, he thought grimly, he'd find Snape and kill him.

Dudley tried to feed him a pasty and some sort of fizzing brown drink before his mother brought up a bowl of water and some cooked meat. He drank the water but barely touched the meat. Dudley poked his finger at the cage, and though it humiliated him, he tried to be affectionate to win the boy to his side, but Dudley soon lost interest in him. Exhausted, Draco curled into a ball and fell asleep.

The next few days were fairly uneventful for Draco. Petunia had bought some sort of food for him that, while bland, was filling. When he didn't die or end up foaming at the mouth as he had heard Weasley did when he drank the poisoned mead intended for Dumbledore, Draco believed he could trust Petunia to not kill him. At least not yet.

He had been sleeping in his favorite corner of his cage, the back right one, when suddenly Dudley's bedroom door opened, and Dudley and a scrawny, ugly looking boy Draco had never seen before entered the room. The new boy was carrying a cage, and inside of it, Draco saw a fierce looking and large black rat.

"That's not a rat, Dudley," the boy said. "That's a ferret!"

Draco's spirits were lifted now that some shred of human intelligence was presented to him at long last.

Dudley got a constipated look on his face, and he stared at the other boy's rat for a long moment and then at Draco. "Doesn't really matter though, does it, Piers?"

He said it in such an intimidating manner that Draco was not surprised that Piers quickly and emphatically agreed. "No, 'course not, Big D. They can still fight."

*"Fight? Are you mental?!"*

Dudley grinned. "See that?" he said proudly. "He's raring to go. Let's take 'em in the backyard. My mum's gone out shopping for a bit."

Draco protested against this vociferously, and the rat looked at him menacingly. There was a hole in the rat's ear, and bald spots covered his back where fur had been ripped out. He was supposed to fight this veteran warrior? He wondered, briefly, if this was all part of an elaborate plan Snape had devised to test his worth. Perhaps the rat was an Animagus, like Wormtail, and he could communicate with it, make a bargain.

*"I'll give you a hundred Galleons if you go along with me. We can stage this fight, pretend that we're really fighting, but we're not. Alright? Neither of us will get too beat up, and you'll be richer for it!"*

The rat hissed at him and slammed himself against the cage. The bars gave a little, and Draco stared in terror at the creature.

Dudley led the way down the stairs and out the back door. Draco caught sight of a pleasant, if overly manicured, garden, and he thought it was ironic that his grave would be in a Muggle woman's flowerbed.

The boys created a makeshift ring of several feet and then held the two cages over the ring and opened the gates to the cages. Draco flailed in mid-air and hit the grass with a hard thump. Piers' rat immediately charged him, and Draco sprinted in the other direction as fast as he

could. He knew he would have to kill the rat if he wanted to survive, but he had no feelings of guilt as he had with Dumbledore. Again, he had no options, but this wasn't a human being but some filthy Muggle's pet.

He looked over his shoulder, and the rat leaped at him. A terrible pain ripped through his shoulder, and Draco twisted himself onto his back, trying to kick the rat off him. He could smell his own blood, and terror gripped him. He swiped his claws across the rat's face, feeling them catch, and the rat squealed in pain. Draco wrenched himself away and ran to the opposite side of the ring, his shoulder bleeding freely.

His claws had caught the rat's eye, and the rat was screaming in pain as blood ran down its face. Draco panted, his heart beating frantically in his chest. He just wanted this to be over! The rat charged him, and Draco hissed, barring his teeth. They met with a clash of claws and teeth. The rat sank its teeth in Draco's side, and he squeaked in agony as he tried to free himself.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" demanded a very familiar female voice.

Hands pulled the rat off of him, and a pair of callused hands gently picked him up. Draco squeaked in pain, and the hands froze for a moment before cradling him.

"OUCH! Bloody hell, it bit me! Look, Harry, I'm bleeding. Stupid rat!" Ron Weasley clutched Piers' struggling, bleeding rat in two hands. But his indignation paled against the tirade Hermione Granger was railing against Dudley and Piers.

"It's inhumane! Vile, disgusting, and pathetic!" she shrieked, advancing on the two boys.

Dudley looked in his direction, and it was Harry Potter's voice that floated from above Draco. "I'll think I'll take this off of your hands, Dudley."

Dudley looked ready to fight, but Potter spoke before he could get a word in. "Think of it as my coming of age present."

Piers looked confused. "What the hell is he talking about, Big D?"

But Dudley looked terrified and he touched his fingers first to his tongue and then clutched his ass, staring at Harry with open horror. He mumbled something before fleeing the garden with Piers hot on his heels, calling after him for an explanation.

"Hey, that looks a lot like Malfoy," Weasley said, still grappling with the rat.

Draco looked up, and Harry's green eyes blinked down at him. "Yeah, I think I'll call him Draco."

## Chapter 2

"Blimey, he's bleeding a lot," Ron said as he looked over Harry's shoulder. "What are you going to do with him?"

Harry shrugged, and Draco felt the wind float through his fur as they walked across the lawn. Breathing hurt, and he tried to breathe in light, shallow breaths, but even these made him tremble in pain and he squeaked in misery. What were Potter and his lot doing here, anyway? A terrible thought gripped him. What if Snape had tipped them off? Were they here looking for him? It would only be a matter of time before Granger put two and two together and he was hauled off to Azkaban.

His squeaks of misery set Hermione off again. "Your cousin's a beast! How could anyone do that to poor defenseless animals?" she raged, and her wild gestures cast long shadows onto Draco's body and Harry's hands.

What Hermione said startled Draco and he twisted in Harry's grip to look up at him. Harry Potter was related to Dudley? These were the people Potter returned to every summer?

Harry laughed darkly and Draco felt Harry's fingers tense under him. "Dudley's not very good with animals," he said as he led the way into the house.

"What happened?" Ron asked curiously as they followed Harry into the kitchen.

Draco had only glimpsed the kitchen when Dudley had carried him up to his room, and even though he hurt he stared at the contraptions on the counter. There was some sort of large glass bowl with a blade in it. When Harry set him down onto the counter, Draco saw the words pulse, chop, and pulverize. He shuddered. What if Petunia had tried put him in there? He lay on his good side, his wounded side exposed to the air, feeling vulnerable and helpless.

"He traded his parrot for a gun, and when they gave me his second room he chucked his tortoise through the roof of the greenhouse," Harry was saying as he rummaged about in the cupboards. Hermione made a disgusted sound.

"Muggles study Herbology, too?" Ron asked.

"No, Aunt Petunia pretends to be watering the orchids while she's spying on the neighbors," Harry said.

If Draco weren't in such pain he would have laughed. It sounded like something she would do. Every time she had come up to feed him she would stand by the window, twitching the curtains back, and looking furtively over at the neighbors who were frequently engaged in screaming matches.

Hermione made a disgusted sound again and leaned over the counter to look at Draco, a worried expression on her face. "Do you think we should take him to the vet?"

"Dunno," Harry said from somewhere to Draco's far right. "How'd we get there?"

"We could Apparate," Ron said, but he didn't sound very confident.

"I'm already knackered from taking both of you here from King's Cross," said Harry, for which Draco was grateful. If he never Apparated again it would be too soon. "Hermione, open that cupboard above the sugar bowl. No, damn it. They've moved it. I don't know where it is."

"What are you looking for?" Hermione asked, looking inside the cupboard.

"The First-Aid kit. I think we should clean his cut," Harry said. "That rat looked downright foul."

"Little bugger had yellow teeth, like Wormtail," Ron said. The mention of Wormtail startled Draco, and he wondered how Ron knew about the Dark Lord's servant.

"Look where he got me." He proffered his hand to Hermione who frowned, wrinkling her nose. Ron sighed. "Wish Hagrid were here. He'd know what to do."

Loathe as he was to admit it, Draco agreed with Ron. He wondered whatever happened to his house. Did it burn down, or had someone managed to put it out?

Hermione left for the loo, and Ron and Harry sat on the counters, Harry explaining what all the gadgets were in the kitchen. In between Ron's questions of "what's that?" they looked down at Draco.

"He's stopped bleeding, at least," Ron said cheerfully. "Did you see what he did to that rat's eye?" Ron leaned over Draco, grinning. "I hate rats," he said brightly.

They heard a shout in the loo, and Ron and Harry exchanged a look. Draco, on the other hand, could care less. He'd been body-slammed by a mad rat. He was a ferret. He was at his worst enemy's house. While it had gotten easier to breathe his shoulder hurt fiercely, and the hard tiles were not at all merciful to his aching body.

Hermione rushed into the kitchen holding a white box and brown bottle. "Look!" she cried, holding the objects up.

"What're those?"

"Brilliant!"

"I found them under the sink in the loo," Hermione said excitedly, opening the white box. "Excellent, look, here are some cotton balls."

Harry unscrewed the cap to the brown bottle and splashed some onto the cotton ball. "You better hold him, Ron," Harry said with a determined look on his face.

Bewildered, Ron held Draco down on the counter with a light grip. Draco flinched nervously, not liking to feel any more trapped than he already was.

*"FUCK!"*

"Bloody hell!"

"Hold him, Ron!"

"Oooh!"

Draco squirmed under Ron's hands, which clutched him tightly now. His tail lashed furiously, and he tried to bite Harry's hand, which was dabbing at his wounds. Hermione flapped anxiously over Harry's shoulder, and Draco caught glimpses of her bushy hair every time he twisted to claw at Ron. It was with grim pleasure he raked his claws over Ron's hands, and every howl of pain Ron made was music to his ears.

"There," Harry panted. "I think I cleaned it. Ugh, look at this."

"Poor thing," Hermione said gently to Draco.

Ron looked affronted. "Look at my hand!" he said angrily, letting go of Draco. Long scratches, some of them looking quite nasty, ran from his knuckle to wrist.

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed the brown bottle out of Harry's hand. "Hold your hand over the sink," she ordered.

Ron looked at her warily. "What is that stuff?"

"Hydrogen peroxide," she said shortly. "It's a disinfectant."

"Why'd he go mental?" he asked as he extended his hand over the sink. "Honestly, you'd think we were trying to kill him."

Draco watched gleefully as Hermione began to tip the bottle and a liberal amount of the liquid spilled out.

"FUCK!" Ron bellowed, waving his hand in the air like an overzealous lemur. Droplets flew from his hand and onto the counter and the windowpane as he jumped up and down in pain.

Draco sniggered and Ron bared his teeth at him. "Maybe he's really Malfoy," Ron said through clenched teeth. "He's just like him. Maybe he's here in incognito to kill Harry."

Draco held himself very still, and the pain in his shoulder faded as fear sank its claws into him. He had just given himself away. He knew it. Granger would wave her wand and he'd turn into a human again, and then Potter would kill him. Dumbledore had been the father Harry had never had, and though he didn't know how Potter knew Snape had killed Dumbledore, he knew that he knew; and he knew that Potter had been following him all year and had seen him racing across Hogwarts' grounds with Snape the night Snape killed Dumbledore. The thoughts tumbled through Draco's mind with a zigzag sort of logic that connected everything he had ever done to give Potter a reason to hate him into a high black wall that was falling and would crush him. Black had been his godfather, and his Aunt Bellatrix had killed him. He had nearly gotten Hagrid sacked. He'd called Granger a Mudblood every chance he got. He insulted the Weasleys. He'd slurred James and Lilly Potter. He'd clenched his muscles so tightly his body was quivering.

"Oh, honestly, Ronald," Hermione snapped. "You think every rat's Wormtail and every ferret's Malfoy."

"Couldn't be," Harry said, cutting into Draco's terror. "Here, have a band-aid, Ron. The chances of Voldemort making Malfoy transfigure himself into a ferret and then sneak into the house to kill me are pretty slim, Ron. Hey, he's shaking."

"He might be in shock," Hermione said worriedly. Even Ron looked sympathetically at him.

Their three faces loomed over his, and he could feel his heart beat faster. They might not know who he was, but they could leave him with the Dursleys. He squeaked pathetically, and Harry gently held him in his hands.

"Let's put him back in his cage. Maybe he'll feel better there."



The extreme oscillations between fear and relief struck silence into Draco, and he absorbed all he saw in a kind of stunned quietness. He was so still that Harry raised him up to his eyes to see if he were still alive. Draco blinked as Harry's large green eyes looked into his.

"He's okay," said Harry in a relieved voice. It was then he noticed the tag Snape had fixed to the cage. "Hey, Ron, so much for your conspiracy theories. Draco was a birthday present to Dudley, and his birthday was last week."

"And we saw Malfoy just four days ago," said Hermione looking triumphant.

He carefully lowered Draco into his cage, and Draco slowly moved into his favorite corner, his claws scuttling on the bare metal bottom of the cage.

"We should get him some straw or something," Harry said, frowning as he looked at Draco's sparse cage.

"Where are we going to sleep, Harry?" Ron asked, staring at Harry's very small room.

There was no room for them. The space between Harry's bed and the opposite wall was little more than a few feet, and while they could have put one cot down there was just no room for two. Harry looked appraisingly at his bed and then at Ron before shaking his head. The bed barely fit him, and Ron was a good seven inches taller than him, and even if they both lay on their side one of them would undoubtedly fall off the bed.

What they needed was more room.

Of course!

"We need a tent," said Harry. "A magical one, like we had at the World Cup."

"Ooh, good thinking Harry," Hermione said excitedly. "And we can use it when we go hunting for Horcruxes."

Horcruxes? He'd heard that word before, hadn't he? Somewhere in his father's library, he thought. He could recall the book, its wide leather binding, but he couldn't remember what the book had said about Horcruxes.

"Where can we get one?" Harry asked.

"My dad borrowed his from a friend," said Ron. "But you can buy them at one of the side streets at Diagon Alley. Haven't you ever seen the store?" he asked curiously.

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. Although they had been to Diagon Alley nearly every year, their visits were usually confined to the stores that sold their school supplies, and had very rarely wandered into other stores. The notable exceptions, of course, had been Borgin and Burkes, Fred and George's joke shop, and the pet store.

"It's called Koonz's Tentacular Fete," said Ron. "Charlie has tons of stuff from there because he has to go all over the place looking for dragons," Ron explained. Harry was rather curious about what a wizard camping store would look like, and he listened attentively as Ron told him about the different gear the store sold.

"Dad said he once had this really cool tent that would change the floors from wood to carpet if you tap danced in a certain way." Ron shrugged. "It was the seventies."

Draco was reminded of the tent he and his family used at the World Cup. It had been spectacular; a gym, a pool, a billiards room, library, ballroom, dining room, three guest rooms, one of which Fudge, the then Minister of Magic, had used.

"Can you hook up a tent's fireplace up to the Floo Network?" Hermione asked curiously.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno. S'pose you could, why?"

"Because it'd be really useful, wouldn't it," Hermione said excitedly. "What if we got a lead on a Horcrux or we needed to go look something up? We could just use the fireplace."

There was that word again, Draco thought. Horcruxes. He wished he could remember what they were, but only the image of the book came to mind. Not even its title, he thought in frustration. Just two or three inches of dusty green leather with gold leaves running up the binding. He knew it would bother him until he figured out what Horcruxes were, so he paid close attention what the Gryffindors were saying, hoping they would speak more about it.

"Or we could Apparate," Harry pointed out.

Hermione shook her head. "Some places have anti-Apparation wards, like Hogwarts and the great Magical libraries," she said. "Anyway, people could come and visit us if they could Floo in." She looked over at Harry. "Like Ginny."

Harry shuffled his feet nervously. "We broke up."

"What?" Ron exploded, his face already beginning to flush with the infamous Weasley blush.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said softly, looking sorrowfully at him. "I thought you might do that."

Ron looked like a fuming bull, and so before he could attack, Harry hurried to explain himself. "I did it to protect her, and she understands," he said quickly. He had forgotten that Ron didn't know.

Draco, however, was not interested in the Chosen One's love life, and so when his eyelids started to droop he did not resist the pull and fell asleep on the cold metal of the bottom of his cage.

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"BOY!"

Draco awoke with a jump and different instincts pulling at him. One side of him wanted to draw his wand and the other wanted to back into the corner of his cage and hiss. His ears pulled back and he looked intently around him, waiting for Dudley's father to come bursting into the room.

Ron laughed. "Looks like Dudley's gonna catch it now," he said excitedly.

Harry sighed. "I'm the boy," he said as he straightened up. "You two'd best come along as well."

There was a determined look to her jaw as Hermione followed Harry out of the room. Ron, on the other hand, who remembered Vernon from the time the Weasleys had come to pick Harry up for the World Cup, looked less confident. Draco saw him check that his wand was in his robe more than once.

"YOU HAVE SOME NERVE YOU UNGRATEFUL FREELOADER! I WAITED ... "

Harry cut in, but Draco only caught a few words. It didn't matter though, as Harry's uncle repeated at top volume what Harry had said.

"YOU'RE REALLY SORRY? And what are all of these blasted trunks doing here? I nearly broke my neck!"

Draco felt two thundering steps shake the table before Hermione's high voice sounded throughout the house.

"We're so sorry, Mr. Dursley! But we didn't think there'd be enough room in your car for all of us and our luggage."

"Who are you?" Mr. Dursley demanded in a voice that, while quieter, carried with no difficulty through the metal bars of Draco's cage.

"I'm Hermione Granger, and this is ... "

"YOU! I know you. You and your mad father and brothers! " Mr. Dursley thundered.

But Harry interrupted him again, and this time Draco could hear him. "They're my friends, Uncle Vernon," he said firmly. "And they're staying for a while."

"Absolutely not! We're not having more your kind in this house!"

Draco dearly wished he were human again so he could curse the Muggle. He'd known the man to be stupid ever since he couldn't tell the difference between a ferret and a rat, but this was something that put him into an entirely different category of stupidity altogether. Vernon sounded as though he thought he was above wizards. Draco paced his cage in agitation. Fool! Idiot! The Dark Lord was completely right when he'd talked about putting Muggles and Mudbloods in their proper places. Why should the Wizarding world have to hide from Muggles? It should be the other way around.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Hermione shouted.

Vernon was as silent as a crack in the wall, and Draco squeaked when a heavy thump shook the entire house. Seconds later he could hear three pairs of feet thundering up the stairs, and then Hermione burst into the room followed by Ron and Harry, who bore shell-shocked expressions.

"What a loathsome, foul, bigoted, narrow-minded, medieval Muggle!" she said angrily her eyes flashing. Ron and Harry hung in doorway, watching her pace furiously with her wand drawn.

"Thinks magic's something disgusting, does he? Well, bet he wouldn't like to know this is going on under his roof!" She stopped mid-stride and pointed her wand at Draco. "*Scourgify!*"

Draco tried to dodge the blue blast of magic as it shot out of the tip of her wand and jetted towards him. It ricocheted off the bar of his cage and hit him squarely in the rump, knocking him on his back.

*"Bloody fucking hell!"*

"He sounded kind of mad, Hermione," said Ron as he eyed Draco clawing at his fur. "He looks really upset."

"I don't care if that stupid man is upset!" she said angrily, brandishing her wand again.

"No, I meant ... " started Ron, but Hermione cut him off.

"Our kind," she said scathingly. "He's the Muggle version of Lucius Malfoy!"

Draco bristled at the comparison. His father was nothing like Vernon Dursley. To suggest so was disgusting.

"Aren't you going to get in trouble for using magic on a Muggle?" asked Harry suddenly. "I thought there were rules against that sort of thing."

"Technically, I used magic on the doormat," said Hermione. "And I didn't break the Statute of Secrecy either. '*Your kind*', honestly ... "

Ron looked deeply impressed. Even Draco, although he resented the Scourgify, looked at Hermione appraisingly. Of course, she was nothing but a filthy Mudblood, but he could respect her cunning.

They returned to the topic of where they would be sleeping. It was decided that they would shrink the desk to a fifth of its size and stow it in Harry's closet in order for there to be enough room for Harry and Ron to sleep on the floor. Hermione had protested Harry giving up her bed but had finally agreed when Harry had promised that they would buy a tent the next day.

"And we could see Fred and George's shop," said Ron, looking excited. "We could even get some Shield Cloaks."

"I still have those Decoy Detonators," said Harry.

Draco let the rest of their conversation wash over him. He remembered ordering the Instant Darkness Powder. He had found the joke shop's catalogue between the cushions of one of the couches in the Slytherin common room and had ordered it under Blaise Zabini's name. Blaise had been surprised when an unfamiliar owl had dropped the package bearing the trademark of Weasleys' Wizing Wizing Wheezes. But before he had had time to open it, Draco dropped ten Galleons on the other boy's dinner plate and then left the Great Hall with the package in his school bag.

Blaise never said anything about the package or the Galleons, but Draco had felt Blaise's curious and suspicious stare for the rest of the day. Blaise and Draco rarely dragged one another into each other's schemes; Crabbe and Goyle were better suited for that sort of thing. He didn't know what had possessed him to write Blaise's name, but he had. Things between them were different after that. Blaise stopped lending him books. It was as simple as that, and no one else noticed because Blaise had never made a show of lending Draco the books, and Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott just assumed that they were his own. Blaise would leave them on Draco's bed when he was done with them, and sometimes Draco would read them.

Draco once asked why, and Blaise had told him that it was because Draco talked too much, and that books mercifully shut him up for a few hours.

Draco then read the next book aloud.

The book after that had been a picture book with detailed illustrations about disemboweling and dismembering curses.

But after the morning in the Great Hall with the Instant Darkness Powder and the Galleons, Blaise stopped leaving books on the bed. It had been one of the many consequences of the Dark Lord's assignment.

"We can go to Magical Menagerie and get Draco sorted out," said Harry, looking at Draco's cage.

Hearing his name jolted Draco to the present. Magical Menagerie? He couldn't! What if he were discovered? Would the proprietor know the difference between a real ferret and someone who had been transfigured into one?

"How do you think Crookshanks, Hedwig and Pig will like Draco?" asked Ron.

"Aunt Petunia's not going to like that we're going to have so many animals in the house," Harry said, although he didn't seem very concerned. In fact, Draco thought Harry looked rather pleased that he would be irritating the awful woman.

"Reckon Crookshanks will try to eat him?"

Hermione bristled and pursed her lips. Ron obviously caught on because he changed the subject with alacrity.

"What if they made you Head Girl, Hermione? Be a bit awkward what with us not going back next year, wouldn't it?" Hermione looked rather wooden, and Draco was sure he saw Harry roll his eyes at Ron.

"Bet they've never had someone turn down Head Girl before," Ron said, not noticing the forbidding look on Hermione's face. He blundered forth like a bewitched vacuum cleaner, oblivious the fact that Hermione's lips were pressing together every tighter.

"Maybe they'll make Lavender and Dean Prefects," Ron mused aloud as he looked around Harry's room. "Lavender's the only girl left now, so they'd have to. Dean'd be alright, but Lavender would be a nightmare."

Hermione's eyes flashed and her nostrils flared.

Harry took one look at Hermione's taut face and studied a dusty corner of his ceiling as though it were the most fascinating thing he had ever seen. Draco gave a disgusted snort and turned his back on the scene, not wanting to watch Ron flaunt his idiocy.

His ears twitched as he heard the front door open, but none of the others seemed to have caught it. Moments later, however, Petunia made a more audible announcement of her entry.

"VERNON! Vernon, what HAPPENED?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione froze.

"WHAT?" she shrieked. They heard the sound of groceries dropping to the floor and the breaking of glass.

All traces of happiness vanished from Harry's face, and Hermione and Ron exchanged nervous glances. Draco thought he heard Harry mutter "Round two." Ron had somehow found a furry wallet with teeth and was rubbing nervous circles onto it. The wallet flapped open in a way that greatly reminded Draco of a dog rolling on his stomach and waiting for it to be scratched.

They could hear Petunia and Vernon whispering furiously to one another. In a succession of bangs, the windows were shut and the curtains yanked back.

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Dinner that night had been a tense affair. Vernon and Petunia were determined to ignore their houseguests as though it would make them disappear. They talked about the water, automobiles, and then very loudly about Dudders' boxing triumphs. Draco wished that Harry hadn't left the door to his room open; silence was more entertaining than the Dursley's table talk.

Marge was coming in a fortnight. Someone dropped a utensil on a plate as soon as Vernon announced this. Vernon cleared his throat violently and continued to say that Marge would be staying for the weekend with Ripper. Draco wondered if Ripper had earned his name, and he hoped he would never be left alone in the house with the man.

The sun was setting, and for the first time that day a breeze was floating through the open window. The cool air fanned Draco, and he turned his face toward the window, enjoying the relief from the heat.

Very faintly, Draco could still hear the conversation downstairs. Vernon sold drills, and he would carve all different sorts of scars into your skin. The most popular one was a lightening bolt, but you had to be anointed with hydrogen peroxide first. Many people were waiting in line for the lightening bolt scar, and the Death Eaters were pouring the brown bottles over everyone's head. Two boys got it on their shoulders.

Someone grabbed his left arm and yanked up his robes. "Look!" a woman screeched, and Draco twisted his head over his shoulder and saw that it was his mother. She pointed at the lightening bolt that nearly covered his Dark Mark. "You've betrayed me! You said we'd get it at the same time!"

She pushed him away, and he was falling. His father caught him and pulled him into his cell in Azkaban. But the cell was cramped and crowded, and Draco was pushed against the cold metal bars.

Someone gave him their cloak, and he wasn't cold any more.

Harry gently arranged the towel around Draco's body before he went back to sleep.



## Chapter 3

Harry woke up early with a stiff neck. He slowly turned his head the other way, wincing as he did, and watched the early morning light stretch across the wall. No one else was awake yet; Hermione had cocooned herself in the sheets, and Ron was sprawled across more than his fair share of the floor. Sleeping on the floor with Ron next to him was a far cry from Gryffindor Tower and his four-poster, but it was much better than how he thought he'd be spending the summer ... alone. He felt a great surge of affection for Ron and Hermione as he remembered their determined faces at Dumbledore's funeral when they told him they would stand by him no matter what.

Oddly enough, that day had been one of the most peaceful ones Harry had had in a long time. After the funeral, they had gone back to the common room where he and Ron had played one last game of chess while Hermione wrote a long letter to Victor Krum, something that Ron hadn't made a fuss about. Harry had raised his eyebrows at Ron over the chess set when Hermione announced that she was going to tell Victor about everything that had just happened, but Ron had merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Harry caught Hermione's eye, and her eyes had sparkled happily before she turned to her letter.

He, Ron, and Hermione had talked about Dumbledore, Snape, Malfoy, and Voldemort and of course the Horcruxes, but he no longer felt as though he were fighting against things he had no control over. He had been right about Malfoy. Snape had betrayed them all. Dumbledore was dead. The Horcrux was a fake. He couldn't change any of this, and yet he was the only person who had the power to eliminate the root of all this unchangeable truths. He knew that killing Voldemort wouldn't reverse the past, but it would bring an end to it.

The next day, while they walked down to the gates to get beyond the school's boundaries where they could Disapparate, they had somehow gotten on the subject of the Dursleys. As their trunks floated behind them, bobbing in the air, Harry regaled them with stories about how he had used magic before Hogwarts, Hagrid giving Dudley a tail, the Ministry owl that had flown in and terrified one of Uncle Vernon's guests, and the look on Uncle Vernon's face when Harry had subtly threatened him with Sirius when it looked like Uncle Vernon wasn't going to let him go the Quidditch World Cup.

And now they were here. It gave Harry a bit of a jolt to realize he had just hosted his very first slumber party. For years he had watched enviously as Dudley and his friends would make s'mores in the microwave, stay up late or not go to bed at all, and then eat the feast that Aunt Petunia would prepare for them when they woke up. Harry had never been allowed to partake in any of the activities, and he'd never had any friends to invite over. Not that the Dursleys

would have let him anyway. Dudley and his friends had delighted in running up and down the stairs while Harry was sleeping to dislodge the pictures Harry tacked up to his ceiling, not to mention dust and spiders. His hands clenched into fists as he remembered Dudley's mean laughter floating down the stairs and through the cracks.

Then he remembered that Aunt Marge would be arriving in a fortnight and he grinned. Uncle Vernon had suggested heavily that they might clear off for that weekend, and Harry was all for it, thinking they might use the tent. However, Hermione professed a passionate urge to meet the woman right before using a Summoning Charm to fetch the salt and pepper from the other side of the table. Uncle Vernon snapped his mouth closed and looked poisonously at Harry as though to blame him for all magic. Harry had a suspicious feeling that Hermione was determined to force her undiluted magical self upon the Dursleys as much as she could get away with, because as soon as she was done with her meal she cried, with a dramatic flare that reminded Harry strongly of Lockhart, "Evanescio!" and the food on her plate disappeared. Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking of some way to cancel his sister's visit or at the very least put her up in a hotel. Aunt Marge didn't stand a chance against Hermione.

The light streaming through the window had stretched completely across the wall now and bounced off the metal bars of Draco's cage. The light seemed to have awoken Draco because he could hear the water in his dish being disturbed. Harry quietly got to his feet, stretching and gently rolling his neck, and then he walked over to Draco's cage.

The washcloth he had put on him had been pushed into a heap, squashed against one of the corners.

"Hi," he whispered, poking his finger through the bars. Draco stared at him warily, making no move to get within Harry's reach.

Ron gave an almighty snort, and Harry turned in time to see Ron fling his arm violently where Harry's head had been just a minute ago. Ron's snore elicited an unintelligible murmur from Hermione, and she wound herself more tightly into the sheets. Harry rather wondered how she planned to extricate herself.

The crispness of the dawn was melting as the summer sun climbed in the sky, and Harry's stomach grumbled. He looked again at Ron and Hermione, but they were still sleeping deeply. He halfheartedly thought about casting Levicorpus on Ron again to wake him up, but he couldn't bring himself to use anything Snape had thought up. If he never saw his copy of Advanced Potions Making again it would be too soon.

Harry sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was go into Dursley territory by himself when he knew his uncle was just waiting for the moment he'd have Harry alone. He was sure Vernon

would tell him in no uncertain terms what he thought of Hermione, and how if Marge found out anything ...

Harry snorted. He highly doubted his uncle would be foolish enough to do anything to him when Ron and Hermione were there. Vernon's hatred of magic was only outmatched by his fear of it, and having a legal witch and wizard in his house in addition to a nephew who, when provoked, was known to do magic wandlessly ...

This did not, however, make him any more willing to face his relatives, and so he waited until Ron and Hermione woke up. Breakfast was eaten in stony silence on the part of the Dursleys and animated chatter between Harry, Ron and Hermione. Uncle Vernon flinched every time Hermione mentioned the spells she thought must go into making a magical tent.

"It's probably compressed Engorgement Charm; one that works only on the inside while letting the outside look like it's just a normal tent," she said excitedly. "I bet someone really clever thought of that."

Harry and Ron nodded politely. Ron, Harry noticed, was enthusiastically devouring Aunt Petunia's rashers and eggs and guzzling glasses of the freshly squeezed orange juice. When the craft was getting low, Ron cheerfully refilled it with a slight wave of his wand. None of the Dursleys poured themselves any more orange juice after that, and Aunt Petunia attacked her grapefruit with angry jabs.

The telephone rang, and Uncle Vernon leapt to his feet to answer it before anyone else could. From where Harry was sitting he could hear Aunt Marge's booming voice.

"I'm coming up tonight, Vernon. Dog show in Surrey tomorrow that I just found out about."

Vernon's eyes widened and Aunt Petunia held her spoon still in mid-jab. Both of them looked at Harry. Harry lost all appetite for his food and pushed his plate away. It had been fine to think of Aunt Marge coming in a fortnight. He had planned on persuading Hermione into going to one of the great Magical libraries she had been talking about. But now Marge was coming tonight, and they hadn't bought the tent or anything.

"Al ... alright, Marge. Yes, yes ... I'll pick you up at the station ... four o'clock? Yes, yes, all right, Marge. Goodbye."

After breakfast they went back up to Harry's room to get their wallets and Draco. Just before they left for Diagon Alley, Uncle Vernon pulled Harry aside.

"Harry," he said, flexing the veins in his neck. "Why don't you and your friends have dinner in London." He thrust a twenty-pound note at Harry and looked threateningly at him.

For once, Harry agreed with his uncle. He would never voluntarily be in the same room as Aunt Marge, and he'd rather eat at the Leaky Cauldron anyway. He wondered what the exchange rate was between Galleons and Pounds and figured it would at least buy them all butterbeers and some of the inn's delicious chocolate pudding. He hurriedly stuffed the money into his pocket before joining Ron and Hermione.

"What did your uncle want?" Hermione asked.

"To give me money," Harry said lightly, showing them the twenty-pound note. "We can give the Leaky Cauldron some business tonight."

--

Draco desperately wanted to be human again. He was sick of his cage, sick of ferret food, and was humiliated and disgusted that he could smell, let alone see his own excrement, at the bottom of the cage. He deeply resented the fact that Harry Potter, of all wizards, was his owner. Malfoys are no one's pet, especially not Harry Potter's.

But the Malfoy name was probably mud in the Dark Lord's circles now. He couldn't bear to think of Snape telling the other Death Eaters in terrible detail about his method of molding Draco into a more satisfying Death Eater. What if he saw some of the Death Eaters in Diagon Alley today and they recognized him? He didn't think they would dare turn him back into a human for fear of Snape's wrath, but they would point and snicker at him. He could just imagine their sneering faces and he felt his body tense with rage. When he figured out how to turn himself back into a wizard again the first thing he'd do would be to take his revenge against Snape. He might even contract Aunt Bella into helping him; everyone knew how much she loathed him. He had thought that Snape would help him become the Dark Lord's favorite, or at least in his favor, but instead he had made him useless to the Dark Lord and thus expendable.

A thought struck him, and he held himself very still as it unwound itself in his head, whispering new answers to questions that had plagued him ever since he'd been turned into a ferret. Why had Snape turned him into a ferret and gifted him to Harry Potter's cousin?

To get revenge on you was the answer he had come to.

But what if that wasn't it? What if Snape had turned him into a ferret and abandoned him at

Harry Potter's for another reason? What if he really was trying to turn him into a better Death Eater?

Thinking of Snape without accusing the man of plotting against him brought new possibilities to Draco. If Snape really were following the Dark Lord's orders ... if he really was trying to turn Draco into a better Death Eater ... why had he gone about it the way he did? What was the point of being a ferret? What was the point of being at Potter's house when he'd heard Snape say so many times that Potter belonged to the Dark Lord to kill?

The answer came to Draco with such abruptness that he sat up with alertness. It was obvious! Very subtle, very Snape-like, but obvious when he stopped to think about it. He laughed with high-pitched wheezing and couldn't stop.

He wasn't supposed to *kill* Potter.

He was supposed to *spy* on him.

What a better way of doing that than making him an innocuous pet, an animal in need of rescuing from the odious Dudley? No wonder Dumbledore had thought Snape was his man. Snape understood people so well that he knew exactly where their blind spots were, and Harry Potter went giddy when it came to playing the hero.

Draco had been the one to compromise Snape as a spy by not killing Dumbledore, and so he had cost the Dark Lord very useful information about the Order of the Phoenix. And Snape was the Dark Lord's most trusted and loyal Death Eater, so of course he would obey the Dark Lord's command to train Draco into a useful servant. And yet Snape was clever enough to couple revenge with obedience so that he could satisfy both his master and himself.

Draco had been so swept up in his rage and humiliation that he hadn't seen this. Now, he was more furious with himself than he was with Snape. How many conversations had he tuned out just because they hadn't interested him? What if he had missed something crucial? His stomach clenched. What if Snape was testing him? What if he was expecting regular reports? He had nothing to report. Only that Potter and his friends were interested in Horcruxes, and he for the life of him he couldn't remember what those were.

Before he realized it, they were in the backyard and walking toward the greenhouse. Being outside was a relief to Draco. Smells he hadn't noticed while he had been battling the rat floated through the bars of his cage and were alive to him. The roses were in full bloom and the grass, while dry from the summer heat, still smelled faintly of its better days. The Dursley's home was like an extension of his small cage, trapping him in the Muggle World, and after

being cooped up in there, being outside made him feel closer to being human than he had felt in several days. The backyard was nothing to boast about; certainly nothing like the gardens back at the Malfoy Manor, but at least the Dursleys hadn't managed to stamp out nature completely from the yard and flowerbed.

Hermione opened the door to the greenhouse and they quickly hustled through. Inside it was uncomfortably hot and crowded with pots. Several of the pots were on the highest shelf that faced the neighbor's house, and a ladder was leaned against it. Harry swung Draco's cage when he nearly stumbled over a bag of soil, and Draco scrambled to avoid his sliding water dish.

*"Watch it, Potter!"* Draco snarled as the water sloshed over the rim as the dish slid past him.

"Sorry, Draco," said Harry, stepping carefully around a pot. "Right, the Muggles will probably just think a car backfired." He shrugged, and Draco felt his cage rise a little with the upward motion of Harry's shoulders. "Whenever you're ready, Hermione."

Hermione looked a little nervous. "I've never taken two people before," she said, her voice rather high. "What if I splinch us?"

"Then the Ministry'll sort us out," Ron said, not looking the least bit fazed. "Or I expect one of us could. We saw the professors put loads of people back together during our Apparation lessons. You just have to sorta ... " he waved his wand and a pot exploded, spraying Draco with bits of terra cotta and soil.

Hermione winced and Ron tucked his wand hastily into his pocket. Harry brushed away a burnt orchid from Draco's cage before casting Scourgify. Again, the feeling of being extremely clean startled and disturbed Draco, but at least his cage was clean.

Hermione still looked nervous. "Couldn't we just take the Knight Bus?" she offered tentatively, her eyes fixed on the shards of pottery.

"We'll be fine, Hermione. And I really think I do know the spell," Harry assured her. "At least for minor things," he added under his breath. Ron smiled at him from behind Hermione, who still didn't look convinced.

"Or Ron and I could Apparate ourselves," Harry suggested with feigned reluctance. "I expect we'd manage." He looked pointedly at Ron, who quickly agreed.

"I was only an eyebrow away from passing," he reminded them.

That decided the matter for Hermione, and she gripped them by the arms, rather more firmly

than necessary, but neither Harry nor Ron made any comment. Harry held onto Draco's cage tightly with two hands. Hermione was whispering "destination, determination, deliberation" to herself, and her nerves did nothing to help Draco's own fear of Apparation.

He dreaded the pain to come ... the agonizing grinding of his ribs curling into his spine ... not being able to breathe and yet having to so desperately that he would die if he could not draw at least one breathe. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs to the bursting point with air.

It felt remarkably like flying at great speed straight up into the sky. His ears plugged and he felt as though gravity were tugging him down by the heels while some unknown force was yanking him up by his hair. His breath escaped him with a mighty woosh that was lost to the roar of colors and sounds that rushed around and through him. It was entirely unpleasant, and finished an instant later.

Amazingly, the water in his little bowl barely had a ripple disturbing the surface. Draco sank against the floor of his cage, breathing deeply. The London air was markedly different from the air he had become accustomed to breathing at the Dursleys. He sniffed. There was something else in the air, something that had definitely not been at the Dursleys. He could almost taste it ... like the air during a lightning storm it was intensely alive ... It was peculiar ... it was very familiar but he couldn't put his finger on it ...

He looked around him. They were in Diagon Alley, and then the air made sense to him. It was magic he had noticed. Of course he wouldn't ordinarily notice it. How often was he in a Muggle setting?

"Here we are," Ron said, looking up at the violently bright sign that read Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. "Oh, look! They've got new stuff!" He hurriedly opened the doors and rushed to a display of small tin boxes of different colors.

" 'Always think of the perfect comeback too late? No more! Comeback Mints will stimulate your brain into action for better recovery time. Effectiveness depends upon the intelligence of the eater,' " Ron read aloud.

"Look, they have ones for accents. 'Sound foreign for up to ten minutes.' French, Indian, Chinese ... Japanese, Scottish, Brazilian ... American, even!" Hermione said, clearly impressed. "I'm gonna get some tins for my parents for when we go to France. They'll love to be able to pronounce everything on the menu."

"We should get these for Neville," Harry said, pointing to the Backbone Mints. "'Sound firm, in control and determined.'"

"Oh I don't know," Hermione said as she scanned the other mints. Harry saw her eyes linger on the Sound Sexy Mints and Scorching Kisses Mints before she looked up at him. "Neville can be pretty determined when he wants to be." She frowned. "Can you overdose on these?"

"Nope!" George said, appearing at her side. "There's fifteen mints in each mint, and you could take them all at once and sound French for two and half hours solid if you wanted."

Fred popped up around Harry's side. "New pet, Harry?"

Harry held up Draco. "Yup. Rescued him from my cousin." They told the twins of Draco's battle with the rat, pointing to small patch of missing fur on Draco's shoulder.

"Poor little mite," Fred said. "I'd rather be a house-elf than your cousin's pet, Harry." Hermione scowled and Fred quickly took the conversation back to the mints. "Anyway, what're you doing with the Backbone Mints, Harry? Shouldn't think you need those ... "

Harry shook his head. "I was thinking of getting some for Neville Longbottom."

George tapped his finger against his chin, nodding. "Hey, Ron, come over here for a second, will you? I wanna show you something."

"What?" Ron asked, looking warily at his brother. "You're not gonna test something on me are you?"

"Would I do something like that?" asked George, feigning hurt.

"Yes."

"Ah, come on. I'll give you five Galleons," George wheedled, already tugging on Ron's sleeve.

"Don't do it, Ron," Hermione said sharply. "If he's offering five Galleons I bet it's something really nasty."

"Hermione, have you seen or new mood sensitive products?" Fred asked charmingly, steering Hermione toward the opposite end of the store. He gestured for Harry to go with Ron behind his back, waving his left hand as his right wrapped around Hermione's shoulder.

Harry followed George and Ron up the stairs to the twin's apartment. George was talking about how business had been and what was currently the most popular product. "Of course, the mints are popular with people our age, but it's the people in their thirties, generally single, who are buying them in cartons! This one guy came in here about last week and bought one of the



Sound Sexy Mints, and he came back the next day and cleaned out the display. Thirty-three Galleons it cost him. Anyway, here we are. Brothers first, Ron!"

He swept the door open and Ron stepped inside.

"AHHHHHH" Ron bellowed, back-peddling. He tripped over his feet and crashed into Harry. Harry, Ron, and Draco crashed to the floor.

"What is it?" Harry demanded, shoving Ron off of him. Draco was squeaking angrily from his cage, completely drenched and his water bowl upturned. "What?"

Ron pointed at the ceiling, his face bleached of color. Harry looked up and his eyes widened, his hand automatically reaching for his wand. There, suspended above them was huge, fat spider as big as Hedwig, spinning a web. In horrified fascination, Harry stared at its furry body as its long legs attached threads of spider silk together.

Ron whimpered incoherently, and Draco hissed, clearly terrified. Harry pushed Draco behind him and raised his wand. How had a spider of that size gotten in here? It belonged in the Forbidden Forest!

"Alright, Ron, here's your money," George said cheerfully, dropping five Galleons into Ron's lap.

"Wha ... " Harry asked, not looking away from the spider.

"Arachnid Attacks," George said proudly. "Just finished that one. Looks pretty good, doesn't it?" He reached up to the spider and Harry flinched, nearly pulling George back. "It's an illusion, you see? Look," he walked over to kitchen and pulled out a drawer and took out a sheet of shiny paper. He handed it to Harry, and he saw that they were stickers of spiders in various positions.

"All you do, you see," George explained, taking the sticker sheet back from Harry, "is peel off a sticker and attach it to an appropriate surface. Then spray water on it, saliva will do if you're in a pinch, and voila! The spider appears." He flicked his wand at the illusion and water spurted forth, and the spider disappeared instantly, leaving water dripping from the ceiling.

"I want more than five Galleons," Ron said indignantly, still looking shaky.

George laughed and took them back downstairs to Hermione and Fred who were looking at mood rings.

"They're not like the Muggle ones," she said excitedly, holding out her hand which had a pink ring on it. "Watch. I'm thinking of Umbridge." The ring turned an ugly shade reminiscent of

Crookshank's hairballs. "And now I'm thinking about Hagrid." The ring turned to a brilliant aquamarine color. "What did George show you?"

"A really detailed illusion of a huge spider; like the ones we saw in the Forbidden Forest," Harry said ruefully.

Fred and George beamed at them.

Ron bought a box of fireworks and Hermione bought the mood ring and mints before they left for Magical Menagerie.

"We can set these off when we find a Horcrux," Ron said, who had brightened up after a while.

Draco's ears twitched at the word. Horcruxes ... Horcruxes ... he knew he had read about them. Again, the faded green leather book with gold leaves came to his mind. He hadn't read it recently. Probably about four years ago, he thought. And the book had been in his father's library. He thrashed his tail against the cage, irritated. Not remembering was driving him crazy. If Snape popped in on him he wanted to be able to say at least something useful, not just that he keeps hearing the same word repeatedly.

The door to Magical Menagerie tinkled when they opened it, and the proprietress looked up from the magazine she had been reading to welcome them. Ron and Hermione looked around the shop while Harry went straight up to the proprietress and deposited Draco onto the counter.

"He got in a fight with a rat ... you can see where if you look at his shoulder," Harry explained. "We cleaned it out the Muggle way, but can you have a look at it?"

As Harry opened the cage, Draco tried his best to look like nothing more than an ordinary ferret. The trouble with that, of course, was that he didn't have the faintest clue about ordinary ferrets.

The woman pushed the hair away from the scab on his shoulder and made a sound in the back of her throat. "It'll scar," she said. She felt his ribs and frowned. "This ferret's being underfed," she said angrily. "What're you feeding him?"

Harry was taken aback at her vehemence. "I only got him yesterday. He'd been my cousin's before that for about a week," he said coolly.

The woman grumbled. "He's exhausted, too. You aren't keeping him up all the time to play with

him, are you?

"No," Harry said shortly. "What should I buy for him?"

She snorted. "Well, a larger cage for one thing. This thing's like a prison cell. And some toys, too. And of course food," she said. She fixed Harry with a stern look as though daring him to protest any of the items.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Where are the cages?" he asked as politely as he could.

"On the back wall," she said, nodding her head to the right. Harry heard her mutter something but didn't catch it. He wished he'd bought one of those Comeback Mints now.

"Stupid cow," he muttered, walking to the cages. There were cages of all shapes and sizes, and Harry's anger fizzled as he saw cages for mice and rats that were as large as Uncle Vernon's car and filled with tunnels and slides. Other cages were only about the size of a toddler's playpen. Harry selected about medium sized, before returning to the counter.

She had pulled a variety of toys out; some spun, others raced along the counter or lit up, and the rest just sat there not doing anything special. Harry stared at all of them, a little overwhelmed. Finally, he just let Draco loose among them and let him choose which ones he liked.

Draco, too, was overwhelmed. He knew immediately that he didn't want any of the ones that lit up or emitted sharp noises. Those would drive him insane. He sniffed a safe looking gold ball and batted it with his tale. He liked that one. It reminded him of the snitch.

"The, uh, gold ball, please," Harry said. "And what kind of food should he have?"

The woman pulled out several bags and tins and rang up his purchase. In total, it cost him eight Galleons, though he saw that she had charged the gold ball twice. However, he was eager to leave the store as quickly as possible and so hadn't said anything. There was a bench outside the store, and he and Draco waited there for Ron and Hermione.

It was about noon, now, and Harry's stomach grumbled. He wished that Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor hadn't closed. He scanned the streets for signs of a restaurant. There was a pub little ways a way, and an Indian restaurant just a few doors down. Indian food sounded good to him, and he wished Ron and Hermione would hurry up.

Magical Menagerie wasn't very far from Knockturn Alley, he noticed. In fact, he could see Borgin and Burkes from where he sat.

Harry sat upright.

"The Vanishing Cabinet," he breathed, his eyes wide. He gathered all his new purchases together, and wrenched the door to Magical Menagerie open. "Ron, Hermione!" he said loudly.

Hermione poked her head out from the cat section, a book in her hand. She took one look at Harry and snapped the book closed and hurried over to him. "What is it? Have you seen something?"

"We've got to go," he said tightly. "Where's Ron?" He looked over his shoulder and began to walk away from Hermione, checking the aisles. "Ron?" he called.

"Harry, come look at this." He heard Ron's voice float from somewhere to his left.

"Ron!" Hermione said urgently, also to Harry's left. "We've got to go. Put that down. Harry's seen something."

Harry found them a second later and gestured for them to follow him outside.

"Oh, right, don't buy anything," the proprietress snapped.

Harry ignored her. As soon as they were outside he began to explain.

"We're going to Borgin and Burkes," he said, his tone brooking no argument. Just as he thought, Hermione looked nervous, but before she could interrupt him he barreled on. "The Vanishing Cabinet might still be there."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, a touch of exasperation in her voice. "You told Remus about that, remember? He must've done something about that!"

Harry opened his mouth to argue with her. He was going to remind her that last year his suspicions had been waved away, nobody thinking there was much stalk in them, and see what happened? But before he had a chance to say anything, Ron cut in.

"I think we should go," he said. "Didn't You-Know-Who use to work there? Maybe he left one of his Horcruxes there."

The Dark Lord? Horcruxes? Draco was so fiercely attending to every word that was spoken that he barely noticed the jostling of the cage as Harry practically ran toward Knockturn Alley.

"Oh, right, Ron," Hermione said scathingly. "Like Voldemort ... " Draco and Ron flinched " ...

would leave a bit of his soul hanging around somewhere were greedy ol' Borgin might sell it?"

The worn green leather book with the gold leaves running up the spine opened, and Draco remembered what Horcruxes were. The Dark Lord really was immortal.

## Chapter 4

"Borgin will remember me!" Hermione insisted.

"Then don't come in," Harry snapped angrily.

Hermione looked taken aback. It was obvious that she had thought that they would go in together or not at all, but Harry was already walking away from her. Ron paused for a moment at her side before following Harry into Knockturn Alley.

"Do you reckon he's sold it?" Ron asked in a low voice. They were attracting odd glances, a few of them menacing. It wasn't everyday that two Muggle dressed teenagers entered their dark alley.

"Dunno," Harry said tightly. He wished very much that he were not holding several shopping bags and Draco's cage. Ron already had his wand out, and Harry wedged Draco's cage between his left arm and ribs so that he could draw his wand, too. He felt moderately safer with it in his hands, and the two of them hurried down the cobblestone alley.

A hag hawking her wares a few feet away called out to them.

"Giantess nipples, boys, only twelve Galleons!" She jumped out in front of them and thrust her tray out. Fleshy mounds the size of billiard balls rolled about on the tray, and the stench of rotting flesh made Harry recoil. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead and he felt his stomach roll. He heard Ron gagging next to him.

The woman cackled and hobbled closer to Harry, waving her bony arm over the fleshy mounds so that the smell wafted up to him. He stumbled away from her, trying to suck in air through his mouth, but he choked on saliva and bile. His spluttering and coughing and the witch's mean laughter drew peoples' attention to the commotion, and out of the corner of his streaming eyes he saw two darkly robed wizards begin to make their way over to them.

"Go away," he gasped, his wand raised. His shirt stuck to his clammy back and he ran his hand over his forehead to wipe away the sweat.

The hag's arm froze in mid wave as she stared at Harry's forehead. "You're Harry Potter," she breathed, leaning across her tray. Her breath reeked, and Harry gripped his wand tightly in his hand, prepared to stun her. She looked excited, and the lumps of flesh on her tray rattled as her arm shook beneath it. "You're Ha-" but then her voice abruptly died, although her lips were still

shaping Harry's name.

Her eyes flew open wide and she clawed at her throat with long, cracked, and dirty fingernails, looking shocked. Harry blinked at her, stunned. He looked to his right but Ron looked equally surprised.

"Wha ... ?" he wondered aloud, gripping his wand tightly in his hand.

The hag pointed behind them, a look of rage twisting her features. But before Harry could turn around, he was being propelled forward by a hand on his back.

"Go, go!" urged Hermione's voice, sounding panicked.

The three of them rushed past the hag, who was hissing in fury. Something whizzed past Harry's ear and he turned in time to see the witch pick up another humungous nipple and hurl it at them. He grabbed Hermione's arm and sprinted forward, half dragging her along. Ron howled as one hit him, exploding blood and pus all over his back, but he didn't stop running.

Someone had returned the hag's voice to her and her furious screeches carried down the alley. They ran past other vendors and stores, their wands gripped tightly in their hands. Harry's bags bounced against his hip, and Draco's cage dug painfully into his ribs.

A few minutes later they stood panting in front of Borgin and Burkes. Ron wrenched his soiled shirt off his head and threw it away from him into the gutter.

"Fantastic," he growled, crossing his arms over his chest. "Half naked in Knockturn Alley, just what I've always wanted." He glared at Hermione.

"Well I had to do *something*! If she had said Harry's name you'd be worrying about more than just clothes," she snapped. "Those guys in black robes looked pretty interested in Harry."

"I thought you weren't coming," Harry pointed out.

"I couldn't leave you two alone in Knockturn Alley when you have half a brain between the two of you," she said scathingly.

"And what do you have? Two brains?" Ron sneered.

Harry rolled his eyes and began to walk up the steps to Borgin and Burkes. Ron and Hermione immediately stopped bickering, and Hermione frowned as she stared at Harry.

"Don't you think he'll just throw you out like he did me?" she said doubtfully, but she joined him on the steps. "Or maybe he'll throw you out because you're with me." She bit her lip and rubbed her right hand nervously over the knuckles of her other hand. It was clear that she didn't want to wait outside the shop by herself, but now that they had made it this far, she didn't want to be the one who ruined their chances of getting any information out of Borgin.

"I won't let him throw me out, not until he's answered my questions," said Harry, looking determined.

The three of them filed through the door, a weak tinkling of bells sounding through the shop as they crossed the threshold. Harry searched the room for the Vanishing Cabinet, but it was nowhere in sight.

"See? Professor Lupin must have gotten it," Hermione whispered, sounding both relieved, anxious, and triumphant.

But Harry wasn't convinced, and he stepped further into the room. How had Borgin ever gotten hold of the Vanishing Cabinet? And why? What was remotely Dark Arts about a Vanishing Cabinet?

"I'll be with you in just a moment," Borgin called.

"I bet he's oiling up Self-Screwing Thumbscrews," Ron said darkly, looking up at the long and cruelly pointed metal instruments of torture that hung on chains from the ceiling. "Bet Filch would love to do his shopping here."

Draco paced his cage nervously, his nails clicking on the metal bottom. The Vanishing Cabinet had been right over there, where the opal necklace used to be. Borgin's collection of hangman's rope was still there, but there was no Vanishing Cabinet. Had Lupin come by and taken it? No. He had told Borgin that it was not to be for sale, and he highly doubted that Borgin would dare disobey him after seeing all the Death Eaters that had gone into the cabinet. Had Borgin hidden it somewhere in the shop then?

"Good afternoon," Borgin said as he came down the stairs. "How may I help y ... " He saw the three of them and his oily smile turned sharply into a snarl. "You," he said, pointing to Hermione. He looked at Ron and became apoplectic. Obviously, he realized the family resemblance to Mr. Weasley. "Get out," he snarled, pointing to the door.

"Where's the Vanishing Cabinet?" Harry demanded, stepping in front of Ron and Hermione.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Borgin snapped, turning away from Ron and



Hermione to glare at Harry. "Get out of my shop."

But Harry stood his ground. "I know that Draco Malfoy came in here last summer and made you tell him how to repair another Vanishing Cabinet," Harry said coldly. Borgin flinched and Harry saw his right hand slowly lower for his wand even though his eyes never broke contact with Harry's. "Don't even think about it, Borgin. Hexing Harry Potter would be bad for business."

Borgin's gaze flickered to Harry's scar in surprise, but he said nothing. The tension in the air thickened, and Hermione edged closer to Ron until the three of them stood like a wall before Borgin.

"I know that Malfoy showed you his Dark Mark to scare you into keeping quiet, and I know that it was through the Vanishing Cabinet that the Death Eaters came into Hogwarts," Harry continued, his voice vibrating with cold rage. Standing before him was a man who had a hand in Dumbledore's death, and he wanted nothing more than to lash out at him. If Borgin hadn't told him how to fix the Vanishing Cabinet, would Malfoy have found another way into Hogwarts? Would Dumbledore still be alive?

"You have no proof," Borgin said, smiling nastily. "The door is that way."

"I'll buy it from you," Harry said. "Name your price. Go on; I'm the sole heir to the Black fortune."

"Leave!"

"Harry," Hermione said, nervously. "Let's just go."

"No!" Harry snapped. He was sick of backing down, of backing off when things got intense and uncomfortable. That's what he had done last year, and now there were casualties. Ron and Hermione hadn't seen what he'd seen ... if they had, they wouldn't ask him to step down.

"Don't you get it?" he said angrily to Hermione. "He still has it, and Voldemort can use them to go wherever he wants. Do you think Hogwarts is the only place Voldemort wants to get into? What about St. Mungos? The Ministry? Who knows what else he could do with it. We have to get it!"

"Admirable, admirable," Borgin said disdainfully. His hand flew to his wand and he raised it above his head. "But I've had enough of this. Time to leave, boys and girls."

"Prote ... " Hermione began, but Harry cut her off.

"IMPERIO!"

Reality became two bright pinpoints for him ... what he wanted to know, and who could tell him. Very far away, as though she were screaming across the other side of world, Harry could hear Hermione, but what she was saying slipped through his fingers. Borgin struggled against the curse, and Harry focused all his will into a single thought.

Tell me where the Vanishing Cabinet is. Just tell me. What have you done with it?

He didn't know if he had said it aloud or if he had only thought it, but Borgin answered.

"I sold it to Severus Snape," Borgin said in a dreamy voice, a vacant expression on his face.

Shocked, Harry's concentration slipped, and Borgin regained control over himself. He stared at Harry, shocked and dazed, but Harry barely noticed him. Snape had the cabinet. The man who killed Dumbledore had the cabinet.

"We have to get to Hogwarts," he said quietly to Ron and Hermione.

"Harry!" Hermione said, shrilly, "You used an Unforgivable on him!"

"Let's get out of here," Ron said, leading the way to the door. Borgin didn't try to stop them. He had sunk to his knees and he watched them leave with a fearful expression on his face. Hermione turned the Closed Sign over the window on her way out, looking terrified. As soon as they were out of the store, Ron gripped Harry and Hermione's arms and Apparated them back to the Dursleys' greenhouse.

"WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!" Hermione screamed. Several pots exploded as Hermione's magic escaped her control, and soil showered down on the three of them. "Using an Unforgivable is worth a lifetime sentence in AZKABAN!"

"*I have to get out of here!*" Draco panicked. If Potter would Imperio someone to find out where the Vanishing Cabinet was, he could just imagine what curse he'd use on the person who actually used it. "*He'll kill me.*" The idea terrified him. To think that only a short while ago he had thought he could make it back to the Dark Lord and tell him what he had discovered.

Hermione and Harry argued furiously with one another, with Ron contributing his thoughts once in a while. But their argument kept churning in the same circle, and Draco felt as though he needed to concentrate on getting out of his cage. At least, once he was out of the cage, his chances of successfully finding Snape and telling him about what happened in Borgin and Burkes and Voldemort's Horcruxes would be much higher.

Clearly, he had underestimated Potter. He had known that he had been wrong about Potter's upbringing for several days now, but he had never for a moment thought Potter of being capable of pulling off an Unforgivable. His Aunt Bella had told him about Potter's attempt at using the Cruciatus Curse against her.

"A slap on the wrist," she had sneered. "A bee sting. "

But that had been a year ago, and he had just seen Potter successfully execute the Imperius Curse. Had Dumbledore taught him how to do that? Snape had taught Draco, after all, how to polish his own Unforgivables. Innumerable numbers of ants and gnomes suffered before Snape was pleased with Draco's level of control over the Unforgivables.

Thinking of Snape reminded him of the Vanishing Cabinet. Why had Snape gone back and taken it? Was it on the Dark Lord's orders? Or was Snape just trying to steal more of the glory for himself? He was already the Dark Lord's favorite ... unless something had changed these past few days to shake Snape's confidence in his position.

Another pot exploded, and Draco dodged a clod of dirt, hissing. He absolutely had to get out of there. What he needed was a wand. He looked around him to see if any of the Gryffindors had left theirs within reach, but none had. Agitated, he went to his water dish, but it was now a muddy color from all the dirt that had been flying around.

*"Disgusting!"*

Ron looked down at him and took pity. "I'm just gonna pop inside and get him some fresh water," he said casually, looking relieved to be escaping Harry and Hermione's fight.

*"Pop away!"* Draco said sarcastically, incredibly jealous of Ron's freedom. What he would give to be human again for ten minutes.

And then it came to him. Of course! He knew how he could get out. Why had he never seen it before? It had been what Ron had said ... "pop." He had to Apparate out of the cage! He didn't need a wand to do it; he could have done it any time!

For several minutes, Draco just enjoyed the comfort of knowing he had an escape route that none of the Gryffindors could have ever predicted. That there were no anti-Apparating wards around made him feel even happier. He wondered if Snape had thought about how long it would take Draco to figure out that he could Apparate and Disapparate.

He grinned, letting Hermione's shrill protests wash over him.

No more cage, no more Dursleys, no more Potter, Granger, Weasley, and no more being a ferret. And the information he would pass onto the Dark Lord would surely increase his family's standing in the Dark Lord's circle. Maybe his Master could even be persuaded to help break his father out of Azkaban.

Ron arrived with a fresh water bowl for Draco a minute later, and Draco eagerly drank the cool liquid. The greenhouse was uncomfortably warm, and Hermione's hair grew even bushier than its usual volume.

"What if Borgin goes to the Ministry?" Hermione demanded. "How could you have been so stupid, Harry ... "

"Right," Harry said sarcastically. "Because Borgin, a man who owns a Dark Arts shop, is going to go and get himself noticed by the Ministry."

"You'd be a good catch," Hermione continued. "Catching Harry Potter with Dark Arts? Rita Skeeter would eat it up."

"But Scrimgeour wants Harry on his side," Ron interjected. "He needs Harry to win the peoples' support. Remember how he tried to bribe him with becoming an Auror? He's not about to go making enemies of Harry now is he?"

"He might try to blackmail Harry into condoning Ministry actions! You might have just obligated yourself to be nothing but a poster boy for the Ministry after today!" Hermione said, her eyes bright.

Harry opened his mouth to retort but then snapped it shut. There was no point. She didn't understand. Harry racked his brains for something that would show Hermione how invaluable the knowledge he had forced from Borgin was. Why couldn't she get over how his actions might affect him and instead concentrate on what was really important here? The fate of the Wizarding world. He opened his mouth to try to explain again when Hermione burst into tears.

Harry stared at her in shock, and he looked to Ron for an explanation. Ron sighed, and wrapped his arms around Hermione, stroking her hair as she sobbed into his shoulder.

"He'll be fine, Hermione," he said softly. "And if Scrimgeour does turn on him, well, I reckon the people will say that he acted for the greater good. And if they don't ... the Order will hide him."

This only made Hermione cry even harder. "A life on the run," she sobbed bitterly, hiccupping.

She was furious because she had been worried about him, about what would happen to him. The realization knocked the wind out of Harry, and he sat down on hard on a bag of fertilizer. He was reminded very strongly of Mrs. Weasley at that moment, and he bowed his head, cradling it in his hands. Hermione's sobs and sniffing were the only sounds in the greenhouse for ten minutes.

When Hermione finally calmed down enough to sit down, she stared miserably at Harry with red and puffy eyes. She sniffled and cleared her throat.

"I don't want you to end up like Sirius," she said, scrubbing at her eyes. "I don't want you trapped inside an old house and angry. And I don't want you to use more Unforgivables than you have to," she finished softly.

Harry didn't say anything, knowing it would be pointless to try to argue with her. But that didn't change the fact that he still had to kill Voldemort before Voldemort killed him. How was he going to kill the last bit of Voldemort's soul, the one in his body? It was something he'd been pondering ever since he learned about the Horcruxes. He shrugged his shoulders and sighed deeply.

"Me neither," he admitted.

Silence fell again over the greenhouse as each of them thought about the same thing: would Harry have to kill anyone else beside Voldemort? It was something Harry had tried to not think about, even when he thought of Snape. He couldn't help but remember what Slughorn had told Tom Riddle when he had asked about how one made a Horcrux.

"By committing the worst evil ... killing someone."

There was no doubt in Harry's mind that Voldemort was evil and had to be stopped. But what would killing Voldemort do to Harry? Would his soul start to tear? Would it become weaker?

Then he remembered that Dumbledore had killed Grindelwald, and Dumbledore certainly hadn't seemed as though his soul was tattered. This heartened Harry. If Dumbledore had done it and survived as a good man, then perhaps Harry could as well.

"We have to go to Hogwarts," he said finally. "And we have to destroy that other Vanishing Cabinet. Let me go and get the map, just in case Snape's there," he added with a grim note to his voice. He left the greenhouse, and Ron and Hermione talked in low voices while they waited.

This all suited Draco very well. He had a plan developing in his mind, one that he thought would

lead to his freedom. Unfortunately, the crux of the plan revolved around him being able to Apparate on his own without killing himself, which he had to admit was a very real danger. But when he pitted it against the Avada Kedavra, he had to admit Harry might cast it on him, he decided that he'd rather chance his luck with Apparating than the Killing Curse.

Although, part of him wanted to wait until Snape stopped by to collect information from him. He dreaded Apparating enough when he was a human, and while Side-Along-Apparation had so far been tolerable, he had a feeling that Apparating by himself as a ferret would be a rather different experience.

He debated with himself as they waited for Harry to return, and he had yet to come to a decision when Harry opened the door with a large square of old parchment in his hands.

"Ok, I've got it, let's go."

"Does it work from here?" Hermione asked, her nose still rather red.

"That'd be good, wouldn't it? Bet it'd be dead useful when we have the tent. You know, keep us sort of connected to Hogwarts," Ron said, looking excited. "I wonder if your dad made it so that you didn't have to be in Hogwarts for it to work."

Draco watched interestedly as Harry tapped the parchment and said, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." Skinny black lines blossomed over the page, and the three Gryffindors sounded excited. Dozens of black dots roamed across the page, and Draco tried to see what they were doing. He could just make out the writing above the closest dot, and it jolted him to read "Minerva McGonagall."

So this was how Potter had always known where he was last year! It all made sense now, and Draco felt terribly irritated at all of the effort he had wasted in trying to cover his tracks by going up to the Room of Requirement in dozens of different ways.

"No Snape," Ron noticed.

"Scrimgeour's there, though," Harry said darkly. "But he's with Professor McGonagall." He watched the map again for a few seconds before coming to a conclusion. "We'll Apparate to Hogsmeade, and we'll enter through the secret passageway in Honeydukes."

"What if it's closed?" Hermione asked.

"Then we'll go through the Shrieking Shack," Ron said. "There probably won't be too many people about Hogsmeade, and even if they do see us go in there, they'll probably just think

we're off to do the nasty."

Hermione blushed scarlet, and Harry stared determinedly at a browning orchid. He and Ron were best friends, and he hoped the best for Hermione and him, but hearing about their sex life was definitely not something he was interested in.

"Okay ... " Hermione said, struggling to compose herself. "Let's go."

Hearing this made Draco happy. He'd much rather Apparate back to the manor from the Wizarding world than from the Muggle. He'd Apparate straight into his mother's rooms, and she'd change him back. He was sure that Snape had told everyone what he had done to make Draco a better Death Eater.

He impatiently waited for his cage to be picked up as Harry, Ron and Hermione grabbed each other's arms. He couldn't wait to be human again ... to be able to wield a wand, to shower, to walk, be tall ... But they never picked him up.

"NO!" he screamed as they Apparated without him.

For a few seconds Draco was too furious to do anything but curse them. But after a moment or two he calmed down. He would just have to Apparate from the Dursley's greenhouse. He looked around at the broken pots and spilled soil and couldn't help but feel triumphant. He had figured out how to turn terrible circumstances into profitable ones. He had learned very valuable information, he would rise in the Dark Lord's favor, and the Malfoys would once again enjoy the respect they deserved.

He cast one last loathing look at his cage, thrilled that he'd never have to spend another second in the metal box again. He'd never have to eat that bland mush again. He'd order the house-elves to prepare a feast for him: steak, a salad, sorbet, chocolate dipped strawberries, Gillywater ... As soon as he got back to the manor he was going to luxuriate in the bath for hours. Being Scourgified just didn't have the same effect as shampoo and soap, or of being in clean clothes. He distractedly wondered about the state of his school robes. Would they be in the same condition as they were the night he was turned into a ferret? Then he wondered at the rat bite on his shoulder. Perhaps Snape had something that would heal it.

Then, when he was presentable, he'd go to the Dark Lord and tell him all that he'd learned. There was no way that he wouldn't be impressed with what Draco told him. He'd be pleased that Draco had made so much progress as a Death Eater in such a short amount of time. And then he'd find Snape. He hadn't decided if he would punch him first and then thank him, or if he was going to thank him and then punch him.

But first he had to get there. Draco sucked in great gulps of air, remembering that last time it had helped against the pain. He closed his eyes and prepared himself for the uncomfortable pressure that would try to crush him. Then he Apparated.

He felt like he was being ripped in half and he tried to scream in agony, but there was no air left in his lungs. He had to get out of here; it had to end, but the pain continued to rip through his body. Just when he thought he'd die, the pain faded away. His chest heaved as he breathed in deeply, trying to purge that peculiar feeling that was plaguing him.

He opened his eyes and stared at wall to Petunia Dursley's greenhouse.

*"What the fuck?"*

But he had Apparated! He had felt that terrible pressure, the air had whooshed out from him, and it had hurt more than it had ever before. So why was he still in the greenhouse?

Draco turned around and stared in horror at his fluffy white tail that was suspended in the air.

He had splinched himself.



## Chapter 5

Hogsmeade was quiet when they arrived, and though the doors to the shops were thrown open to coax in a breeze, only a few people were inside. All of them bore the harried expressions of people wishing they were some place cooler.

Harry wasn't looking forward to the long and cramped secret passageway from Honeydukes to Hogwarts, and he pulled out the map again to see if Scrimgeour was still there. It was no use; he was still with McGonagall. He was pacing in front of her, and Harry pressed his face closer to the map to watch the Scrimgeour's tiny figure. Suddenly, Scrimgeour stood very close to Professor McGonagall before he leaped several inches across the page and sat down in front of a table.

"Oh my God!" Hermione gasped, who had been watching the map as well. "She just hexed him!"

"What?" Harry and Ron said together. The three of them huddled over the map and Hermione pointed at the space between Professor McGonagall and the Minister. "She must have hexed him," she said, breathless with amazement. "When he got so close to her, remember? He couldn't have jumped that far, and he's not likely to have turned his wand on himself is he? Ooh, I wonder what he said!"

Her nose was practically pressed against the map as though she expected it to account for what had just happened. The three watched the map intensely, waiting to see how Scrimgeour would react. All that happened, though, was that he left the office, and they followed him as he moved quickly through the castle and out the doors.

Ron crowed in delight. "Excellent! Now we don't have to go through the Shrieking Shack." He looked over at The Three Broomsticks with a hopeful expression on his face. "Don't suppose we could have a quick bite, what with the time we're saving by not having to go through any secret passageways?"

"No," Harry said shortly, folding the map up and tucking it in his pocket. "We need to get to the Room of Requirement." He started walking quickly up the path that led to Hogwarts' gates, thoughts churning in his mind. What was Scrimgeour doing in McGonagall's office? And why had she hexed him, if indeed she had? What was Snape doing with the Vanishing Cabinet? Surely he must have known that the Order would be guarding the other one, if they hadn't already confiscated and destroyed it. Having only one Vanishing Cabinet would make it pretty useless, in Harry's opinion. Perhaps Snape was just keeping it as a trophy. At this, Harry

clenched his teeth and glared at the tall grass they were walking through. His blood rushed in his ears as he remembered the twisted look of hatred and rage on Snape's face when he used the Killing Curse on Dumbledore.

He crushed the long pale green blades of grass with his feet as he strode ahead of Ron and Hermione.

"Harry!" Hermione's insistent voice rustled Harry's from his thoughts. She was pointing up the hill, where Scrimgeour was walking quickly toward them. His face was a blotchy red color, and he walked down the path as quickly as his limping gait allowed. When he was about four feet away, Harry slipped his hand inside his pocket and grasped his wand. After what he'd seen on the Marauders' Map, he wasn't sure what to expect from the Minister. He planted his feet firmly into the ground and tensed his muscles, preparing himself for an intense verbal and perhaps physical dispute with the Minister of Magic. But just as it looked as if Scrimgeour was about to barrel into them, he turned with more agility than one would think he was capable of, and he went around them.

The three of them turned and stared at his back, all surprised that he hadn't even attempted to remind Harry of his duty to uphold the people's morale. Hermione was the first to speak.

"Now I *really* want to know what he said to Professor McGonagall," she breathed, looking curious and excited. They watched the Minister through the cloud of dust his shuffling feet had kicked up for a moment longer before they resumed their walk up to the castle.

Harry felt pangs of longing when the castle and the grounds came into view, and for a moment he stopped and simply stared. It was hard to believe that he wouldn't be coming back ... that he would never take another class. He thought of the Quidditch pitch and his heart squeezed painfully. He would miss flying around the pitch ... the wind whistling in his ear as he plunged his Firebolt toward the ground. He would never share another Gryffindor victory with his team. He suddenly remembered the first time he kissed Ginny. It had been at the party celebrating the Gryffindor victory, and Ginny had caught the Snitch.

Lost in his memories, Harry was taken by surprise when Fang leapt on him, barking joyfully. With a face full of an enormous, drooling tongue and a long black tail thumping happily against his leg, all maudlin thoughts disappeared. Ron and Hermione turned back and Fang expectantly rolled on his stomach and looked at Hermione with soulful eyes.

"Harry!" Hagrid's voice boomed above him.

Harry looked up at Hagrid's pleasantly surprised face and grinned. "Lo, Hagrid," he said,

cheerfully. "How are you?"

"Good, well, y'know, as much as can be expected," Hagrid hauled Harry to his feet and patted him on the back, sending Harry stumbling forward a few paces. "Hallo Ron, Hermione! How've you been? I've just made some tea; have a cuppa."

Ron looked eager at the invitation and turned towards Hagrid's cabin.

Hermione grabbed the back of Ron's robes and said, "Ron!"

Ron craned his head over his shoulder and made a face. "But we haven't eaten since breakfast. And it's lunch time!"

But they had to decline, telling him what they found out at Borgin and Burkes, not mentioning Harry's use of the Imperius Curse. The news sobered the mood immediately, and a look at once furious and terribly sad settled over Hagrid's features.

"THAT BASTARD!" Hagrid roared, his black eyes glittering. He seemed to double in size and Hermione's eyes widened. Ron and Harry's stared at Hagrid's massive hands, which had balled into fists the size of bowling balls. "I was in Knockturn Alley just last week!" said Hagrid, looking furious.

Fang whined, and Harry patted him reassuringly on the head, scratching behind the ears like Sirius had liked. "*If I had only known*," Hagrid kept muttering to himself as he rubbed one enormous fist into his palm.

"Do you know why the Minister of Magic was up at the school?" asked Hermione.

Hagrid snorted. "Probably wants to know what Dumbledore was doing last year. Professor McGonagall told me he's tried to get at Dumbledore's Pensieve." Harry's eyes widened and he, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another.

"What happened?" asked Harry, forcing his voice to remain calm. If Scrimgeour ever got Dumbledore's Pensieve, he'd find out all about the Horcruxes. And knowing the Ministry, it wouldn't be kept very quiet. Harry's stomach clenched as he thought about Voldemort reading the front page of the Daily Prophet: *You-Know-Who Split Soul In Seven Pieces, Dumbledore and Boy Who Lived Nabbed Two Bits!* It was imperative that Voldemort not know that they knew. If he did♦Harry didn't want to think about it. "Did he get it?"

Hagrid grinned. "Didn't you see his robes?" he asked.

"Hang on, yeah! They smelled like burned carpet!" Ron said, looking excited. His eyes widened and his mouth hung agape for a second before he said, "McGonagall hexed the Minister of Magic?"

Hagrid nodded, looking pleased and smug.

"I told you that," Hermione hissed, looking affronted that Ron hadn't been paying attention. They said goodbye to Hagrid and walked up to the school.

The first things they noticed were the giant hourglasses that kept record of the house points. All of the jewels hung in the top of the hourglass.

"Ten points to Gryffindor," Ron joked.

Ten rubies fell from the top, sunlight glinting off their sides in vibrant red hues. Ron and Harry grinned at each other, and Ron had just opened his mouth, undoubtedly to give Gryffindor more points, but Hermione glared at them.

"Ron! We're not even coming back next year!" she said, looking disapprovingly at him. "Ten points from Gryffindor," she told the hourglass firmly, as though it had somehow been an accomplice. Obliging, the rubies soared back where they had just fallen from.

"Nice try," Harry muttered to Ron as they followed Hermione.

In a few minutes they stood in front of the Room of Requirement. Harry paced in front of the wall, concentrating on needing to hide the lint in his pocket. In a matter of seconds, the door appeared, and Ron and Hermione were speechless when they stepped into the room. Even Harry was momentarily thrown off by the sheer amount of stuff there.

"Oh my," Hermione said in a high voice. She leaned over and picked up the lid to a jewelry box that was lying on top of a rather ugly piece of abstract statuary. Ron's mouth hung open.

"I wonder if the stuff way down there is from when the Founders were still here," he pointed at the opposite side of the room.

Harry shrugged. He didn't care if Merlin's toy broom was down there. He wanted the Vanishing Cabinet. The trouble was, he didn't know what it looked like.

"Put something inside every cabinet, and if it disappears you have the right one," Hermione suggested, holding out a completely tame Fanged Frisbee. With Frisbee in hand, Harry began approaching cupboard, cabinet, or wardrobe that looked big enough to hide someone.

But none of them he tried was the Vanishing Cabinet. One, however, had behaved much like a paper shredder, and the toy was turned into julienne strips of brilliant green plastic. Harry didn't dare to put his hand in there to retrieve the scraps, and he used a splintered Beater's bat after that.

"It has to be close," he said, frustrated. "Malfoy would have left it up here so that he could have easy access to it. He wouldn't go wading through all this junk," he muttered to himself, staring for a cabinet that he had missed.

"DAMN IT!" Harry swore, flinging the broken bat from him as hard as he could. Something delicate shattered a moment later, and Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "Damn it, damn it, *damn it!*"

"Harry, calm down," Hermione said sharply. "Breaking stuff isn't going to help."

"Maybe the Order has it," Ron said, sitting down on a velvet-covered chair.

"Like they had the one Snape *has*?" asked Harry, his eyes narrowed. He sighed and sat down in front of the last wardrobe he had been looking at and leaned against it. But he couldn't think of how Snape would get out of the castle with the Vanishing Cabinet without being seen by someone. An Invisibility Cloak wouldn't fit over Snape and a cabinet. Unless Snape had shrunk the cabinet, in which case it would only be a matter of sneaking out of the castle. "Maybe," he said, doubtfully.

"We can ask McGonagall," Hermione said, standing up. She looked firmly at Harry. "And I think you should take Dumbledore's Pensieve, Harry," she said, looking serious.

Harry sighed. He had been expecting that he'd have to do that, and a part of him was even excited about it. He could search through Dumbledore's memories for the ones of his parents and Sirius. But it felt wrong to be taking the Pensieve without asking the man to whom the memories belonged. What if there was something really personal in there? But he couldn't risk anyone else looking through Dumbledore's memories either.

He looked one last time, straining to spot an untested cabinet, but gave up after a few fruitless seconds. Together, they left the Room of Requirement and went to the Dumbledore's old office, now occupied by McGonagall.

"Um ... Acid Pops?" Harry asked tentatively of the gargoyles that guarded the entrance. They continued to stare balefully at it, unmoving.

Hermione pointed out that McGonagall would have changed the category of passwords when

she became Headmistress. Hermione tried the names of several witches and wizards who were famous in the field of Transfiguration, but to no avail. Not knowing any famous academics, Ron and Harry took turns saying the first thing that came to their mind but to no avail.

"This sucks," Ron said grouchy, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Suddenly, the gargoyles sprang to life and the staircase opened.

"This sucks?" Hermione echoed, shocked. She looked incredulously at the door, a suspicious look in her eyes as she watched the revolving stairs. "It can't be," she said, refusing to believe anything so crass from her favorite professor.

"Quite, Ms. Granger," a voice floated down to them. "I simply could no longer stand to hear you three proposing one ludicrous password one after the other." She appeared a moment later, looking quite resplendent in her summer robes of light purple. She looked sternly at Harry. "Why aren't you at your aunt and uncle's? Are you staying with the Weasleys?"

She looked down the hall as though expecting to see Mr. and Mrs. Weasley turn the corner.

"Um, no, Professor," said Hermione. "We came to see you."

"Dumbledore's Pensieve and the Vanishing Cabinet," Harry said, looking determined.

Professor McGonagall's eyebrows rose sharply across her forehead and her lips thinned into a solid line as she stared at him. Harry met her gaze unflinchingly. The last time they had been in her office he had refused to tell her what he and Dumbledore had been doing, and she hadn't been too pleased.

"It's locked in the cabinet in my office," she said after the long pause. Harry released the breath he didn't know he had been holding, and they followed Professor McGonagall into her office.

The curious silver instruments were still there, puffing steam and smoke and whirring about just as they had when Dumbledore had last been there. Some of the portraits that remembered him called out a friendly greeting, and Harry's gaze was immediately drawn to Dumbledore's sleeping portrait. It was a perfect likeness to him, and Harry stared. Never before had Harry seen Dumbledore look so relaxed. He was sitting in a plump, high backed chair of deep scarlet, his eyes closed and a peaceful look about his mouth as he breathed deeply. Harry, who had always imagined Dumbledore snoring when he slept, didn't have the heart to wake him.

He wished he hadn't come in. His heart thudded painfully in his chest, and he looked away from Dumbledore and his gaze settled instead on the empty perch. Several handfuls of ashes still

filled the basin under the perch, but there was none of Fawkes's brilliant plumage. He wondered what had ever happened to Fawkes. Was he still in mourning and would one day return to Hogwarts? Or would he spend the rest of his days alone?

Luminous silver-white light danced on the wall in front of him, and he turned around. Professor McGonagall was carrying Professor Dumbledore's Pensieve in her hands, and she walked carefully over to a large desk that Harry had once sat at with Dumbledore, learning what a Pensieve was.

"Have you looked in it?" he asked, more sharply than he intended, but his voice caught on the last word and he swallowed the fist-sized lump that had gotten stuck in his throat.

"No," she sighed. "But I have wanted to," she admitted as she set the Pensieve carefully on the table. Harry sat down across from it and looked up when McGonagall next spoke. "How do you plan on transporting this back to your aunt and uncle's?"

Was it Harry's imagination, or did Professor McGonagall's eyes flash when she mentioned the Dursleys? He was reminded strongly of Mrs. Weasley whenever someone mentioned them in front of her; her eyes flashed and her lips thinned, too. But Harry didn't think Professor McGonagall looked to be in the mood to talk about his relations, whatever she might think of them.

"You do realize that these thoughts are irreplaceable and invaluable," she said, sternly, looking sharply at them. Her stern look instantly transported Harry back to his first year when he and Ron had been late for their first ever Transfiguration class.

"Uhh," he stuttered, fumbling for an answer. Ron was equally unhelpful, and they both turned to Hermione.

"I'm going to use a Shield Charm," she said promptly. "Over the top of the Pensieve, sealing the thoughts to the bowl, and then around the bowl itself."

Harry looked at her gratefully, not wanting to tell Professor McGonagall that he had thought they might ask the house-elves for a water bottle.

Professor McGonagall nodded and looked up at the point above Harry's shoulder, and he knew that she was watching Dumbledore. But he didn't turn around and instead stared at the red flush that was crawling up her neck. When her lower lip began to tremble, Harry looked away.

Ron shifted his weight uneasily on his feet and cleared his throat loudly. Everyone looked up at him and his ears went red. "What, uh, hex did you use on the Minister, Professor?"

McGonagall looked momentarily taken aback before she glanced suspiciously at Harry, and he hastily arranged his features into a look of innocence. He knew without a doubt that McGonagall would not be pleased about the Marauder's Map.

"We, uh, saw him on our way up here. Hagrid said he'd been to see you," he said, hoping he wasn't getting Hagrid in any trouble.

"It was a hex you shall learn about next year," was all she would say, and the note of finality in her voice had Hermione quickly changing the subject to something less volatile. Harry felt momentarily relieved before her evasiveness irritated him. He wouldn't *be* at Hogwarts next year. He glanced over at Ron and could tell he felt the same.

"What has the Order done with the Vanishing Cabinet, professor?" asked Hermione.

McGonagall's serious face sent a ripple of unease through him, and he tensed in his chair. They had to have it. He'd told them that night where it was; someone must have gotten it. But with a sinking feeling in his gut he accounted for everyone he had told. The Weasleys and Fleur had probably stayed at the Hospital Wing, worried about Bill. Madam Pomfrey of course would be on duty, taking care of the wounded. He had a flare of hope when he remembered that Tonks, the Auror, had been there, but McGonagall sighed deeply.

"Someone's taken it," she said. "Lupin looked for it yesterday but could not find it."

"He looked *yesterday*?" said Ron, clearly thinking along the same lines as Harry. Even Hermione winced. They had all thought that one of the professors would have taken care of everything.

"It was a full moon the night after Dumbledore died," Professor McGonagall said quietly.

Guilt carved a hollow in his chest, and Harry heard Hermione's small gasp. Ron hung his head, obviously regretting his judgmental tones. The bitter expression on Lupin's face at Christmas when he'd told Harry he'd been undercover at a werewolf colony came to Harry's mind. Why had Lupin, who already had so much to do, been given the job of finding the Vanishing Cabinet? Why couldn't Tonks or Shacklebolt or even the professors have taken on the task?

"Why didn't somebody else look sooner?" he asked, failing to keep the accusing note out of his voice. Hermione frowned, and Harry couldn't tell if it was because she agreed with him or thought he was rude.

"Remus was the Defense Against The Dark Arts professor," McGonagall said. "He was more prepared to deal with any ... threats. We posted a guard outside of the Room of Requirement, but someone managed to stun Tonks and Shacklebolt, and they were able to enter without



obstruction."

"Why didn't you tell me this?" asked Harry, angrily, standing up.

"The Order knows," said McGonagall stiffly.

"We're part of the Order!" Ron exploded, sounding angry and disgusted. "We've been part of the Order for a while, even if you won't formally induct us. And now Hermione and me are of age." He thrust out his forearms, and the marks from where the brains had attacked him were clearly visible.

"You can't just keep something like this from us! We were there, fighting with you, that night, remember?" He grabbed Harry's wrist and showed McGonagall the back of Harry's hand.

"Hermione almost *died* trying to save the prophecy," he said furiously. "And Harry almost dies every year because of You ... V-Voldemort!"

Ron looked just as surprised as Harry and Hermione. For a second, the three of them grinned at each other. Harry looked at McGonagall, who didn't look too stunned by Ron's outburst.

"Congratulations, Mr. Weasley," came a very familiar voice from somewhere above and behind Harry. All four of them looked up, and Dumbledore smiled proudly at Ron.

Ron flushed scarlet.

"Professor," Hermione said tremulously, her bottom lip quivering. "We all miss you so much."

Professor Dumbledore looked at her kindly. "Then you must come and visit more often!" Hermione smiled as tears splashed down her cheeks. Ron reached out and held her hand. Dumbledore smiled at them fondly before he looked at Harry.

For a moment, he didn't speak. The two studied one another's faces, and Harry felt a peculiar sensation course throughout his body that left deposits of sorrow, anger and guilt.

"My dear boy," Dumbledore said quietly. "Thank you for taking care of me so well."

"Sir," Harry began, but his voice caught. He swallowed, but the lump in his throat wouldn't go away. No! He had to be strong. He dug his nails into his palms and looked away from Dumbledore. He had to say this without going to pieces. He refused to make Dumbledore worry about him.

"If I had only brought a water bottle," he said, his voice rough. "Or remembered that the Inperi

are afraid of fire, you might ... " He blinked and tilted his head back, breathing deeply. There were so many things about that night that Harry wished they could have done over.

"You shouldn't have wasted your spell," he said angrily, his eyes blurring. "We could have fought them together!" he said harshly, glaring at Dumbledore. "You could have shielded the door, and we could have gotten back on the brooms."

"Harry," Dumbledore began.

"NO! You were wrong! All year ... I knew that Malfoy was up to something. I told you, *I told you*, but you wouldn't listen." Anger such as Harry had never known before burned through him, and he picked up the chair and threw it at Dumbledore's portrait.

"HARRY!" Hermione cried. "No!" She drew her wand and pointed it at McGonagall, who had drawn her wand. Ron's eyes were wide, and he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, turning his head from Harry to McGonagall.

The only person who didn't look worried was Dumbledore. The chair had been repelled from the wall and lay toppled over on the floor, undamaged.

"Put your wand away, Minerva," said Dumbledore quietly, not looking away from Harry. Slowly, she obeyed, and Hermione and Ron lowered their wands too. "Go on, Harry," he said, softly.

But Harry felt drained. His anger had dissolved almost as soon as he had exploded and had replaced by another need. Terrible the need had been, those lessons about Tom Riddle's past had brought Dumbledore and Harry closer together. "We're going to get a tent," he said. Dumbledore nodded, understanding.

"Clever," he said, his eyes twinkling in approval. "You'll enjoy that."

Harry sighed. "I'm not sorry about being mad at you," he said. "I think you deserved it."

Dumbledore nodded. "I expect I would throw a chair at myself if I were in your position," he said.

Harry gave him a small smile, glad that Dumbledore understood and didn't resent his anger. Which wasn't really even anger, Harry realized. It was like when Mrs. Weasley yelled at the twins for nearly blowing themselves up. He couldn't explain it, but Dumbledore understood, and that was what mattered.

The rest of the visit was divided between updating Dumbledore and Snape about what they had discovered at Borgin and Burkes. Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore knew he had used the Imperius Curse on Borgin, but he didn't say anything. There was still so much Harry wanted to talk to Dumbledore about, but after about an hour, Harry remembered Draco.

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "I left him in the greenhouse."

"*What?*" Professor McGonagall demanded. "You have Draco Malfoy at the Dursleys?"

"No, he's my ferret. It must be sweltering in there."

"You named a ferret Draco?" Dumbledore asked, highly amused. "How very fitting." He looked thoughtfully at something Harry couldn't see, but Harry was preoccupied with feeling guilty.

"You two go and pick out a tent; I'll be there as soon as I put Draco back inside."

"You don't have your Apparation license, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall reminded him.

Harry shrugged. He didn't think too highly of Ministry laws at the moment. McGonagall looked exasperated, and Dumbledore chuckled before disappearing from his frame.

They left the castle quickly, and as soon as they were beyond the school's boundaries Ron gave Harry the address for Koonz's Tentacular Fete. Promising to meet them as soon as he could, Harry Disapparated with the Dursley's greenhouse firmly fixed in his mind.

Harry landed on top of a pot and lost his balance spectacularly, crashing into the ladder. Several pots fell to the ground, and Harry almost took out his wand to Reparo them, remembering only just in time that he didn't want to face another hearing for Underaged Magic.

When Harry Apparated in, Draco nearly splinched himself again in fright. Somehow, it had been easier to accept that he might die in a matter of seconds when he was in the Malfoy gardens. Here, however, trapped in a small, hot cage in Harry Potter's Muggle aunt's greenhouse, death seemed to be almost impossible ... as though nothing could get worse than it already was.

Harry brushed soil off his jeans and crouched down next to Draco's cage.

"Sorry, Draco," he said as he nudged a pot back with his toe. He glanced at the cage. "At least you had some water."

Just as he was about to look away he froze, staring at Draco's fluffy white tail.

"Who are you?" demanded Harry, on his feet in an instant. He ripped his wand out of his pocket, all thoughts of the ban on Underaged magic forgotten, and pointed it at Draco.

The scene was all too familiar to the night Scabbers' true identity had been revealed. Harry adjusted his grip on his wand, flexing his fingers around the wood, prepared to curse Draco if he so much as blinked wrong. Harry had given one Death Eater mercy before, and that man had been instrumental in returning Voldemort to power. He would not make the same mistake twice.

Cold fury swept through Harry's body, and his eyes became hard chips of ice. Draco flinched. Enraged, Harry reminded Draco of the Dark Lord, only the terror Harry inspired was of a different nature.

He was too angry to find it funny that Draco's Animagus form was a ferret. He racked his brains as he tried to remember what Lupin and Sirius had done to force Wormtail out of his Animagus form, but all that he could remember was how the room had lit up with blue-white light. Agitated, he tried to think of another spell that might work, but all that came to mind was the time during their fifth year when Hannah Abbott turned her ferret into a flock of flamingos. He made an irritated sound, and orange sparks flared out of his wand.

Draco fought to keep his head and not try to Apparate again. He didn't want to know what part of his body his tail was, but he imagined he'd be sorry to be without it when he was human. But it was maddening to hold himself still and not beg for his life when a wand held by someone who had cast an Unforgivable only that day was pointed at your heart. His nose was twitching uncontrollably, and with every spasm he feared that a jet of green light would come shooting out of Harry's wand.

Harry's gaze flickered from Draco's face to his tail. He knew that before he did anything, he had to make Draco whole again. He strained to remember exactly how the professors had put people who had splinched themselves back together.

"I'm going to put you back together. So don't move unless you want to do me the favor of hurting yourself," he said coldly. He slashed his wand through the air and a purple cloud consumed Draco before fading into a smoky haze.

Draco tentatively flexed his tail, and was grateful to see that it was once again working.

A spell came to Harry's mind, and he nearly dismissed it when a small voice in his head made him pause. Malfoy was only mediocre when it came to Transfiguration. How would he have managed learning to become an Animagus? He stared intensely at Draco. He looked exactly like the ferret Moody had turned Malfoy into during their fourth year. Harry didn't know if people

could choose their Animagus forms, but he highly doubted Malfoy would choose to be a ferret. With that in mind, Harry raised his wand.

"Finite!" he cried, bringing his wand down. A sharp crack echoed through the greenhouse, and Draco began to swell rapidly, elongating and growing taller. Quickly, while Draco could still fit inside the cage, Harry opened the latch and dumped Draco onto the floor.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted, and Draco was blasted against the shelves. Aunt Petunia's garden tools fell with a clatter, and her small spade hit Draco's knee.

Dazed and in pain, Draco didn't resist when Harry plunged his hand into Draco's pockets and seized his wand.

"*Malfoy*." Fury and disgust lashed Harry's voice. Though he was wandless and covered in soil and terra cotta dust, Draco sneered at him.

Any doubts Harry might have had about the ferret being Draco disappeared when he saw the familiar sneer of disdain on Draco's face. But it was not the same sneer as Harry was accustomed to seeing. In fact, it reminded him of how Draco had looked the night he had let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts ... afraid and angry. The drops of pity Harry felt for Draco were like oil on top of his ocean of hate for the other boy; it refused to be submerged into his furious rage at Draco.

Harry wondered if Draco would be singing a different tune when he brought him to the Order. He could just imagine him standing in front of Lupin and McGonagall ... the looks of rage on their faces. But thinking about the Order of the Phoenix angered Harry. Would they tell him anything? Or would they treat him like a little boy and try to hide reality from him? He remembered his scene with Dumbledore and McGonagall from that morning, and a decision was made.

The Order would probably try to put Draco in Azkaban, or at the very least let the Ministry handle the case. Harry had neither the time nor the inclination to let Draco rot in a courthouse with the finest lawyers money could buy making his defense. An idea was beginning to take shape in his mind, and he knew immediately that Hermione would not approve. How he would get her to take his side he wasn't sure. He'd have to work on her ...

Before Draco had time to try to attack Harry without magic or even try to dodge, Harry used Draco's wand and Stupified him and then locked the door to the greenhouse. He waited for a moment to see if his hunch had been correct, but when no Ministry owls turned up he sighed with relief. He had been right; Draco was of age. Hurriedly, he stowed both his and Draco's

wand in his pocket.

He had to get to Ron and Hermione and tell them about Malfoy. Grim thoughts ran through his mind. Whoever had Transfigured Draco into a ferret obviously knew about the Dursleys, or at least about Dudley's birthday. But to the best of Harry's knowledge, the only wizard or witch who had met Dudley was Dumbledore, the Weasleys, and Hagrid, and he very much doubted any of them had been in contact with Malfoy.

He Apparated to Diagon Alley and began running along the alley, checking the street addresses every now and then to see how close he was to Koonz's Tentacular Fete. Several people looked upset to see him running and huddled closer together. Harry wished he could have paused and put them at ease. After a few minutes, he stopped in front of a very large store with an impressive window display of living room furniture, and a sign advertised a sale on all chandeliers.

Harry pushed open the door and stepped into the brightly lit room. Tents of all colors and sizes filled it. Two very wealthy looking wizards were examining an enormous black tent that had a flagpole at the very top of it.

"Harry!"

Harry turned and saw Ron and Hermione hurrying toward them, a piece of parchment clutched in Ron's hand. Ron looked excited and Hermione looked irritated. Ron thrust the parchment at Harry. "Look at that!" he exclaimed, jabbing his finger at an enormous oval. "An indoor Quidditch pitch!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, because that's what everyone needs ... an indoor Quidditch pitch."

But Ron ignored her. "It's standard size, Harry! Bloody expensive though."

Harry nodded impatiently, wishing they were back at the greenhouse already. But the plan he was working on wasn't smooth enough yet for him to tell them about it. "Yeah, really great. Have you found one?"

Hermione nodded and led the way through the maze of tents. "It's got a kitchen, one bathroom, living room, library, and two bedrooms ... "

"We need three bedrooms," Harry said firmly, imagining what a catastrophe it would be for Ron and Draco to share a room.

"That's gonna cost more," said Ron.

"That's okay," Harry assured him, trying to sound casual.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she looked at Harry, who pretended to be completely engrossed by the lawn furniture they were walking through. He sat down on a blue footrest and tried to contort his features into a look that suggested he might want to buy it. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Hermione come to some sort of decision before she led them over to where the three bedroom tents were.

"We saw a tent made out of Invisibility Fabric," said Ron. ""Price on request""

Harry was tempted. It would make sense to take all manner of precautions as they looked for the Horcruxes. It would solve the problem of Muggles poking around inside their tent, too. He imagined the three of them hunting around for their tent and having to spend the night on the ground under the stars.

"I think we should get one we can see," said Harry.

Ron looked a little disappointed but cheered up when Hermione stopped in front of an orange tent. "Hey! This is the one I liked," he said excitedly. He pushed through the flap and called for them to follow.

Harry and Hermione entered the tent, and Harry could see at once why Ron liked it. It looked inviting and comfortable, and Ron had already thrown himself across a very plush looking couch. "It's very nice," he sighed, leaning his head back against a cushion.

Harry grinned, and even Hermione smiled. The place wasn't elegant or delicate looking; Harry could imagine them brewing a potion in the kitchen and playing Exploding Snap across the coffee table. "What are the bedrooms like?" he wondered aloud.

"I'll show you, Harry," Hermione said quickly. Ron looked happy that he didn't have to get up again, and Harry followed Hermione down a hallway. There were two bedrooms on the left and one on the right. Hermione pushed the doors open, and Harry stepped into each of the rooms. He knew at once that he wanted the one with a large window and the dark blue walls. He sat down on the bed and smiled. He had never imagined that his first home would be a tent.

Harry didn't have enough money in his pouch when they tried to buy it and had to fill out a magically binding contract that said he had enough money in his vault and would send it by goblin courier in two days time. Harry tried to sign the documents without reading them, but Hermione stopped him. It took him twenty minutes to go through the paperwork, and the man

behind the counter had looked very annoyed with Hermione.

"Honestly, who would be stupid enough to sign a magically binding contract without reading it?" Hermione said for the third time as they walked over to the Leaky Cauldron.

Ron and Harry rolled their eyes at each other but wisely did not say anything. Tom the barman had looked thrilled when they sat down at one of the tables, and he waited on them himself. After they had been served drinks, Hermione asked about Draco.

"Oh, er, okay," Harry muttered. He had almost forgotten about Malfoy. But he supposed now was as good of a time as any. He took a very large gulp of Butterbear. What would they say? He had a good feeling what they would say at first, but after he explained, what would they say?

"Draco Malfoy's in my aunt's greenhouse."



## Chapter 6

Ron laughed. "Yeah, the look on McGonagall's face when you told her about Draco." He chuckled to himself and slurped the froth off of his Butterbeer.

"No," Harry insisted, "the real Draco Malfoy. The ferret's really Malfoy."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's getting old, Harry."

Harry gripped his glass very tightly, starting to feel frustrated. He leaned his head in over the table, the wands in his pocket digging into his hip and said, "I'm not kidding. When I went back, he had splinched his tail off, and I put him back together and used Finite Incantatum, and he turned into Malfoy!"

They were wearing the same expressions now as when he had told them all last year that he thought that Draco was up to something. Their disbelief was maddening and he threw down his one piece of evidence onto the table.

"Harry! That's a wand!" Hermione said, her eyes wide.

Harry nearly said something cutting in reply but restrained himself, watching Hermione as she picked up the wand.

"Hang on," said Ron, a look of concentration on his face. "I've seen that wand before!" He took the wand from Hermione and looked at it closely. "Yeah!" he said, looking stunned.

"What did you do with Malfoy?" asked Hermione, sounding nervous.

"Stupefied him," replied Harry, taking back the wand. He didn't want anyone else in the Leaky Cauldron to wonder about all the fuss the three of them were making about a wand.

"But, you're not of age," said Ron. Harry saw Ron's eyes flick up to the ceiling as though expecting a Ministry owl to come soaring towards them.

"I used Malfoy's wand," explained Harry.

"Good thinking," said Ron. He sniggered and then said, "I would've loved to have seen his face when you turned his own wand against him."

"But what was he doing there?" Hermione wanted to know. "And who turned him into a ferret?"

"He did," said Ron as though it were obvious. "He's an Animagus."

Hermione shook her head. "No. You can't force an Animagus back into his human form with Finite Incantatum."

"Well, maybe he Transfigured himself," suggested Ron.

An uneasy feeling settled in Harry's stomach. If Malfoy were going to Transfigure himself into an animal, he highly doubted he would choose being a ferret. Mad-Eye Moody had Transfigured Malfoy into a ferret, and the ridicule aimed at Malfoy had been a source of great amusement for Harry for two years. No, he decided. Malfoy did not turn himself into a ferret. But who would? It was the sort of thing he thought one of Draco's enemies would do, but wouldn't one of his enemies be on the Light side? Why then, hadn't the Prophet said anything about Malfoy's capture?

"I don't think so," said Hermione grimly. "I think it was a Death Eater."

The uneasy feeling turned into dread, and Harry pushed his Butterbeer away from him, his appetite gone. No one said anything as Tom brought their food to the table.

Harry's shepherd's pie no longer appealed to him, and he sipped his water, mulling over what Hermione had said. If it were a Death Eater, how did they know so much about the Dursleys? How did they know when Dudley's birthday was? With a jolt, he realized that Malfoy had probably been a ferret since the night the Death Eaters stormed Hogwarts. Harry racked his brains as he tried to think who would turn Malfoy into a ferret.

The answer came to him, and a nasty taste flooded his mouth. Snape. Dumbledore would have told him about the Dursleys, and Snape had served guard duty the summer before fifth year. He would have had ample time to learn about the Dursleys.

"But why would a Death Eater do that?" Ron asked, frowning. "What if Malfoy were discovered? Wouldn't they be worried that the Order would get information out of him?"

A realization struck Harry, and rested his arms against the table. "But Malfoy's expendable," he said, softly. It made him sick to understand Voldemort's train of thought, but it made sense in a tactical sort of way. "He probably doesn't know anything really valuable. Dumbledore said that Voldemort expected Malfoy to fail, and he didn't worry about Malfoy being interrogated then, so he probably wouldn't worry now. But he could use Malfoy to spy or kill me ... " Hermione

flinched ... "either way, Voldemort would profit. He would get rid of a failure, or turn a failure into something useful."

"But Malfoy got the Death Eaters into Hogwarts," Ron protested. "He almost killed Dumbledore!"

Hermione, however, understood. "Almost being the operative word, Ron. Snape had to kill Dumbledore."

Anger slashed through Harry like lightning and he tensed in his chair. Every time he thought about the terrible mistake Dumbledore had made in trusting Snape, he wanted to lash out. Dumbledore's trust was knotted with Snape's betrayal, and Harry couldn't help but want to march back to Hogwarts and storm and rage at Dumbledore again for being wrong.

"Why did he try to Apparate?" Ron wondered aloud, his fork of mashed potatoes halfway to his mouth.

"What?" Harry asked, blinking.

"Malfoy. You said he splinched himself, right? Maybe he was trying to report back to ... V-Voldemort." Ron stuttered on Voldemort's name. His ears burned brightly and his knuckles turned white as he clutched his fork, but neither Harry or Hermione made any comment on this.

"But what had he found out that would ... " Hermione's eyes widened and she looked frightened. Her voice dropped to the barest whisper. "Horcruxes. We talked about them in front of him."

Ron's fork fell to a clatter onto his plate, and all three of them flinched at the sound. Harry's mind raced. How much did Malfoy know? Although it was unfair, Harry couldn't help but want to blame Hermione. It was she who had revealed the most about the Horcruxes when they were crossing the street to Knockturn Alley.

*"Like Voldemort would leave a bit of his soul hanging around somewhere were greedy ol' Borgin might sell it."*

"We need to tell McGonagall," said Hermione, already standing up.

"No," said Harry. Hermione frowned at him. "Malfoy will tell her about the Horcruxes," he explained. "And nobody can know but us."

"But ... " Hermione again, looking frustrated.

"No," said Harry, very firmly. That she would even think about taking Malfoy to the Order was unbelievable to him. He could just imagine Mundungus telling the whole world about the Horcruxes and selling fake amulets and potions to protect people. He snorted and leaned against the back of his chair.

Hermione opened her mouth, but just then Tom came by. "Don't like the food?" he asked, sounding both worried and annoyed.

Ron took a large gulp of his water, and Hermione looked frostily at Harry. "No, uh, it's really good!" said Harry, hoping he sounded halfway convincing.

"You haven't touched it."

Harry kicked Ron under the table, but it was Hermione who winced and kicked him back. Ron kept his water glass glued to his lips and was absolutely no help to Harry.

"It's ... for my Muggle relatives," said Harry wildly. "I've just told them so much about your great food, that they want to try it."

"Really," said Tom, not looking even slightly convinced. He left the table without filling their drinks, and Ron finally set down his glass. This time, Harry didn't miss when he aimed a hard kick in the shins at Ron.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "Let's just go." He opened his money pouch and took out a handful of Sickles. It was more than their meal had been, and Harry hoped it would mollify Tom a little.

They left quickly, and when they were in the alley facing the wall that separated the Wizarding world from the Muggle one, they Apparated back to the Dursleys, just a few feet away from the greenhouse. Hermione strode purposefully to the door, but Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "We need my Invisibility Cloak," he said.

They walked back to the house and opened the door to the kitchen. "What time is it?" whispered Harry, stopping and blocking the door.

"Three o'clock, why?"

Harry sighed with relief. "Aunt Marge's train comes at four," he explained. "Good, that means at least Uncle Vernon isn't here."

They hurried up to his room, and Harry threw open the lid to his trunk and rummaged for his Invisibility Cloak. Ron leaned the tent on Harry's bed. Harry balled his Invisibility Cloak in his hands, and they walked back to the greenhouse. Harry pulled out Draco's wand and whispered, "Alohamora."

"I'm going in first," said Harry. He felt nervous. He hadn't cast the spell with his own wand, and there was no guarantee that it had worked completely. He didn't know if people could become un-Stupified after enough time.

But Draco was still slumped over, unconscious. Hermione gasped when she saw Draco, and Harry was irritated. "Didn't believe me?" he asked, not able to keep the accusing tone out of his voice.

Hermione shot him a cool look. "No, look at his wrists," she said. "They're tiny."

Harry shrugged. What did he care if Malfoy had tiny wrists? He cast an uninterested look at them, and was rooted to the spot where he stood. Tiny was an understatement. Harry's eyes followed the wrist to the forearm where his sleeve had been pushed back. He frowned. Malfoy had always been slim, but he didn't remember him ever being so skinny.

"Does he have the Dark Mark?" asked Ron, his voice gruff. Harry looked at Ron out of the corner of his eye. Ron looked like he was fighting a battle with himself. But Harry knew that expression well; Ron didn't want to talk about it.

Hermione gripped her wand tightly in her hand, and she stepped closer to Malfoy. She stretched her hand out and tapped Malfoy on the arm and then flinched back as though she had expected him to grab her arm. When Malfoy didn't even twitch she reached out and tugged the sleeve on his left arm up.

Harry inhaled sharply when he saw the tattoo. It was a sharp contrast to Malfoy's smooth, pale skin. It was the first time Harry had ever been able to study a Dark Mark, and he crouched next to Malfoy to examine it. It looked exactly like the Dark Mark, only instead of looking luminous, as the Dark Mark did when it loomed in the air, this one was cast iron black. Although he was expecting it, his scar didn't once prickle uncomfortably.

"Right," he said, rising to his feet. He raised Draco's wand and said, "Ennervate."

The first thing Malfoy did was groan. Harry had forgotten that his Stupefy had slammed Malfoy against the shelves. Malfoy then looked up at them, and Harry saw his hand dive into his robes for his wand. A sick, desperate look came over Draco, and looked around wildly for his wand. It made Harry uncomfortable to see him like this; Malfoy was nothing like the Malfoy he had

known during his six years at Hogwarts. This Draco was like the one he had seen in the tower.

"I've got it, Malfoy," Harry said, keeping his wand trained steadily on him.

Malfoy glared at him, a shadow of his old self lighting his face. He looked at Ron and Hermione, who had their wands pointed at him, too. Ron's was shaking, and Harry was reminded that it was Malfoy who had unwittingly let Greyback into the castle. He thought of Bill's scarred face and hatred pumped through his veins, rushing in his ears.

"Where's Snape?" he said quietly, his voice rough.

Malfoy only sneered at him. "Like I'd tell you."

"I can make you," said Harry, his voice sounding far away to him. Bill's tortured face kept swimming in front of his eyes. Dumbledore's pleading with Snape echoed in his head, scraping against Harry's mind. Someone was tugging on the back of his robes, and Malfoy's face was contorted in fear.

"Harry! Ron, help me," Hermione said, struggling to keep Harry from taking another step further. Harry stopped, and Hermione stumbled backward.

"Where's Snape ... " Harry began again, but Draco cut him off.

"I don't know."

"I don't believe you," said Ron, sounding like Harry never heard Ron sound like before.

Malfoy's face was tight with fear, and he swallowed. His hand trembled when he brought it up to his face to push his hair out of his eyes.

"Did Snape turn you into a ferret?" asked Hermione.

Draco hesitated. Was Snape there? Was he testing Draco's loyalty? Draco moistened his lips with his tongue and didn't say anything. He considered Apparating but remembered the terrible pain that had ripped his tail from his body. His stomach rolled as he recalled the agony.

"I think he did," said Harry, watching Draco closely. The other boy looked green. The light from the sunroof flooded Draco's face, throwing his pale and hollow features into greater clarity. Harry had only ever seen one other person look as Draco did now, and it infuriated him to know that it was Sirius. His godfather had looked this scrawny when he met Harry, Ron and Hermione in the cave during their fourth year. Sirius had been skinnier when Harry first saw him in the

Shrieking Shack, when Sirius's clothes were rags and hanging off of his body. With a wrench in his gut, Harry realized that Draco wore the same desperate and almost hopeless expression Sirius had on that night before they had turned Scabbers into Wormtail.

He didn't want to think of Sirius and Draco in the same position. Malfoy wasn't innocent like Sirius had been; Harry had heard him confess to Dumbledore.

"Maybe we can just tell Lupin, Harry," said Hermione. "I mean we can't take Malfoy with us ... " She flicked her eyes at Malfoy.

"No!" said Ron loudly. He stepped past Harry and pointed his wand at Draco's chest. Malfoy blinked rapidly, and Harry saw his chest shudder as he stared at Ron's wand.

"Ron, stop it," Harry said sharply.

"He's responsible for Bill," Ron said savagely. His wand shook in his hand. Draco's eyes widened, and Ron laughed mirthlessly. "What? Didn't know, Malfoy? Greyback attacked my brother."

"But he wasn't transformed," said Draco, his voice catching on the last word. Harry didn't know if it was guilt or fear.

Ron sneered at him. "He's still scarred."

"But he's not a werewolf," said Hermione.

Draco didn't look relieved, Harry noticed, nor did he look disappointed. He didn't know if this was because Draco was staring down Ron's wand or if he just didn't care about what had happened. Harry remembered the shock on Malfoy's face when Greyback appeared in the tower, and Harry had a feeling that a great deal of that night had been out of Draco's control. The drops of pity that mixed in the ocean of hate he felt for Malfoy rose like oil to the surface and didn't disappear no matter how hard he tried to drown them.

Ron, however, did not feel as Harry, and with a roar he lunged at Draco and punched him in the face. Blood spurted from Draco's nose as Ron's fist slammed into it. He quickly raised up his forearms and blocked Ron's blows, and then kicked Ron's feet out from under him.

"Ron, STOP IT!" shrieked Hermione.

Draco threw himself on top of Ron and clawed to wrench Ron's wand out of his hand. Harry tried to get in between them, but the two were wrestling so fiercely that he couldn't pry them apart. Hermione had her wand raised but she couldn't curse Draco without one of Ron's limbs

flying in front of where she was aiming.

"Get Ron," Harry grunted, trying to pry Draco off of Ron.

Draco struggled against him, still straining for Ron's wand when a strong kick in the stomach propelled Draco into Harry. Harry tried to pin Draco's arms behind his back, but Draco writhed in his grip and twisted until they were chest to chest. Draco struggled to get his own wand, which Harry had stashed in his back pocket, and Harry forced Draco's arms upward, pinning them with his grip. Draco tried to knee Harry in the stomach and the groin, but Harry's reflexes and health outmaneuvered Draco's attempts.

"Hold him, Harry!" Ron bellowed, pointing his wand at Draco.

A high keening sound sounded through the greenhouse, and Harry was shocked to realize it was Draco who was making the desperate sounds. With teeth bared and fingers clawing at Harry's wrists and his grey eyes light blue with panic, Draco reminded Harry once again of Sirius. He saw Ron take aim, and Harry acted before he could properly think it through.

He twisted Draco's wrists until the other boy's arms buckled, and then Harry gripped Draco by the elbows and picked him up and changed places with him. Ron's red hair blurred across Harry's vision before he was once again staring at Draco.

"Stop," Harry growled, squeezing Draco's arms tightly. Draco continued to fight and Harry finally shoved Draco away from him and whipped his wand out of his pocket. "I SAID STOP!" Harry roared, pointing his wand at Draco's chest.

Draco panted, blood trickling down his chin and neck. His nose was already swelling, and Harry could see that Ron had broken it. Looking out of the corner of his eye, Ron was clearly visible to Harry. Harry knew better than to tell Ron to lower his wand. Hermione was no longer pointing her wand at Draco but instead held it up to attention, ready to Stun.

Harry turned to Ron. "He's defenseless ... you can't attack him, Ron," Harry said, angrily.

Ron jerked his head. "*He* didn't care about that; most of the students were asleep in ... Dumbledore was defenseless!" He glared furiously at Harry as though daring him to refute it.

"You weren't there," Harry snapped. "He wouldn't have done it!"

"WHY ARE YOU DEFENDING HIM?" shouted Ron.



Harry raked his hand through his hair and exhaled loudly. How do you explain split-second logic to someone? He didn't know where to start and said in halted stutters, "Because Dumbledore wanted ... no, Lupin said that being Dumbledore's man meant ... I mean ... "

Harry sighed. It made sense in his head ... these tumbling thoughts that somersaulted into streamlined clarity ... but trying to articulate how the tangents were connected wasn't working. He wished Ron could see into his thoughts and could replay the memories ... the ones of Dumbledore trying to show Draco that he did indeed have options, of Lupin explaining at Christmas time why he trusted Snape, and seeing Draco crying in the bathroom. He wished Ron could understand how remembering the one and a half thousand Galleon price tag on the opal necklace made Harry realize how desperate Draco must have been to fulfill Voldemort's orders. And though he didn't want Ron to know, Harry couldn't help but feel a certain bond to Malfoy. You can't help but feel a little closer to someone when both of you have had the same wizard threaten to kill you.

Malfoy knew what it was like to stand in the presence of Voldemort and be given an ultimatum of life and death. Ron and Hermione had never even seen Voldemort. They had no idea what it was to stare into Voldemort's red eyes and hear him say that he would kill you. But this wasn't what really what made Harry defend Draco. Part of him recoiled when he admitted that he was indeed defending his Hogwarts' nemesis, but another part was bolstered by the confidence that he was doing the right thing.

It was more than what Dumbledore and Lupin had said, or the pity he felt for Draco. It was something more basic, a feeling in his gut, that made him stand between his best friend and Malfoy.

"So you're going to sink to his level? Attack a defenseless person?" Hermione demanded, glaring at Ron. Harry knew then that her ready wand wouldn't only fire off if Malfoy tried something.

"He's a Death Eater," snarled Ron.

"So we'll give him to the Order! I don't know what the Ministry'd do with him, maybe they'd give him the Dementor's Kiss ... " Hermione shuddered. "The Order would definitely punish him, and might get some information out of him. But you can't just take justice into your own hands!"

"He's not going anywhere," Harry snapped. "I wouldn't put it past anyone to use Legilimency on him or Veritaserum, and he'd tell them all about the Horcruxes." He paused, breathing heavily, and Ron and Hermione looked angrily at him, but Harry didn't care. If Voldemort knew that

they knew about the Horcruxes, he might make more of them, and Harry would have no clue about where to look.

"Is that all you care about?" Ron said loudly. "What about Bill? What about Dumbledore?"

"Ron!" Hermione gasped. "Of course Harry cares about your brother and Dumbledore! How could you ever say he didn't?"

Ron looked away from them, and Harry clenched his fists. "Of course I care about Bill and Dumbledore, Ron. I know the part Malfoy played in Dumbledore's death; I saw Dumbledore die. Malfoy didn't know that Greyback was going to come ... he said so to Dumbledore ... "

Ron snorted, and anger crackled in Harry's gut. "Damn it, Ron, you weren't there!" Harry exploded. "He wasn't lying! It doesn't excuse what he did, and it doesn't change anything, but he's not who's really behind all of this. Voldemort is, and if I don't kill him it'll never stop!"

He needed them to understand. "It was what Dumbledore wanted. He tried to get Malfoy to change sides ... "

"You're not Dumbledore, Harry," Hermione said. She looked as though she were trying to be gentle, and it infuriated Harry.

"I know I'm not!" Harry snapped. "But he used Petrificus Totalus, and I heard and saw everything. He could have Stupefied me, but he didn't. He wanted me to know. I'm not saying that we should forget or even forgive Malfoy for what he did, but we're in a war. He can help us."

"You said he doesn't know anything valuable," Ron pointed out, his voice hard. He jerked his head at Malfoy, and Harry saw out of the corner of his eye Malfoy backing away, trying to put as many pots between him and Ron as possible.

Harry nodded. "I know. But he knows about Snape." Ron jumped slightly, a look of surprise and comprehension on his face. "Snape's Voldemort's right hand man ... he might even know about the Horcruxes." An idea came to him. "He probably does! He gave Lucius Malfoy one of his Horcruxes ... maybe he's given one to Snape."

"Harry, you're not supposed to catch Snape! You're supposed to be looking for the Horcruxes," said Hermione, sternly. "And it's a huge guess you're making. Malfoy really messed up with the Horcrux he was given, didn't he? Voldemort wouldn't make the same mistake twice. You just want to go after Snape for revenge!"

But Harry ignored her. Ron was looking at Harry seriously, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. Hermione looked scandalized that Ron was even considering what Harry said, and she opened her mouth to say something, but Harry shot her a furious look. He knew it was a reach to think that Voldemort would have given Snape one of his Horcruxes, and to be honest, he didn't want to go after Snape just because he thought that he might have a Horcrux. In fact, the only reason why he had brought up Snape was because he knew Ron would tolerate Malfoy if he thought Malfoy could be of use to them. In truth, he didn't think that Malfoy knew anything valuable. Keeping Malfoy with them, however, would at least neutralize the threat he posed to the Order and to Harry's mission of finding and destroying the Horcruxes.

Hermione was still holding out for Ron to side with her. Ron seemed to make up his mind because he nodded curtly to Harry. Hermione looked furious.

"Fine," Ron said shortly. "He stays. But I'm not sharing a room with him."

## Chapter 7

The tent, in Draco's opinion, was nothing to write home about. It was a rather ludicrous shade of orange that would not even remotely blend in with nature, and looked small and cramped. Ron held him at wandpoint while Harry and Hermione searched for anything Draco might use to break out.

"We're in here, Ron," Hermione called from one of the rooms. Ron jerked his head at Draco, and he warily stepped through the opening.

Wooden floors creaked under Draco's feet, and in the back of his mind he recorded the detail; if he ever tried to sneak away, he would have to do something about the noise. He walked quickly down the hallway, not wanting Ron to prod him again. The door was open, and Draco stepped across the threshold.

He was silent as he looked around the room. The first thing he noticed was that, instead of wood, he was walking on carpet. Small details such as flooring had become more important to him after having walked and slept on uncomfortable metal bars. A mattress without headboard was pressed against the wall, and a small wardrobe sat in the middle of the closet. They were the only pieces of furniture in the room. A skylight in the ceiling revealed a starry night sky.

Harry saw him looking at the skylight. "It's broken," he explained, shrugging. It had been one of several things he had discovered while reading the contract. "Someone bungled the charm so that the time of day is reversed. You'll get used to it."

At the moment, Draco didn't care that he was looking at stars rather than blue sky, but then he thought about how he would feel at two in the morning with an afternoon sun glaring down at him.

"Do I get a chair?" he asked, not quite keeping the bite out of his voice.

"No," said Hermione tersely. Draco didn't question why. He had a feeling he knew anyway. An innocent piece of furniture in its own right, a chair could be used as a blunt weapon when in the wrong hands. Granger obviously thought he epitomized 'wrong hands'. Anger flared up inside of him from an unknown source. It hadn't anything to do with not having a chair, but Draco was too wound up to think much deeper than that. He glared at the wardrobe in the closet. He didn't even have any clothes to put in the drawers.

"Pound on the door when you need to use the bathroom," said Harry.

"What? Not going to only let me use it twice a day?" Draco sneered.

Something flashed in Harry's eyes. "Keep it up and you'll get a cat-flap in the door," he said quietly, his voice taught with anger, frustration, and something else Draco couldn't define.

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry and then at Draco with, if possible, even angrier glares. Harry strode out of the room without another word, and Ron and Hermione followed. The last one out, Hermione spoke to him before she left.

"You don't know how lucky you are." She glowered at him for a moment as though wanting to say something else, but Ron called for her.

"The house is warded so that you can't Apparate inside of it; so don't even think about trying to do that again." She shut the door behind her and cast a locking spell.

He stared at the locked door for a moment, a roaring sound in his ears. *Lucky?* He laughed mirthlessly. Yes, because it was so lucky to be given an impossible order by the Dark Lord with yours and your parents' lives forfeited if you failed. Wasn't he fortunate to be turned into a ferret and have no idea what Snape was doing? What a blessing to be captured by the enemy!

He pounded his fist into the mattress, and his wrist bent painfully. Grunting, Draco cradled his arm in his hand. The pain had cleared his head, somewhat, and he thought back to the expression on Potter's face just before he left the room. Gently rotating his wrist, Draco wondered if his eyes had been playing tricks on him or if Potter really had looked ... insulted? No ... embarrassed, Draco decided. This puzzled Draco. Why had Potter threatened him with a cat-flap? Was he thinking about turning Draco back into a ferret? That didn't explain the embarrassed look on Harry's face, though.

He sighed and stretched across his bed, staring up at skylight. The stars winked above him, as he tried to figure Potter out. On one hand, Potter was his rival, his enemy ... an attention-seeking Gryffindor who cheated his way out of punishment and wormed his way into glory. On the other hand, however, Potter was a dangerous wizard who had saved his life. Draco dearly wanted to think of Potter the same way as he had thought of him for six years, but recent events had undermined the effort.

It was more than seeing Potter use an Unforgivable. In a large part, it had to do with something completely un-magical: the Dursleys. It was obvious to Draco that Potter hadn't grown up spoiled and pampered. His relatives seemed to hate him, in fact. Not wanting to wrestle with the thought any longer, Draco turned to another thought that had been prodding his mind. Potter had defended Draco from Weasley, Granger, and the Order of the Phoenix. Of course, he

knew that Potter wanted the Horcruxes kept a secret, but the urgency in Potter's voice had spoken of something else. Draco had been overwhelmed to hear that Potter had been in the tower with Draco and Dumbledore. Potter had heard everything Draco had never dared to ever say out loud, and Potter still hadn't used the Imperius Curse to force him to tell them what else he knew.

When he thought about all the ways Potter could keep Draco silent about the Horcruxes, all of them involving violence and threats, it amazed Draco that he was in the condition that he was now. Was this what Granger meant when she had said that he was lucky? If so, he was inclined to agree with her. It was obvious to Draco that Potter didn't really think that he was much use in his quest to find Snape. Besides, pursuing Snape seemed to be a side goal to the Horcruxes. Flinching, Draco came to the conclusion that there was absolutely no reason for Potter to keep him alive once he was done finding out what Draco knew about the Horcruxes.

A tremor shook through Draco's body, and the stars blurred in his vision. A terrible weight pressed against his chest. Nothing had changed. After everything that had happened he was in the same position as he was this time last year. Only now he had given the other side more of a reason to hate him and want him dead after revealing his hand in Dumbledore's death. The Dark Lord might only see Draco's efforts as being marginally successful, but the Wizarding world hated him as Snape's accomplice, the Dark Lord's hidden Death Eater, a Dark Wizard. And now he had destroyed the opportunity Snape had given him to redeem his family's name in the Dark Lord's circle. Nothing had changed; he had failed again, and this time he doubted the Dark Lord's mercy.

He curled his knees up to his chest, wishing he had a Time-Turner.

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"How are we going to keep an eye on him?"

Ron and Harry looked up from their trunks that they were dragging into their bedroom.

"What?" Ron asked, panting slightly.

Hermione rolled her eyes and pointed her wand at the trunk. "Locomotor trunk," she said, almost lazily, as she flicked her wand at the trunk and set it floating into the room. Ron's ears burned, and Harry was once again frustrated that he was not of age to use magic. "I mean, what if we come in to bring him food and he's waiting right behind the door to attack us? Or what if he tries to escape."

"I thought you said he couldn't Apparate," Ron said.

"Not in the house," Hermione said, stressing the word "house." "But when we're out looking for Horcruxes he will be able to. We can put up anti-Apparating wards on the tent, but what if he somehow breaks out of the tent?"

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought about that. How would they see what Malfoy was up to? You don't need magic to break out of a tent or house, after all.

"We could put Unbreakable Charms on the walls and stuff," Harry suggested.

Hermione shook her head. "Those fade after a while." She looked thoughtful. "What we need is a portrait."

"Yeah!" said Ron, looking excited. "That's a good idea!"

"We'll need more than just the one, though," said Harry. "We'll have to have paintings in every room so that it can tell us what he's up to."

Hermione's face fell. "Magical paintings are expensive."

Ron laughed. "Portraits are; paintings are cheap. We can get some cheap landscapes for a couple of Sickles."

Hermione brightened, but Harry frowned. He didn't want cheap landscapes in his house. It felt strange to think of the tent as his house, but he had paid for it, and it was four walls and a roof, no matter what it looked like on the outside. He wanted paintings with personality.

"Won't, uh, the portrait get lonely if there's only one person?" he questioned. "I mean, we don't want a depressed person in the house, right?" He'd rather have cheap portraits than landscapes that you would find hanging in a hotel. He didn't mind a few landscapes, but portraits, at least, you could talk to.

"But where are we going to get cheap portraits?" Ron wondered aloud.

A startled look washed over Hermione's face, and she said, "Oh! I know!" She hurried out of the room and they heard her quick steps on the wood floor in the hallway. A minute later she appeared with a catalogue in her hand. "Look! Lockhart's catalogue!"

"Why do you have *that*?" Ron demanded, not even looking at the page Hermione was opening.

"He gave it to me," she said, looking flustered. "Look, he sells portraits of himself for two Galleons."

"I wouldn't pay two Knuts to have his mug on my wall," said Ron, darkly.

Hermione ignored him and pressed the catalogue into Harry's hands. "I mean, he's not the brightest man in the world, but ... " She trailed off.

Harry grimaced. Free overnight owl delivery with the purchase of two or more portraits. For four Galleons he couldn't deny that the price was right. "We could always change it later," he said aloud, assuring both Ron and himself. Hermione struggled to look like she didn't care, but Harry caught her smiling to herself. He rolled his eyes as he filled out the order form.

"Hang on," he said. "Hedwig and Pig are at the Burrow. How are we going to send this?" He held the order form in his hand, and it flopped loosely over his arm. Hermione frowned.

"I'll go get them," Ron offered. "I can get some of my Chudley Cannons posters, too."

Harry thought he saw Hermione wince. He grinned, glad to be seeing Hedwig soon. "Okay."

"I'll see if Mum has some food for us," Ron added on his way out the tent flap.

Thinking of Mrs. Weasley's cooking made Harry's stomach growl, and he was reminded that he hadn't eaten lunch. Tom's Shepherd's pie sounded very appetizing at the moment, and Harry hoped that Mrs. Weasley had some of her steak pies on hand. He highly doubted that Aunt Petunia would have made enough food for all four of them, and the idea of dining with Aunt Marge was not something he hoped to make a reality.

"If she doesn't, we'll go to the market," Hermione said, flipping through the rather well thumbed-through catalogue. Harry saw that many of the pages had their corners folded over, and he suppressed a grin. "We'll have to stock up the kitchen, anyway."

Half an hour later, they heard Ron thundering up the stairs. Hedwig hooted impatiently, and as soon as she saw Harry she turned restless in her cage. Harry quickly took the cage from Ron's hand and opened it. Hedwig climbed onto his arm and nibbled affectionately at his finger.

"Hi, girl," Harry said softly, stroking her soft white feathers. "How was the Burrow?"

As if in response Hedwig looked reproachfully at Pig, who hooted exuberantly at Ron as he fluttered around his head.

"Ready to take a delivery, Hedwig?" Harry asked, holding up the parchment.

She lifted her leg obligingly, and he tied the order form to her leg. He walked out of the tent



with Hedwig on his arm. It was disorienting to go from a house to a room, and as he made his way to the window he tried not to think about his cupboard under the stars. He pushed the window open and Hedwig pressed against his arm before she flew away.

When he entered the tent again, Ron and Hermione were not in the sitting room but in the kitchen, a place where Harry hadn't set foot in yet. It was a small kitchen, about half the size of the one the Dursley's had, and the appliances were all old fashioned. But when Harry opened the refrigerator he was surprised. Like the tent, the refrigerator gave every appearance of being normal, but when he opened the door he found himself staring into a walk-in refrigerator.

"Wow," was all he could say. He shut the door and stared at the other appliances appraisingly. What would he find when he opened the oven? Or the pantry?

"Have some carrot cake," Hermione said, holding out a large piece of cake on a plate. "Mrs. Weasley made it this morning."

Ron nodded, his mouth bulging with cake. "'s ealy ood," he mumbled, crumbs falling from his lips. He swallowed thickly.

It was good. Harry took another bite before cutting another piece and putting it on another plate. "For Malfoy," he explained.

Ron looked thunderous at the idea of sharing his mother's cooking with a Death Eater, but Harry didn't care. It wasn't as though they had anything else to feed him.

"Don't leave him alone with the cake," Hermione warned. "He might try and attack you with the fork."

Harry nodded and picked up the plate carefully. Ron stabbed at his cake menacingly and didn't say anything to Harry as he left for Draco's room. Harry kicked Draco's door with his foot.

"Malfoy," he called. "I'm coming in."

Part of him felt ridiculous that he was knocking on his prisoner's door, but knock he did. He waited a moment before drawing Malfoy's wand and undoing Hermione's spell. He twisted the knob slowly, prepared to drop the plates and curse Malfoy if need be.

But Malfoy was curled up on his side on the bed, his back to Harry. Harry shifted his weight awkwardly. Was Malfoy sleeping? He stared at the Slytherin's shoulders, but they weren't rising and falling regularly. Was he crying? The cake in Harry's stomach churned unpleasantly. The last time he had seen Malfoy crying he had almost ended up Crucio and had used Dark Arts against

the Slytherin.

He cleared his throat. "I have some cake that Mrs. Weasley made." Draco didn't move. "I can't leave you alone with the fork, because you might try to kill us ... so if you want to eat you have to come now."

With a sigh, Malfoy stood up, and Harry walked forward and put the cake down on the floor before backing up a few steps. He sat down, his fork in one hand and a wand in the other. But Malfoy made no attempt to steal the wand from Harry. He was cutting into the cake with the side of his fork and didn't say anything to Harry.

A huge part of Harry wanted to interrogate Malfoy, to ask him what he really knew about Snape. That part of him, however, was quelled when he saw Malfoy close his eyes as he took a bite of the cake. Harry watched in fascination as the hollows of Malfoy's cheeks moved as he chewed, and Harry was reminded that Malfoy had been living on ferret food for nearly a week. Again, Harry was struck by Draco's resemblance to Sirius, only in this case Malfoy reminded Harry of how Sirius had eaten rats to keep from starving. Just like Sirius, Malfoy was wearing the same clothes as when he had last seen him, although Sirius had been in Azkaban rags and Malfoy in school robes that badly needed to be washed.

Harry hadn't thought about Malfoy needing to do his laundry. With an unpleasant twist in his stomach, Harry realized that there were a lot of things he hadn't thought about before he decided that Malfoy had to stay with them. Malfoy didn't say anything as he ate the cake in slow bites. He kept his eyes firmly on the carpet as he chewed, and Harry took the opportunity to study the other boy. Malfoy needed to shower and shave. His usually sleek blonde hair hung in dirty clumps about his face.

"Mrs. Weasley made the cake," he said again. He wanted to make Malfoy feel grateful to Ron's mum, yet he was also trying to make conversation.

Malfoy gave him a chilling look.

Embarrassment and anger curled like smoke in Harry's chest. Before Malfoy was done, Harry used a Summoning Charm and stole the plate and the fork that had a bit of cake on it before slamming the door behind him and locking it. He clenched his hands into fists, and icing and cake squished between his knuckles. His ears were ringing and he strode quickly out of the tent, not wanting to see Ron or Hermione.

With his hands messy from the cake, he walked down the hallway, gripping Malfoy's wand tightly in his hand as though it were Malfoy's throat. He had to get out of there. He had just pushed the tent flap over his head when he heard a startled gasp. Without thinking, Harry

thrust his hand with Malfoy's wand in it, pointing the wand straight between Dudley's eyes.

"What are you doing?" demanded Harry angrily. "What are you doing in my room?"

But Dudley stared, cross-eyed, at the wand. Harry quickly dropped his arm to his side, but didn't relax his grip. The wand was sliding in his frosting-slicked hand, and he looked warily at Dudley.

"Well?" Harry demanded. Dudley's eyes flickered toward the tent before he looked back at Harry.

"Why do you have a tent?"

Harry raised his eyebrows at his cousin. Since when had Dudley expressed an interest in anything that had to do with Harry unless it was Harry being punished or yelled at?

"It's a magical alter where we sacrifice baby goats to Merlin," Harry said seriously. "Wanna watch?"

Dudley left quickly.

Seeing Dudley had doubled his anger, and Harry slammed the bathroom door behind him before roughly twisting the taps. Hot water scalded his hands and he yanked them out from under the stream of water, swearing. The water pipes under the ground had been baking in the sun all day, and he waited impatiently for the water to cool. The frosting on his hands made him itch.

Malfoy could go hungry for all he cared, he thought savagely to himself. It would give the spoiled Slytherin a taste of what Harry's summer before second year had been like. The Dursleys had kept him a prisoner in his room, starving him and Hedwig. If it hadn't been for Ron, Harry thought, he might have starved to death before anyone came looking for him. Yet Harry knew he wouldn't do that to Malfoy, as much as he'd like to.

He realized that he had been leaving the water running for several minutes, and he tested the water. It was icy cold now, and he scrubbed the frosting and cake from his fingers. Any other time, Harry would have been careful to not clog up the sink with cake crumbs, not wanting to cite his aunt's wrath. He found he didn't care just then. In fact, part of him was hoping that his aunt would start to yell at him just so he'd have someone to fight with.

"WHERE'S MY DUDDERS!" a voice downstairs boomed.

Harry grinned. Aunt Marge was *much* better than Aunt Petunia.

"Where's that boy, Petunia?" boomed Marge. "He should take my bag up to my room."

Harry smiled nastily at his reflection. Good ... she was already finding fault with him.

Uncle Vernon gave a fake hearty laugh. "Never mind, Marge. Just leave it there ... right. Drink?"

Harry turned the doorknob and pushed the door forcefully, causing it to bang into the wall. He had taken no more than four steps towards the stairs when Hermione poked her head out his bedroom door.

"Harry?" she asked, blinking curiously at him. "What are you doing?"

He suddenly felt stupid that he had been about to pick a fight with his relatives, and so he shrugged. "Nothing," he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well come back inside. Malfoy's been pounding on the door for a while now saying there's a Boggart in his wardrobe. Ron's all for keeping it locked in there with Malfoy."

"Why didn't you get rid of it?"

Hermione looked sideways at him. "I thought you might like to," she said, a knowing look in her eyes. "A healthy, constructive way to vent."

Harry didn't say anything as he followed her down the hallway.

"Malfoy," Hermione called loudly. "We're coming in ... go to the other wall and pound on it." A few seconds later they heard dense thumps from a little ways away. Hermione pointed her wand at the door.

BOOM!

"Oh Lord," she hissed, pivoting on her heel. "I told him not to use the microwave!" She looked flustered and shot Harry a put-upon look. "Will you be okay?"

But she didn't even wait for his response and hurried down the hall, loudly abusing Ron.

Harry magicked the door open and waited until he saw Malfoy leaning against the opposite wall before he entered. He caught Malfoy's eye, and the other boy's gaze flickered over to the wardrobe. The third drawer rattled violently, causing the entire wardrobe to teeter. Harry flicked his wand, and it shot forward.

Coldness sapped the heat from the room as long grey robes rose from the drawer. Malfoy sucked breath sharply through his teeth. Out of the corner of his eyes Harry saw Malfoy's face tighten, and Harry hurried to cast his Patronus.

But no happy thought came to him.

Screams of agony rang through his mind, but they weren't of his mother pleading with Voldemort. It was Dumbledore who was screaming in his head, begging for Harry to kill him. For the first time, mental images assailed him as the dementor leached his strength from him. The twisted look of torment on Dumbledore's face as he whimpered in fear and pain burned its way through Harry's mind. Another scream, higher than Dumbledore's, pierced his thoughts.

"No, not Harry! Please! Take me instead!"

High, cold laughter sneered like an angry laceration across Harry's mind before the laughter turned once again into frightened and tortured sobs.

"I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop!"

Harry's wand dangled uselessly for a moment in his hand before it fell to the floor.

Harry trembled. Dumbledore and his mother's screams echoed in his head like a terrible bell whose ringing sound never faded, only swelled louder and louder. All conscious thought was narrowing to focus only on their fear and pain. If only he brought a water bottle, Dumbledore might still be a live. Guilt and terror made Harry's knees buckle.

"No," he moaned softly, cowering. The Dementor loomed over him, and Harry cried out, flinching away. The memories were becoming tangled; they interwove with one another until he wasn't sure which scream belonged to whom, and who was falling into the Veil and who was falling off the barricade. Harry covered his head with his hands, clutching at his hair as the memories of Dumbledore and Sirius falling to their deaths simultaneously replayed over and over again in his mind.

CRACK!

"RIDDIKULUS!" shouted Draco. Very distantly, Harry thought he saw a man in a whicker chair, but before Harry could get a good look the man was slumped over the back of the chair, a knife embedded in his back. Draco laughed loudly, but instead of sounding happy it was violent, and the Boggart vanished with a loud crack.

Harry was dimly aware that Malfoy had a wand in his hand, but he didn't even have time to

think about the ramifications of Malfoy having a wand because Ron and Hermione burst into the room. With a roar, Ron slammed his shoulder into Malfoy, knocking him to the floor. The wand flew from Malfoy's hand, and Hermione quickly Summoned it before she hurried over to Harry.

Malfoy wrenched himself out of Ron's grip and pushed himself against the wall, breathing heavily.

"Ron, there's chocolate in my trunk," Hermione ordered.

Ron's footsteps thundered down the hallway. Harry was shaking too badly to sit up so he stayed sprawled across the floor.

Never before had anything but his parents' dying moments filled his mind when a dementor was near him, and never had he remembered anything but sound. He had been caught so completely unprepared for remembering the night in the cave that he had lost the concentration needed to cast a Patronus. With dread, Harry knew that as bad as it had been with the boggart, a real dementor would be much worse.

Ron hurried into the room with a Mars Bar. "This was all I could find," he said, thrusting the chocolate at Hermione. Hermione ripped the wrapper off the bar and tried to shove it into Harry's mouth.

Harry glared weakly at her. "Stop it," he mumbled, taking the chocolate out of her hand. He took a small bite out of the candy and remembered why it used to be his favorite. He hadn't had a Mars Bar in years, he realized. Not since the trolley on the Hogwarts Express had Harry had Muggle candy.

Warmth began to sink into his bones again, and after a few more bites he stopped trembling and felt much better. On his last bite, Harry was able to enjoy the candy just for taste rather than how it made him feel.

Everyone remained silent the entire time he was eating, but Harry knew that Ron and Hermione were bursting with questions. As soon as he had swallowed, Hermione cleared her throat.

"What happened? Why couldn't you fight it off?"

Harry sat up and ran his hand through his hair. "I heard my mum," he said quietly. He thought he saw Malfoy flinch, but when he looked in Malfoy's direction he was staring stoically at the empty drawer on the floor. Ron looked confused.

"But you've always been able to fight the Dementors off," he said. "Wha ... ?"

"And I heard Dumbledore from when we were in the cave," Harry finished shortly. It was not something he wanted to share with Ron and Hermione. Not even if he showed them through a Pensieve would they understand what it was like to see the greatest wizard of modern time beg to be killed to end the agony. Remembering how much pain and terror Dumbledore had suffered made Harry's stomach roll.

Neither Ron nor Hermione said anything but instead looked at him worriedly. Harry ignored their looks, concentrating on something else. He had to retrain himself just as he had done the first time in Lupin's office. Voldemort was in control of the Dementors, and he had to be ready.

He looked seriously at his best friends and said, "We need to find more Boggarts."

Hermione sighed. "I knew you were going to say that."

The resignation in her voice made Harry smile.

## Chapter 8

Harry had the last shift of guard duty that night. Being the guard rather than the guarded was a nice change, he thought as he walked down the hallway to relieve Hermione of her shift. As he passed the bare walls he thought about what paintings he would like to have on the walls. He wasn't looking forward to Lockhart's portrait, and he wondered if a photograph couldn't work as well as a portrait. He idly thought about putting a Permanent Sticking Charm on Dumbledore's Chocolate Frog Card.

He knocked on the door. "Hermione?" he called quietly.

He heard a muttered spell and the door opened. Hermione leaned against the wall. She held her wand in her hand loosely and blinked slowly at him, looking tired.

"Haa ... reee," she said, mid yawn.

"Hi," he said, and smiled.

She patted him on the back. "I'd stand if I were you. He didn't speak to Ron or me, and it gets dead boring." She yawned again, and Harry's eyes flickered to Malfoy, who was leaning against his bed in his undershirt and trousers and staring at his feet. "See you tomorrow...well, today's tomorrow isn't it ... later then."

She shuffled gratefully out of the room and shut the door behind her. Harry took the spot on the wall she had just left and settled in for three hours of mind-numbing boredom. Suddenly, he remembered the portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses in McGonagall's office. They slept often; would Lockhart? He grimaced. If Lockhart wasn't sleeping he might go and visit his other portraits in other places. Why on earth had Hermione suggested Lockhart? He reassured himself with knowing that they could get new portraits if Lockhart shirked his duties.

Thinking about what portrait would make a good guard, Harry was startled when Malfoy spoke up.

"Why not the Dark Lord?"

The question didn't catch Harry by surprise. The Boggart incident was all that he had been able to think about all day. Malfoy had had his wand again, but he hadn't even tried to escape. Harry had been completely vulnerable, and still Malfoy had not even pointed the wand at him. Part of him argued that there hadn't been enough time between Malfoy finishing off the Boggart and



Ron and Hermione bursting into the room. But Harry knew that wasn't true.

"It's never been Voldemort," Harry said. Malfoy flinched at the sound of his master's name. "Who was the man in the chair?" he asked, frowning as he remembered the man slumped over in the chair with a knife in his back.

Malfoy's face went completely blank. "Someone I know." That was all he would say on the subject and for an hour didn't speak again.

Late afternoon sunshine washed Malfoy in warm light. He had taken off his filthy robe and was leaning against his bed in an undershirt and trousers, his eyes closed. Harry took the opportunity to study the other boy's face. He had never seen Malfoy look so exhausted, and he was amazed that Malfoy was still awake. He looked up at the skylight, and wondered whether he should cover it.

The next time Malfoy spoke to him it was to tell him that he needed to use the bathroom, and Harry had never been more mortified in his life when he entered it with Malfoy. Neither boy spoke, and Harry, though he felt compelled to stare straight at Malfoy's back, tried to concentrate on what was in his peripheral vision.

The bathroom was a combination of Muggle and wizard inventions. The showerhead was a large carp fish with a widely opened mouth. Instead of candles, there were light bulbs, but Harry didn't see any switch to turn these on, and so he held the lit tip of his wand in front of him.

"I want to take a shower," Malfoy said as he washed his hands. Harry noticed the enormous amount of soap Malfoy was using on his hands and forearms as though he were trying to wash as much of himself as he could in case Harry didn't let him shower.

Depriving Malfoy of showering after he had been a ferret for a week sounded cruel to Harry. Malfoy stretched the towel across the bar as wide as it would go before stepping into the shower and undressing in there. He tossed his clothes over the glass door and they fell across Harry's feet.

"*Scourgify*," said Harry, pointing Malfoy's wand at the clothes. He missed his own wand. Malfoy's wand felt uncomfortable. Holding a Death Eater's wand made him want to wash his hands, but he didn't put it down.

He leaned against the sink while Malfoy showered. If someone had told him two weeks ago that he'd be giving Malfoy a slice of Mrs. Weasley's cake and then standing guard over him while he showered, Harry would have recommended a visit to St. Mungo's.

Malfoy's pale skin glowed in the bluish light glowing from Harry's wand. There was no shampoo in the shower, but Harry saw Malfoy rub the lather from the bar of soap in his hair. His sharply pointed elbows were like points of a triangle as he raised his arms to wash his hair. Soap ran down Malfoy's arms and over the Dark Mark. The white lather was a sharp contrast to the hard black tattoo.

Steam began to fog up Harry's glasses, and he wiped them on his shirt. It made him feel very uncomfortable to watch Malfoy, even though he had showered with the Gryffindor Quidditch team plenty of times. He didn't know if it was because Malfoy was his enemy, or because it was Malfoy's first shower in a week, or because looking at Malfoy's emaciated body felt like trespassing.

Malfoy stayed in the shower for thirty more minutes before he finally turned the water off. Water dripped from the carp's mouth, and it was the only sound in the bathroom. A thought struck Harry, and he gripped his wand tightly, standing up straight. Had there been a razor in the shower? Unease rolled through Harry. Would Malfoy try to kill himself? Would he hide the razor and then try to attack one of them?

"I need to shave," Malfoy said, his voice echoing slightly. "Is there a razor?" He pulled the towel off the bar and into the shower.

Relieved, Harry glanced behind him. He opened the medicine cabinet, but only a dusty vial of Elizabeth's Teeth Whitening Potion was in there. "No," he said. "We'll get you one tomorrow, though."

Malfoy stepped out of the shower with the towel slung low over his hips, looking much calmer than he had before. Harry couldn't help but notice how Malfoy's hipbones protruded sharply. Malfoy saw Harry's eyes flicker at his hips and he tugged the towel up higher. Harry grabbed the Elizabeth's Teeth Whitening Potion and pretended to read the advertisement on the vial while Malfoy dressed. They walked back to his room without speaking. Harry raised his wand to clean the robes, but Malfoy stopped him.

"I don't want them," he said fiercely, his eyes flashing. He stood ramrod straight next to his bed and glared at Harry as though daring him to try to force him into his school robes.

"Fine," said Harry coolly. "Accio," he said, flicking his wand at the filthy robes. "Incendio."

Malfoy jumped as the robes burst into flame, and for a moment he looked as though he wanted to say something. Early evening light stretched their shadows across the room in long stretches. Harry didn't know if it was a trick of the light or the heat from the flame distorting what he was seeing, but he thought he saw Malfoy's eyes tear up. Smoke snuck under his glasses and stung

his eyes. Coughing, he stepped back, and when he looked up Malfoy's face was once again smooth and unrevealing.

Among the still smoldering ashes was a warped metal object, and Harry poked at it with his toe. It was Malfoy's Prefect badge. Harry looked up quickly at Malfoy and saw him staring at the badge.

Malfoy didn't say anything after that, and Harry was relieved when Ron knocked on the door.

"Smells like smoke," he said, frowning. It was then that he saw the ashes and the Prefect badge. Ron looked uncertainly at Harry, who shrugged. Malfoy stared at the two of them coldly. "Anyway, the owls came. Hermione says that 'coz you paid for them you have to be there when we open them." He rolled his eyes.

"Okay," said Harry. "I'll be right there."

Ron looked at him questioningly but didn't say anything. Harry turned to Malfoy. "Do you want it?" he asked.

Malfoy shrugged, not looking at him. Taking that as a yes, Harry nudged the badge out of the ashes with his toe. He pointed his wand at the black pile and cried, "*Evanesco!*"

The ashes disappeared, and Harry left the somewhat melted badge on the floor for Malfoy to decide what to do with it. He locked the door behind him and walked to Hermione's room. A sly voice in Harry's head wondered what Hermione would think if she found out that he had left Malfoy with a metal object, but another voice objected that the badge was in no ways dangerous.

Hermione's door was open, and she and Ron looked up when he entered. "I paid the owls," she said when she saw him look around for the owls. "They peck at you, you know, if you don't pay them really quickly. How was Malfoy?"

Harry shrugged. "He took a shower. We need to buy shampoo and stuff." He didn't mention that he and Malfoy had had a conversation or that he had left Malfoy the badge. He noticed that Ron didn't bring up the burned clothes, and he wondered if he had already told Hermione.

"And we'll need to get a microwave," Hermione added ruefully. Ron grinned at Harry. "I expect we'll need to go to Diagon Alley again; the microwave was some sort of hybrid between magic and Muggle," she said, frowning. "Like the bathroom."

"How do you turn the lights on?" Harry asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Whoever made this tent should have left a manual. I bet that's why the clerk at the tent store looked so mad when you read the contract; he didn't want to tell you that he didn't have a clue how to work anything. Anyway, shall we look at the portraits?" she asked, trying to appear casual.

Expecting two identical portraits, Harry was surprised at how different the two paintings were; the portrait on the right was of Lockhart in a battered phone booth, a triumphant look on his face. It was obviously a scene out of his book. The other portrait surprised Harry because of how very un-Lockhartish it looked to him. Lockhart was staring at the three of them, a shrewd look on his face, and he looked much younger than the Lockhart Harry had met.

"Harry Potter?" the serious looking Lockhart asked, a wary note in his voice.

"Erm, yeah," said Harry.

"Harry Potter!" roared the other portrait heartily, as though the two of them had been great friends who hadn't seen each other in several years. "Let me look at you, my dear boy! You've grown since I've seen you last," he said, sounding surprised.

Ron snorted. "It's been a few years, Professor Lockhart," said Hermione gently.

Lockhart beamed at her. "*Hermione Granger!* You're not Petrified anymore!" Hermione blushed and didn't meet either Ron or Harry's eyes.

"Hang on," said Ron, frowning. "How come you remember all of us *now*?"

"We weren't Obliviated when he was," explained one of the Lockharts. "We remember everything."

"Have you seen him? In St. Mungo's, I mean," asked Harry curiously.

A tragic look came over the face of the Lockhart in the phone booth, and he sighed, staring off in the distance with what he obviously thought was a noble look. "Poor man," he sighed.

"Obviously outnumbered by dozens of Death Eaters who tortured him." His voice dropped to a dramatic whisper, "They were trying to get him to join He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. So he turned his wand on himself so that he wouldn't reveal any of the secret plans he had made for Albus Dumbledore."

"I heard it was a misfired Obliviate spell," the other Lockhart said, looking both disgusted and embarrassed.

Harry stared at the latter Lockhart. "You're not ... uh, like him," he said. He jerked his head at the other Lockhart, who was looking at his reflection in the glass of the phone booth. "He is, though."

"I visited other portraits in the castle. Heard what everyone was saying," Lockhart said with forced lightness. "And I was painted at the very beginning of my fame."

"You mean after the first person you Obliviated?" Harry said coldly.

Lockhart arched an eyebrow at him. "Yes," he said after a long pause. The other Lockhart looked stricken and jumped into the younger Lockhart's frame and began to have an intense whispered conversation with him.

Harry nodded. He would put this younger portrait of Lockhart in Malfoy's room. He had a feeling that Malfoy would destroy the other one before the day was done. Just then, Malfoy pounded on the wall, and Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry.

"We'll put up the portraits in here," Hermione said, picking up one of the paintings.

"Okay," said Harry. "I'm going to put this one on Malfoy's room."

Ron looked annoyed. "How come he gets the good one?" he demanded.

"We need the level-headed one to keep an eye on him," Harry explained, already walking toward the door. Walking down the hallway, Harry heard Ron being instructed by Lockhart as to where his portrait should be hung for best viewing purposes. Harry thought he heard the closet door being opened.

"You haven't told anyone about your cheating, have you?" Harry asked Lockhart.

Lockhart cleared his throat. "No. I still do a fair bit of business through the catalogue and the books, though my publicity has died down a bit since I've been in St. Mungo's. I'd ... uh, appreciate it if you didn't mention anything."

Harry had an idea. "Oh, I don't know ... " he said, feigning reluctance. "You were going to leave my girlfriend down in the Chamber of Secrets." He thought it better not to mention that he and Ginny had broken it off. "And when we were down in the Chamber you tried to Oblivate Ron and me and still leave Ginny to die."

"Yes ... well ... I was a Hufflepuff, you know," Lockhart mumbled.

Harry stopped a few feet away from Draco's door and held the portrait out at arm's length and glared at Lockhart. Lockhart winced at Harry's angry look. "I have plenty of Hufflepuff friends who are brave, Lockhart," Harry said flatly, no longer faking. "You were a coward, and that has nothing to do with what house you were in. You're a cheating, lying, coward who deserves public humiliation. Ever heard of Rita Skeeter?"

Lockhart blanched and then flushed. "Y-you don't mean it," he said, sweating. He tried to smile winningly at Harry but his smile faltered at Harry's querulous look.

"Unless we can strike a deal," said Harry, once again sounding reluctant.

"Yes, of course," breathed Lockhart, sounding relieved. "What did you have in mind?"

"I want you to work for me," said Harry. "You and the other portrait, and you can't tell anyone." He studied Lockhart's face. "And believe me, I'll know if you've so much as breathed a word."

"W-what do you want us to do?" asked Lockhart.

"I want you to stand guard over a Death Eater. Draco Malfoy," said Harry. "You can't help him escape in any way," he said seriously. "He tried to kill Dumbledore."

"But Dumbledore's dead," Lockhart said, eyeing Draco's door nervously. "Snape killed him."

"Right. But Malfoy got all the Death Eaters into Hogwarts," Harry explained wearily. "All I want you to do is make sure he's not trying to escape, and if he is to tell one of us. Can you do that?"

To Harry's amazement, Lockhart looked reluctant. "This will be a full-time job, won't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Harry shortly.

Lockhart sighed. "I do have social life, you know. There are parties, we portraits have."

Harry stared at him, anger building inside of him. "Only because you're *Gilderoy Lockhart* though, right?" he demanded. He was so frustrated that he shook the portrait. "Listen, you screw this up and people will be *burning* your portraits."

Lockhart made a face at Harry. "Oh very well," he grumbled, looking very annoyed and put-upon.

Harry didn't care. He walked the last few steps up to Draco's door and knocked. "Malfoy? I'm

coming in," he called as he unlocked the door.

Draco walked quickly from the door to his bed, hoping that the floorboards didn't creak. He tried to look as though he had just woken up, but he needn't have bothered; Harry was mounting Lockhart's portrait to the wall with a Sticking Spell.

"When's breakfast?" Draco asked. He tried to sound disinterested, but his stomach growled loudly.

Harry frowned. "In a bit. You aren't allergic to anything, are you?" he asked.

"Pumpkin juice," said Draco shortly.

Harry looked surprised. "What did you drink at meals then?"

The conversation felt slightly surreal to Draco. He never thought that he would be discussing his food allergies and preferred beverages to Harry Potter. It didn't seem to be the sort of things enemies did. Potter was looking expectantly at him, and Draco sighed. "Wine, of course."

Harry's eyes widened further. "The Slytherin table had *wine*?" he asked incredulously.

Draco fidgeted, irritated. "Of course. Didn't Gryffindor?"

Harry snorted. "No."

Draco's imagination held up a scoreboard that read "Draco 1. Potter 0." It smacked of childishness, but Draco didn't begrudge himself the small victory over his enemy. He wondered if any of the other houses had wine at their tables. He hoped they didn't.

Harry made an exasperated sound. Of course Slytherin would get wine. Harry didn't even really like wine, but it was the principle of the thing. Why couldn't Gryffindor have had wine?

"Hufflepuff had Butterbeer on Saturday evenings in my day," Lockhart piped up. "Back when the owner of the Three Broomsticks' daughter was in school. She runs the Three Broomsticks now."

Harry tensed, and he saw Draco flinch at the mention of Rosmerta. Malfoy stared unfocused at the floor, his scrawny arms clenched to his sides. Unexpectedly, Harry remembered Terry Boot telling Hermione that casting a Protean Charm was N.E.W.T. level magic, and then Harry remembered Malfoy telling Parkinson and Zabini that Voldemort wouldn't care about N.E.W.T. marks. Harry looked warily at Malfoy. He might have gotten the idea from Hermione, but

casting the charm had to have been difficult. And to have the concentration to keep a person under the Imperius Curse for almost a year ...

A single distracting thought had broken Harry's concentration when he had used it on Borgin, and he had been standing right in front of the man. He couldn't imagine keeping that level of concentration for extended periods of time, especially not over long distances, and he wondered how Malfoy had pulled it off. Or had he been sneaking out of the castle to refresh the curse? But Harry had been watching the Marauder's Map obsessively.

Lockhart was oblivious to the fact that they weren't paying attention to him talk about his school days, and distractedly Harry thought that this Lockhart wasn't as different from the real Lockhart as he had thought.

"I'll get your breakfast," Harry muttered, walking to the door. "And it'll be coffee, not wine," he added, shutting the door behind him with more force than was strictly necessary. He had forgotten about Rosmerta and guilt and anger churned unpleasantly in his gut as he walked down the hallway to his and Ron's room.

He had been so preoccupied with Dumbledore, the Horcruxes, and the mysterious R.A.B. that he hadn't given any thought to how she might be coping with Dumbledore's death. She hadn't turned up at Dumbledore's funeral, and he wondered if she couldn't bear facing everyone. A burst of anger shot through Harry, and he twisted his head over his shoulder to look at Malfoy's door. He wanted to go back in there and punch the Slytherin as hard as he could for what he did to Madam Rosmerta, for his part in Bill's scarred face, for Dumbledore, for every terrible thing he had ever said about Muggle-borns and the Weasleys ...

An unbidden memory of Malfoy's strangled look when Harry had burned his school robes came to Harry's mind, and he clenched his fists.

Ron was unpacking his trunk when he entered their room. He took one look at Harry's face and put down the pair of socks he had been holding. "What happened?"

"Malfoy," Harry snarled, putting as much venom into the one word as he could. He kicked his trunk open and the lid flew back, slamming against the floor. Hedwig hooted reproachfully from her cage, not liking the loud noise.

"What'd he do?" asked Ron curiously.

"Did you know the Slytherins get wine at meals?" he demanded.



Ron's mouth dropped. "No," he said, looking furious. "Malfoy tell you that?"

Harry tossed his dress shoes into the closet, not caring if the leather got scuffed as they banged against the wall. "Yeah." But the anger was already evaporating from him. Ron, however, still looked outraged, and when Hermione came into the room he told her. She, however, looked nonplussed. "Did it ever bother you before that we didn't have wine at meals?"

Ron shook his head as though he were trying to dislodge an irksome fly. "No, but ... "

"Oh grow up, Ron," she snapped. "You just want it because they have it."

Ron looked extremely affronted and didn't speak to her for the rest of the morning. Ron had also gotten mad at Harry when he insisted that they couldn't keep Lockhart in the closet.

"We need to be able to hear him, Ron," Harry said, exasperated. He didn't like the idea of having to look at Lockhart any more than Ron did, but from the betrayed look Ron was giving him he wondered if Hermione hadn't told Ron the same thing.

"Jealousy," Lockhart had whispered loudly to Harry as he hauled the portrait out of the closet. Lockhart looked over Harry's shoulder at Ron. "Don't worry Ron," he chuckled heartily. "Hermione just has a schoolgirl crush on me. It'll pass."

Ron chucked a pair of rolled up socks at Lockhart, who cowered in his phone booth as the socks came whizzing toward him. Harry caught the socks as easily as though they had been the Snitch.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Ron muttered, already half way to the door.

Harry went looking for Hermione. She was in the sitting room with a quill and parchment in hand. Harry looked over her shoulder and saw it was a grocery list. "Malfoy's allergic to pumpkin juice," he said.

"I think water will be good enough for him," Hermione said tightly. Harry didn't say anything and instead read the rest of the list. It wasn't just a grocery list. There were potions ingredients and book titles on the parchment as well.

"What're these for?" Harry asked, pointing the potions ingredients.

"For the potions we're going to brew," Hermione said brusquely, scribbling another ingredient down.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know that ... but what kind of potions?"

Hermione leaned against the back of the couch and began ticking the potions off on her fingers. "Pain Relieving Potion, Pepper-Up, essence of rue, Polyjuice ... "

"What?"

Hermione looked up at him. "Of course," she said, sounding surprised. "What if we have to change into somebody else to get information on the Horcruxes?"

Harry looked down at the rest of her list. "Hermione ... " he said, his eyes stopping on the last potion she had scribbled down. "Veritaserum?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"For Malfoy," Hermione explained. "If he does know anything about the Horcruxes, we need to know." She sounded determined, but Harry caught the flicker of unease in her eyes.

"What?" he asked, sharper than he intended.

Hermione bit her lip. "It's just that we don't know what we're going to do, do we?" she said, and Harry noticed that her voice had risen an octave higher. "I mean, you know what two of the Horcruxes look like, and maybe the snake is one. And we think that someone with the initials R.A.B. has the locket, but we have no clue about the cup is or what the other Horcrux even is, or who R.A.B. is!"

Harry stared at her. Of all the times she could have chosen to appreciate how difficult his task was, why did she have to pick now? He was tired, he was hungry, Ron was mad at him, and he wanted nothing more than to fall into bed.

Hermione seemed to wilt under his stare. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding upset. "I just don't know how...what to do." She didn't meet his eyes and instead stared down at the parchment.

Harry sighed and scrubbed at his face. "Let's just get breakfast," he said, walking out of the room.

Hermione followed him out of the tent, and several times Harry heard her about to speak only to close her mouth, looking upset and frustrated. Harry couldn't decide what to tell her. He was tempted to blast her for looking to him for reassurance when the whole Wizarding world was looking to him for assurance, but a greater part of him admired her for admitting how out of control she felt. He couldn't fault her for not knowing what to do. He had no idea, after all. Pulled in opposite directions, Harry settled on simply smiling at her the next time she stopped

herself from speaking.

The Dursleys and Aunt Marge were seated around the breakfast table when Harry and Hermione got into the kitchen. Uncle Vernon choked on a piece of grapefruit he was eating when he saw Hermione standing next to Harry, and he turned an ugly shade of puce as he pounded on his chest. Aunt Marge stared, and Aunt Petunia's spoon was frozen midway from her own grapefruit to her mouth. Dudley looked from his parents to Harry, an expression torn between excitement and fear stretched across his fat face.

Aunt Marge broke the silence by banging her glass on the table. "You, boy," she barked, "get me more juice."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her to get it herself when Hermione beamed at Aunt Marge and said in a very perky voice, "Oh, let me." Harry stared at Hermione, stunned.

What was she thinking? Harry followed her into the kitchen. "Hermione," he hissed, not knowing where to begin. But she only smiled secretively at him and he frowned. Had she been telling the truth when she told Uncle Vernon that she wanted to meet Aunt Marge? He couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione was plotting something, and he worried that it would involve magic. Aunt Marge had already been hexed once by Harry, and two members of the Magic Reversal Department had to put her right. He wondered whether the Ministry was keeping tabs on her to make sure that nothing magical happened to her again.

He followed her back into the breakfast room where Marge was leaning forward, her enormous bosom squashed against the table and getting egg and bacon on her front.

"And you are?" Aunt Marge asked, sounding suspicious.

Hermione whipped her head so fast around to look at Marge that Harry got a face full of her curly hair. "Oh, didn't Dudley tell you? I'm his girlfriend!" she said brightly as she walked toward the table.

Aunt Petunia's spoon clattered against her bowl, and the tendons in her neck strained as she stared at Hermione. Uncle Vernon half rose from his chair but a furious look from Petunia had him sitting back down again, breathing like an angry bull. Aunt Marge immediately warmed to Hermione and patted Hermione's hand before smiling in approval at Dudley, who looked stunned.

"And you're name, my dear?" Aunt Marge asked, her three chins compressing as she smiled at Hermione.

"Lavender Brown," Hermione simpered as she poured Marge orange juice.

Harry stared at Hermione, sure that he hadn't heard right.

"Lavender, what a pretty name," Marge cooed. She turned to Aunt Petunia. "A flower just like you, eh, Petunia?" She chuckled to herself and didn't notice the tightness of Aunt Petunia's smile. "I expect you two get along famously ... careful Lavender, it's going to spill."

But Hermione continued to pour more juice into Marge's glass, and the orange juice quickly spilled down the sides and onto the table and onto Marge's dress. "Oh, sorry!" Hermione cried, not sounding the least bit remorseful.

"Never mind," Aunt Marge said, dabbing at her dress with a napkin. Harry suppressed a snort. If he had overfilled Marge's glass, she wouldn't have been so forgiving. He imagined her throwing the glass at him and calling him all sorts of horrible names.

Uncle Vernon was shooting Harry furious looks and made gestures for Harry to restrain Hermione, but Harry was enjoying himself too much to care. For years he had to endure Aunt Marge's taunts, her criticisms, her comparing him to Dudley and roundly abusing Harry for every fault she could find. Blowing her up hadn't been nearly as satisfying as it would have been if he hadn't had to run away from Number 4, thinking the Ministry of Magic would expel him from Hogwarts.

"More bacon, Marge?" Aunt Petunia asked.

"I want some," Dudley grunted. He had hollowed out his grapefruit completely with his spoon and had been eyeing Aunt Marge's plate enviously.

"Diddums ... " began Aunt Petunia, turning her misty eyes at him.

"Oh go on, Mrs. Dursley," said Hermione. "He's been such a good boy, haven't you, Dud Dud?" she cooed, wiggling her fingers at him.

A snort of laughter escaped Harry that he tried to cover up as a hacking cough, and his uncle glared at him through his angry little eyes. Aunt Petunia looked pleadingly at her son, but Dudley nodded slowly.

"Yeah, uh, Daisy," he said, smiling grotesquely at her.

"Daisy?" Aunt Marge boomed.

"My middle name," Hermione said breezily, not missing a beat. "I'll get you some, Dud Dud."

"He can get it," Aunt Marge said, jerking her head at Harry. "Go be useful," she barked.

"Oh no," trilled Hermione. "I insist."

"Good catch," rumbled Aunt Marge to Dudley. "Lovely girl. Very pretty. *You* haven't got a girlfriend, I expect," said Marge, looking gloatingly at Harry.

"No," said Harry.

Aunt Marge looked significantly at Petunia, and Harry thought he saw Marge mouth something to his aunt, who nodded curtly. Harry tried to catch Hermione's eye, but she was looking thoughtfully at Aunt Marge.

"I'll just go get it, shall I?" Hermione said before she disappeared in the kitchen again. She reappeared moments later with the frying pan. Instead of walking to Dudley's side of the table, Hermione walked the long way about, passing Aunt Marge.

"Would you care for some Ms. Dursley?"

"Call me Marge," Aunt Marge said, smiling broadly at Hermione. "And yes ... a little more ... that one too, ah, good." Half of the bacon in the pan was transported to Marge's plate, and Harry saw Dudley looking sour.

"You next, Dud D ... oh no!" Hermione lost her balance and stumbled, the frying pan falling to the ground with a loud clatter.

Aunt Petunia flinched as bacon grease splattered onto her immaculate floor, and Dudley groaned. "That bacon! Uh, I mean, Rose!" he hastily corrected, catching Aunt Marge's fierce look.

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "I'm so sorry Dud Dud!" she wailed. "I guess sleeping on Harry's floor wasn't such a good idea." She sniffed loudly. "I didn't sleep well, and now I'm so clumsy!"

Aunt Marge looked apoplectic. "You slept in his room? On the *floor*?"

Hermione nodded. "The guest bedroom is too small for two, and I couldn't sleep in the same room as my boyfriend, and Harry is, you know ... " she trailed off, peeking at Aunt Marge

through her fingers.

Harry was baffled. He was what? But Aunt Marge seemed to understand, and she drew her head back like a snake about to strike, her beady eyes flashing.

"You mean to tell me that you slept in the same room as a, as a ... " she was too furious to finish her sentence, and Harry was more confused than ever. He knew Aunt Marge despised him, but this seemed a little over the top, even for her. Aunt Marge twisted in her chair to glare at him, pulling the tablecloth with her as she turned. "Why couldn't you sleep in your cupboard? How dare you give a lady the floor!"

What was Hermione playing at? He thought that she was avenging the injustices Harry suffered growing up, but she was just getting him in more trouble. He looked over at his aunt and uncle, and they looked angry and nervous. Harry opened his mouth to demand someone tell him what was going on when the most unexpected thing happened.

Aunt Marge surged to her feet, jostling the table as she did so, and said, "I'm staying in a hotel. You've gotten soft, Vernon. I'd have thought that you'd have beaten it out of him by now. You can have my room, Lavender." She glared at Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, but when she looked at Harry her wrath seemed to triple. "Go get my things, Dudley."

At this, Harry was truly stunned. Never in his life had he heard Marge tell Dudley to do anything more strenuous than have more cake. Dudley looked sulky, but Vernon looked at him threateningly, and Dudley slid off his chair and left the room. Minutes later he was back with Aunt Marge's suitcases and Ripper, who tried to bite Harry as Dudley passed him. Aunt Marge tucked Ripper under her arm and left the house.

"Let's go," Hermione said, looking quite pleased with herself. Uncle Vernon stood up, his face a shade of purple that Harry had never seen before on his uncle. His hand spasmed uncontrollably at his side and his eyes bulged in their sockets.

"You ... " he sputtered, spit spraying across the table.

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and tugged her out of the room. A cup whizzed by his ear and shattered on the wall, and Harry felt Hermione's hand tense in his. He turned, and Uncle Vernon had his arm wound back, a saucer this time in his hand.

As it hurtled through the air, Hermione cast a Freezing Charm, and Petunia squealed loudly as the charm hit the cup, immobilizing it in mid-air. Without waiting for more china to be hurled at them, Harry and Hermione hurried up to Harry's room.

"What the devil were you playing at?" Harry demanded as soon as they were back in his room.

Hermione didn't look even remotely guilty; instead, she looked triumphant. "They think you're gay, Harry," she said.

Harry felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. "*What?*"

Hermione nodded, the same infuriatingly pleased look on her face. "What with you not having a girlfriend, and Dudley having me ... "

"Why did you say you were his girlfriend?" asked Harry, looking at Hermione as though he'd never seen her before.

"Leverage, Harry," she said, a touch of impatience in her voice as though she'd been explaining the same concept to him several times. "We needed her out of the house."

"But why tell her that I'm gay?" he asked, not seeing how everything fit together.

At that precise moment Ron poked his head through the flap, looking stunned. "You're gay? Is that why you broke up with Ginny?"

"No!" Harry exploded, feeling rather tired of people thinking he was gay. He quickly explained what had happened downstairs. Ron stepped out of the tent and stared at Hermione, frowning slightly.

"But why did you want her out of the house?" he asked, looking puzzled.

Hermione looked witheringly at them. "Marge is homophobic and she spoils Dudley." She looked at them hopefully, but they stared blankly back at her. "Honestly, you two have half a brain between the two of you. By telling her that I'm Dudley's girlfriend, she likes me, and by telling her Harry's gay, she hates him more."

"I don't see why it's necessary to make her despise me any more than she does," Harry muttered, but Hermione continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"And when she hears that there isn't enough room in the house for both her and me without me sleeping on Harry's floor, she'll leave."

"Yes, but why did you want her out?" Ron asked again.

"So that we can do magic without risking her finding out!" Hermione said, exasperated. "That

and I didn't like her."

"I'm not gay though," said Harry, wanting to make it clear. But at precisely that moment he remembered how Draco's pale skin had glowed in the bluish light from Harry's wand.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We know, Harry. Just like how I'm not your beastly cousin's girlfriend. Not that it would matter though."

Ron looked annoyed. "Yeah it would."

Hermione waved Ron off. "Not me, Ron, Harry ... it wouldn't matter if he were gay."

"Oh," said Ron, looking more cheerful. "No, 'course not." He looked at Harry questioningly, and Harry glared back at him.

"I'm not gay! I dated your sister, remember?" Harry said, beginning to lose his temper.

"Yeah well, Charlie dated a couple of girls before he figured out he liked blokes," said Ron, shrugging. "Funny how it is, isn't it?"

Harry stared at Ron. "Charlie's gay?"

"Didn't Ginny ever tell you?" Hermione asked, looking surprised.

Harry shook his head. It wasn't important; he was just surprised he had never figured it out. You certainly couldn't tell just by looking at Charlie, he thought. Charlie was rugged and adventurous; he played Quidditch and he worked with dragons. Harry didn't know how much manlier a man could be. And then Harry was ashamed with himself for thinking about gay people like that. He had never known a gay person before, or at least, he amended, never knew anyone he knew was gay, and he vowed then and there to not have such a narrow minded view on such matters.

"Is he seeing anyone?" he asked, determined to get over how awkward he felt.

Ron nodded. "Some bloke he met while trying to get foreign wizards to believe Voldemort was back. He's Charlie's date for the wedding."

"What's he like?" Harry asked, fascinated.

Ron shrugged. "Dunno ... never met him." Just then, Ron's stomach growled loudly. "No chance



of some of your aunt's bacon, is there?" he asked hopefully.

"Hermione dropped it," he said distractedly. "Guess we'll have to go to the market."

"What? A Muggle one?" Ron asked, looking interested.

"What'll we do about Malfoy?" Hermione asked, looking at the tent.

"Stupefy him, I reckon," said Ron.

Harry frowned. He had an idea. "We'll take him with us," he said firmly. Ron looked disappointed that Malfoy would be coming along, and Hermione nervous.

"What if he gets away from us and Disapparates?" asked Hermione.

But Harry was confident that Malfoy wouldn't try Disapparating. And just to make sure, he was going to have a firm grip on him.

## Chapter 9

Draco held his prefect's badge in his hand, running his finger along the blunted edges and over the warped curves of the snake's body as he stared up at the first stars to appear in the skylight. The metal was warm but didn't burn his fingers as it had when he had picked it off the floor just after Potter had shut the door.

Lockhart was staring moodily at him from his portrait. "What have you got in your hand?" he asked.

Draco ignored him.

When he heard Harry knocking on the door he hid the badge under the mattress.

"We're coming in, Malfoy," Harry called seconds before he opened the door.

Draco noticed the outstretched wands in their hands. "Are you going to conjure me breakfast then?" he asked detachedly. As little as he had eaten over the past week, he found that he wasn't very hungry anymore. He hoped that they wouldn't all have breakfast in his room. He had seen Weasley eat.

"We're going to the market, and you're coming with us," said Harry.

Draco saw Hermione's hand clutch the strap to her purse tightly, clearly not liking the fact that he was coming. She looked very surprised when Harry handed her Draco's wand.

"In case he tries to nick it," Harry explained. Looking nervous, Hermione put it inside her purse.

Harry walked over to Draco, and he tensed. "What are you doing?" he asked sharply, rising to his feet.

Harry didn't look very concerned. "I have to keep hold of you to make sure you don't try and Apparate back to Voldemort once we leave the house." He gripped Draco tightly around the upper arm and led him out of the room.

"Don't suppose this means I can nip over to Gringotts and have a quick word with another portrait?" Lockhart called after them, looking hopefully at Harry.

Harry frowned and turned around. "Okay, but one word Lockhart ... " he warned.

"Yes, yes," Lockhart said, already hurrying out of his frame.

"Don't you think he's going to tell someone?" asked Ron. "I can just see it in the Prophet: *Boy Who Lives Harboring Fugitive*. Or no, sorry, *The Chosen One Harboring Fugitive*."

Draco felt Harry's fingers flex around his arms.

"Let's just say that he won't do anything if he knows what's good for him," said Harry mysteriously as they went down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs Harry paused, and Draco thought he seemed to be listening for something. Draco heard muted loud voices from behind the kitchen door. As they walked down the hallway, Draco strained his ears to catch what the Dursleys were saying.

"He's a poof?"

Extremely interested, Draco pulled lightly against Harry's grip, trying to hear better. Draco hadn't been the only one to overhear the Dursleys however; Ron snickered so loudly that Harry pointed his wand at the door and muttered a spell and looked exasperated.

"Be quiet son. Petunia, he's a freak and a poof ... can't we ... "

"No," said Petunia. "The boy has to ... "

But Draco never got to hear the rest of what she was about to say because Harry had opened the front door, and a car drove by noisily, drowning Petunia's muffled voice. But Draco didn't think there was much truth to the Dursley's words. Weasley wouldn't have snickered about something like that in front of Potter, not if it were true. Unless of course it actually was true, and Weasley was snickering at how much it upset the Dursleys ...

Draco frowned, not able to make up his mind. Potter had been going out with that Ravenclaw Seeker, not to mention the Weasel's sister. But Potter had broken up with both of them, hadn't he? Disturbed that he was thinking on Potter's love life, Draco paid more attention to where it was they were going.

After walking a few blocks they came upon a shopping center filled with smartly dressed people doing their Saturday shopping. Ron openly gawked at the women in short dresses and platform sandals. He nudged Harry in the side, grinning.

"Now I know what Dad sees in Muggles," he said happily, but the grin on his face melted into a

feeble smile at Hermione's frosty look. "Err ... let's go in, shall we?"

They approached the automatic doors, and both Draco and Ron started when the doors opened before they touched them.

"It's ekeletricty isn't it," Ron said, hanging back until Harry, Draco, and Hermione had safely made it through the doors.

"Yes," said Hermione. "And there's motion detectors ... " but she trailed off, looking amused at the gobsmacked expression on Ron's face.

The inside of the market was, there was no other word for it, amazing to Draco. There were aisles and aisles shelves filled with familiar and weird things. Ron looked equally impressed, and for a few moments all he and Draco did was stare down the aisles while Hermione fetched a trolley.

"I've made a list of some of the things we're going to need," she said, rolling the trolley down aisle six, above which hung a sign that read Cosmetics, Shampoo, Face Wash, and Feminine Products.

Ron and Harry look warily at one another at the last two words on the sign, and hung back in the shampoo section of the aisle until Hermione called for them, looking impatient. She was standing in front of the hand soaps, which were only a few feet away from the feminine unmentionables.

"She's your girlfriend," Harry pointed out helpfully, tightening his grip on Draco as though to anchor himself where he stood, next to a display of loofas and pedicure sponges.

"Yeah, well ... " muttered Ron before shuffling down the aisle to Hermione, who was holding out two different kinds of liquid hand soap.

Harry looked at the many different bottles of shampoo and looked for the one that Aunt Petunia always bought. "Help me find a green bottle," he said to Draco.

"Is this it?" asked Draco sullenly, holding out a vibrant green bottle.

"No. The one she gets is a lighter green, and it's clear plastic," said Harry. Seeing Draco's blank look at the word plastic, Harry pointed to the bottle in Draco's hand. "This is plastic ... it's what's the bottle made out of. We need a bottle that's made of clear plastic, so you can see the shampoo inside.

"Oh," said Draco.

They resumed the search in silence. It was a little awkward when Harry tried to search the bottom shelves ... crouching together, staring at shampoo bottles struck him as surreal. Never in his life would he have imagined that he would end up grocery shopping with Malfoy.

Draco tried to hide his interest in the Muggle potions for hair ... but he had to admit that the colorful bottles impressed him. He especially liked a bottle of conditioner that reminded him of the blue tile in his bathroom at the manor. He tried not to think on how weird it was to be reminded of home by a Muggle market.

"Found it ... oh ... they have an improved one," said Harry reaching for two bottles. Out of all the bottles on the shelves, Draco thought these two were the ugliest and plainest.

"Is this what your relatives use?" he asked.

"No. They all have different bottles. This is the one my aunt had me use ... " Harry trailed off as he stared at the price. "No wonder, it's the cheapest one on the shelves."

Draco wasn't surprised. Petunia Dursley struck him as the kind of woman who would keep Potter alive at the least inconvenience to her and her family. He looked sideways at Harry, but the other boy didn't look surprised.

"Hang on, I want to see something," said Harry, pulling Draco to the right. Harry scanned the shelves as though he were searching for the Snitch, and after a moment reached for a bottle on the high shelf. He was too short and his fingers brushed uselessly against the bottle.

Without thinking, Draco reached up and got the bottle. Seeing Harry's surprised face, he quickly thrust it at Harry and pretended to be reading the back of the bottle of the shampoo Harry had used all of his life. Most of the ingredients he didn't recognize, but a few he did, and he was startled to find that they were the same ingredients used in a potion he had made countless times last year to keep himself awake ... Pepper Up Potion.

Curious, he unscrewed the bottle and waved his hand over it, wafting the smell to his nose. He jerked back, coughing. "This is disgusting," he gasped, his nose burning.

Harry shrugged. "It does the job and it's cheap. This is the one Dudley uses."

"No wonder your hair's shot," Draco muttered, screwing the top back on tightly, his nose still

burning unpleasantly.

"No," said Harry. "My dad's hair was just like this."

"Well / don't want to smell like rotten celery," said Draco, shoving the bottle on the shelf. He picked a bottle that advertised "tropical paradise" and unscrewed the bottle hopefully. It smelled pleasantly of coconut.

"I like this one," he declared, shoving the bottle at Harry. "Get this."

"It's four times as much as this one, and it's smaller," said Harry. "No."

"It's not like you're the Weasleys Potter," Draco said angrily. "You can afford it."

"You want it so badly? You pay for it then, go on," said Harry, beginning to wish that he had traded places with Ron. Draco scowled darkly and put the shampoo back on the shelf before jamming his hands into his pocket. His finger jammed against something hard, and he winced. He felt around in his pocket and his eyes widened as they closed around a large coin.

"Potter," he said, his voice sounding far away to his ears. "Potter, I have money."

He held out the Galleon he used to send secret messages to Madam Rosmerta, and Harry's eyes widened. For a moment, neither boy said anything, staring at the coin. Harry couldn't even begin to put into words what that coin meant to his life. He remembered the eerie way Katie Bell had floated after she had touched the opal necklace Madam Rosmerta had forced upon her in the girls lavatory. Harry's hands clenched as he remembered Ron's bulging eyes and foaming mouth. Worst of all though, was remembering Dumbledore. If only they had gone into the Hog's Head instead of the Three Broomsticks ...

Harry's hands were shaking as he picked up the Galleon. He had thought that it had been lost as Malfoy and Snape were running across the grounds. All this time Malfoy had still had it in his pocket.

"Have you been sending messages to her?" he hissed, digging his fingers into Malfoy's arms painfully.

Draco shook his head. "Even if I had been, someone must have taken the Imperius Curse off of her."

Harry nodded. The Order might not have gotten to the Vanishing Cabinet on time, but he highly doubted that they'd forget about Madam Rosmerta. Perhaps she was in St. Mungo's and that

why she hadn't been able to come to Dumbledore's funeral.

"Fine, you can have your shampoo," said Harry tightly. He pocketed the coin in the pocket next to his fake Horcrux, and he wondered if his collection was going to grow.

The rest of the marketing proved uneventful. Harry was waiting to tell Ron and Hermione about the fake Galleon until they had locked Draco back in his room. There was no way to tell what his friend's reactions would be, especially Hermione, who he thought could be unexpectedly volatile.

"We should have brought satchels," Ron grunted as they left the store with several grocery bags each. He was by far carrying the heaviest bags.

"This is heavy," Draco complained, although he was carrying little more than his shampoo and towels. Hermione hadn't trusted him with anything that could bruise or break.

Hermione suddenly laughed, and the three of them watched as she crouched behind a large post box. A moment later reappeared, swinging her grocery bags as though they weighed nothing more than a piece of ribbon. "I keep on forgetting that we're allowed to do magic outside of school now," she said happily.

"How'd you do that?" Ron demanded.

Looking rather smug, Hermione led Ron behind the post box.

"It's just a Weight Reduction Charm," said Draco scornfully. "Go on Potter." He held out his bags expectantly, looking haughty.

Harry clenched his teeth. He'd rather carry the groceries back without the charm rather than admit that he didn't know how to do something Malfoy knew how to do.

"It'll be good for you to do some work," Harry said shortly. But a few minutes later, when his hands had begun to ache from clutching the heavy plastic bags he wished he had not been so proud.

Draco complained loudly until Ron wondered aloud whether he should practice his Silencing Charm. Draco glared at him but didn't say anything. All four of them were sweating in the heat and their tempers were short. When they got back to the Dursleys, Draco demanded a shower, which Harry refused.

"Damn it, Potter," Draco said angrily. "It's not like I have another change of clothes! I don't want

to be sitting in these sweaty clothes all day."

"You can shower later," Harry said crossly as he unloaded groceries onto the counter.

"No, I want one ... aaaah!" he roared when Ron's Scourgify spell hit him. "Stop doing that!" he bellowed.

"You're clean aren't you? Now shut up," Ron said. He opened up the sliced turkey they had bought and began layering it on a piece of bread.

"Ron!" Hermione glared at him. "Don't make a sandwich. Help put the groceries away."

"But my mum always does that," Ron protested as he spread mustard across another slice of bread.

Hermione swelled with anger. "Oh your *mum* does it, does she? And what does that make *me* Ronald? You think because women have traditionally been domestic engineers that this excuses you from doing your share of the work, do you?"

"No," Ron said, cottoning on that he had crossed a line.

"Ron and I'll do the rest Hermione," Harry said quickly. "You can take Malfoy back to his room, okay?"

As soon as they had gone, Harry turned to Ron, who looked sullen. Before Ron could say anything, Harry put the fake Galleon on the counter. "Malfoy's had it in his pocket this whole time."

"Is that ... ?" Ron looked questioningly at Harry, who nodded. "Have you told Hermione?"

Harry shook his head and walked into the pantry with a box of crackers. "No," he said. "Malfoy wanted some expensive shampoo, and he gave me this in exchange."

"Blimey, do you think he thought it was just a normal Galleon?" Ron asked, following Harry into the enormous pantry.

Harry shook his head. "He knew what it was. Hand me the cereal, will you?"

When all of the groceries were put away, Harry and Ron made sandwiches for everyone, although Harry noticed that one of the sandwiches Ron made looked rather scrawny. "Is that



one for Malfoy?" he asked.

"Not that he deserves the pickles," Ron said darkly.

Harry stayed silent. As much as he despised Malfoy, he couldn't help but think that Ron's attitude about Malfoy was very close to the one the Dursleys had about him. He always got the smallest portion, and if he ever asked for seconds they would call him ungrateful and say he was stealing food off their table.

"Put more turkey in that," he said.

"What? There's enough," protested Ron, who had just been about to place the last slices of turkey on his own enormous sandwich.

"Just do it," Harry said shortly. He hoped Ron wouldn't demand to know why. Explaining that he could identify with Malfoy and that Ron was behaving like the Dursley would not, he imagined, go over very well.

Grumbling, Ron gave Malfoy's sandwich more turkey. Then he poured three glasses of juice and one glass of water.

"Ron," said Harry, a note of impatience in his voice.

"What?" Ron demanded. "You said he was allergic to juice."

"*Pumpkin* juice, Ron. Go on, give him juice. No, not half a glass, come on, Ron," said Harry, definitely irritated now. He picked Malfoy's lunch and was about to leave the kitchen when Ron spoke.

"Fine," Ron said shortly. "You're treating him like he's innocent."

Harry's jaw dropped and he turned around. "I am not!"

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "You take him out with us to the market, you buy him expensive shampoo ... "

"Because he gave me the Galleon," Harry said angrily.

Ron continued as though he hadn't heard him. "And you give him the same portion as us," he concluded, looking as angry as Harry. "Not to mention the fact that you didn't let me give him the pounding that he deserved, and you refused to turn him over to the Order."

Harry was so angry now that the juice was slopping over the rim and down his hand, but he didn't notice that. "You don't get it," he said, almost shouting. "I spent almost all of my life being treated like how you want to treat Malfoy."

Ron's eyes widened and he opened his mouth to retort but Harry cut him off. "Remember what Snape was like in the Shrieking Shack? When he wanted to take Sirius up for the Dementor's Kiss? Lupin said he was letting a schoolboy grudge color his judgment, and that's just what you're doing! You want revenge. You don't care what you do to get it either. Snape wanted to have Sirius' soul sucked out of him, and you want to starve and hurt Malfoy."

Ron looked furious that Harry had just compared him to the Dursleys and Snape, but Harry wasn't done. "I know he's a Death Eater. I was *there*, remember? You and Hermione, you've got no idea what it's like to face Voldemort ... "

"Oh but Malfoy does, right? Why don't you go be best friends with *him* then?" Ron shouted.

Harry hurled the plate and juice at Ron, so furious that he was having trouble breathing. Ron ducked and they shattered on the refrigerator, sending shards of china and glass everywhere.

"FUCK YOU, RON!" he roared, his voice cracking. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at Ron, who froze, looking nervous. "I don't know what it's going to take to get it through your thick skull. This," he waved his hand abstractedly, stabbing at the air, "is bigger than you or me or Malfoy. If I don't succeed, everyone dies, got it?"

"Harry," Ron began, but Harry didn't want to hear it. He had never been angrier with Ron. Not even when Ron thought that Harry had put his name in the Goblet of Fire could compare to how furious Harry was with Ron.

"Shut up," he said savagely. "If you can't accept my decisions then get out. Go home."

He meant every word. It was more than carrying out Dumbledore's last wish of convincing Malfoy to change sides that made Harry stick up for Malfoy to Ron, although he knew that was a part of it. It had to do with everything Dumbledore had ever taught him about justice and everything Harry knew about revenge. He didn't even think he could explain to Ron exactly why he insisted on keeping Malfoy with them. All he knew was that he was keeping Malfoy alive, and he knew that was the right thing to do. It was exactly the opposite of what Voldemort would do, and that, Harry thought, was important.

"Harry."

It was Hermione, and she sounded frightened. "What?" he said suddenly exhausted. "Is Malfoy

in his room?"

"Yes. Harry, you didn't mean that about Ron did you?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes I did, and if you can't accept my decisions about Malfoy than you can leave too," he said quietly. Hermione gave a shuddering little gasp. Harry picked up his lunch and walked out of the kitchen, not looking at either of them as he left.

It seemed unbelievable that the three of them were going to split up over Malfoy. Harry had chosen Ron over Malfoy on their first day, and now it seemed that time had twisted, and they were back where they had been in first year. Only this time, Harry thought miserably, he wasn't going to refuse Malfoy's hand. He wondered if they were going to leave that night, or if they were going to try and convince him that they should just agree to disagree.

Harry laughed mirthlessly as he approached Malfoy's door. He waved his wand, not bothering to knock this time, and the door swung open. Malfoy sprang away from Lockhart's portrait and looked warily at him. Harry wondered how much Malfoy had heard.

"Here's your food," he said holding out the plate.

"What, you're not going to put it down on the floor?" Malfoy drawled, but Harry caught the note of wariness in his voice.

Harry shrugged. "I figure you know by now that you're not powerful enough to kill me even with a wand, and that even if you do escape, Voldemort will use Legilimency on you and see that you were discovered, and then he'll kill you. And quite probably your mum," he added dully. "Unless of course you kill all three of us, and Voldemort's made it quite clear on the many occasions we've socialized that he'd rather snuff me out himself. Eat your sandwich."

Draco didn't, however. Instead, he sat down on his bed and watched Harry carefully, as though he expected him to crack up any moment.

"I didn't poison it, Malfoy," Harry sighed. He took a bite out of the sandwich and chewed with exaggerated motions. He took a sip from the juice as well. "This was actually the one I made for myself. Besides, I don't want you dead."

Draco didn't say anything as he took the sandwich and juice, and Harry leaned against the wall, tilting his head back.

For several minutes, neither one spoke, each lost in their thoughts. After Draco had eaten every last crumb on his plate and downed the last dribble of juice, he cleared his throat.

"Thank you," he said stiffly.

Potter looked surprised. "For what?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "For keeping me alive, Potter," he sneered.

There was a moment of awkward silence in which neither boy looked at one another. Harry closed his eyes, not very much caring if Malfoy was sneaking up on him, and thought of what it meant to be keeping Malfoy alive. Beyond Ron and Hermione being furious with him, he was sure that the Order would be in uproar. An unsettling thought churned the one bite of sandwich in his stomach unpleasantly. What if Ron and Hermione went to the Order and told them about him hiding Malfoy? Harry wondered if he shouldn't have just keep Malfoy as a ferret.

What would the Ministry say if they found out? Harry could just imagine Rufus Scrimgeour knocking on the Dursleys door and demanding that Harry either become their mascot or be thrown in Azkaban. Harry wondered how they would cart him off to Azkaban without suffering public outrage, and for once in his life he was glad to be as famous as he was. If the Minister ever came to his door he'd slam it in his face.

"I want a shower now," Draco said, sounding defensive.

Harry looked up at him and saw Draco gripping his new bottle of shampoo as though it were a Beater's bat.

"But Ron Scourgified you," he said.

Draco glowered at Harry. "It's not the same," he said through clenched teeth. "And I need to shave."

"Fine," Harry snapped, pushing off the wall and onto his feet. "I suppose next you'll be wanting new clothes as well."

When Draco didn't say anything Harry groaned. He was not going to take Malfoy clothes shopping. "Not today. For now, you can borrow Ron's ... " he trailed off, suddenly remembering the huge row they'd had. "You can borrow some of mine," he finished lamely.

"You're shorter than me," Draco pointed out, looking critically at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes, not quite believing he was talking about clothes with Malfoy. "Beggars can't be choosers, Malfoy."

Malfoy sneered at him but didn't protest anymore. "I'll go get you a razor," Harry said, gathering the dishes to bring them to the kitchen.

Part of him hoped that Ron and Hermione had already left because he didn't know what he would say if he saw them. As he walked down the hall he stopped by Hermione's room and stood outside the door. He didn't hear any sounds of clothes and books being packed into the trunks, and for a moment he was hopeful. Then he remembered that Tonks had packed his trunk in a moment with a spell, and if Tonks knew it, Hermione did too. If Hermione was gone, then so too was Ron, and so Harry didn't even slow down as he passed the door to his and Ron's room.

He almost dropped the dishes when he saw Ron and Hermione sitting at the kitchen counter. He looked around quickly to see if they had packed their trunks, but the only thing on the ground was Crookshanks.

"What," he started, but his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "What's Crookshanks doing here?"

They turned around to look at him. Hermione's eyes were red and puffy, and Ron was holding his glass of juice with two hands. His enormous sandwich was untouched on his plate.

"Oh Harry!" Hermione cried, sliding off the stool and hurrying towards him. She wrapped her arms around Harry and cried into his shoulder. Harry was so surprised that for a moment he just stood there. "Harry we're really sorry!"

Harry stared at Ron over Hermione's head, who nodded at Harry. "We've been talking about it," he said quietly. "And I reckon that I've been a prat about Malfoy."

Hermione sniffed loudly and stepped away from Harry. "We understand why you don't want to take him to the Order, Harry."

"Do you?" asked Harry quietly. "Because I have to be able to trust you that you won't go to McGonagall and tell her that he's here. Malfoy and I'll disappear if you two can't accept my decision."

He looked hard at them, but neither flinched or looked uncertain.

"We're with you mate," Ron said roughly, standing now. "A hundred percent. We meant it at the funeral, and we mean it now, even with the ... Malfoy. I won't even Scourgify him anymore." He smiled tentatively at Harry.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, he didn't like that too much. In fact, he wants a shower now."

"I'll stand guard over him Harry," said Hermione, who looked determined to prove she wouldn't be running to the Order.

"Hang on!" said Ron. "You can't be in there when he's taking a shower! He won't have any clothes on!"

"Oh well spotted, Ronald," said Hermione, rolling her eyes. "It's not like it's something I've never seen before."

Ron looked like he had a large bit of Hagrid's treacle tart lodged in his throat. "What?"

Harry grinned, letting their bickering wash over him. Crookshanks yawned and settled himself on top of the microwave.

"I'll do it," Harry said loudly, interrupting Ron and Hermione, who had strayed from the subject of guard duty to Cormac McLaggan and Victor Krum.

"Fine!" said Hermione. "I'm going to the Weasleys."

"You are?" asked Ron, blinking at the sudden turn in the conversation.

"Yes," she snapped, already striding out of the kitchen.

"Why?" called Ron, looking utterly bewildered that she was going to his house.

The front door slammed so hard that Crookshanks hissed. Ron shrugged. "Women," he sighed. "Why do you think she's going?"

"Dunno" said Harry, who was searching for the razors. "Maybe she wants to talk to Ginny. Hey, when's the wedding?"

"Next week," Ron said, finally beginning to start on his sandwich. "You should've seen Mum. She's got family trees spread all across the table."

"What for? Diffindo" asked Harry, pointing his wand at the thick plastic covering the package of razors. The plastic split in two and razors tumbled onto the counter, the plastic sleeves covering the razors bouncing off and onto the floor. Crookshanks leapt off the microwave to paw at them.

"Oo mayure 'e ll uh mz ide," Ron said, some lettuce hanging out of his mouth like an enormous green tongue. He swallowed thickly and repeated himself. "To make sure she spells the names right."

"Oh. Hey, what should I get Bill and Fleur as a wedding gift?" asked Harry as he threw the plastic in the trash.

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. Do you get them a gift as a couple or individual?"

Harry didn't know. He had never been to a wedding before. "We should go ask your mum after Malfoy showers," he decided. "Hey, where's the shaving cream?"

"Did we buy any?" asked Ron.

"Bugger, I don't think we did. Oh well, Malfoy can use some of mine."

"You're almost all out," Ron said, raising his sandwich to his lips. "Hermione had to shave her legs."

"They do that?"

"That's not all they shave," Ron said in a dark and mysterious voice. He shot Harry a superior look.

Harry looked blankly at Ron. What else was there to shave? But he didn't want to reveal his ignorance, so he asked instead, "Why didn't you give her your shaving cream?"

"There are some things couples don't share," said Ron, not looking the least bit repentant.

Harry rolled his eyes but didn't press the issue. They had only just made up, and as nonchalant as Ron was being about Malfoy being there, Harry didn't doubt for a second that the Slytherin's presence didn't chafe. He left the kitchen with a razor in hand and stopped by his room to get his shaving cream before going to Malfoy.

"Finally. What did you have to do? Make a razor?" Draco drawled when Harry entered.

"Oh well if you don't want it ... " Harry said, beginning to walk out the door.

"Potter!" barked Draco, sounding very hassled.

"Well come on then," Harry said from the hallway. As he led the way to the bathroom he

caught a flash of white in the corner of his eye, and he turned around sharply, his wand raised, just to see Malfoy pulling off his shirt.

"Malfoy!" Harry hissed, his heart racing. "Jesus, can't you do that in the bathroom?"

Malfoy shrugged, his hair disheveled, and Harry shook his head in exasperation. In the shower, Malfoy proclaimed loudly the virtues of his new shampoo even if it was Muggle made, and Harry tried to think what he should get Ron's brother as a wedding present. He wasn't sure how much it was appropriate to spend, and he hoped Mrs. Weasley would have a few ideas.

"Hey Malfoy," he said, and he heard the other boy swear. Harry frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I cut myself," Draco voice echoed. "You need to get Wizarding razors next time. These things are rubbish."

"They're perfectly fine," Harry retorted. "You just don't know how to shave."

Malfoy wiped the steam off of the shower so that Harry could see his face. "I know how to shave," he said. He pointed to the nick on his cheek that was bleeding. "These stupid things cut you. Proper razors, *Wizarding razors*, that is, never cut you."

Harry raised his eyebrows. So that was why Neville could manage such a close shave and he couldn't.

"What, don't tell me you've been using Muggle razors," Draco sneered. "Merlin, Potter, just because you're friends with Mudbloods and live with Muggles doesn't mean you have to live like one."

"Don't use that word," said Harry angrily. His voice echoed off of the tiles, and Malfoy rolled his eyes and muttered something, but Harry didn't catch it.

"You know what? You're gonna have to learn to use that Muggle razor, 'coz I'm not getting you a Wizard one," said Harry. This time he definitely heard Malfoy's mutterings, but he pretended not to notice.

Harry didn't say another word to Malfoy until he had put him back in his room, and Ron looked at him curiously when he opened the door to their room.

"What's up?" he asked, looking up from his copy of *Quidditch Through The Ages*.

"Nothing," Harry muttered. Part of him wanted to blast Ron for never telling him about Wizard



razors. How many times had he complained about the nicks on his face from shaving. "Say, how come you didn't ever tell me about magical razors?"

"I thought you liked using your Muggle ones," he said honestly. "Why?"

"Malfoy cut himself with one of the razors we bought today and told me about Wizard razors. I'd never heard about them before," said Harry.

"We can get some in Diagon Alley when we look for Bill's wedding present," said Ron. "They're only a couple of Knuts."

Harry frowned. "What're we going to do with Malfoy when we go to your house today?"

Ron looked critically and doubtfully at Lockhart's portrait. "Maybe Lockhart can look after him. The other one. This one's useless."

"I expect that'd be okay," Harry said slowly. He turned to the portrait hanging on their wall. "Lockhart, go tell the other portrait he's on guard duty."

The lilac robed Lockhart slid from his frame, and Ron and Harry left the tent for the greenhouse. Harry winced at the shambles the greenhouse was in, and hoped very much that Aunt Petunia hadn't seen it. For a few minutes, the used Reparo on the broken pots before Apparating to the Burrow.

Harry grinned at the cheerful sight of the house, and he pushed through the kitchen door.

Two hands grabbed him and Ron and pushed them back outside.

"What the ... " Ron cried, but Hermione shushing hushed them.

"I know who R.A.B. is!" she whispered, looking very excited. "It's Sirius's little brother, Regulus Black."

## Chapter 10

"What?"

Hermione nodded frantically. "Yes!" she whispered. "The family trees on the table ... Regulus's middle name is Arcturus."

Harry frowned. "But that doesn't prove it's him. There must be tons of people with the initials R.A.B."

Hermione looked irritated. "Do you have the fake Horcrux with you?" she demanded. "Let me see it."

Harry handed her the locket and Hermione pried it open with her fingernail. "'To the Dark Lord,'" she read aloud. "Who calls Voldemort the Dark Lord but Death Eaters? Regulus was a Death Eater, and Sirius said that Voldemort or someone acting on Voldemort's orders killed him when he tried to get out of Voldemort's circle."

Harry stared at her, barely daring to believe it, but it made sense. Then it hit him. All this time ... it'd been there. "The locket," he breathed. "It's at Grimmauld Place."

Ron and Hermione stared at him without a flicker of revelation on their faces, but Harry didn't care. "Kreacher probably has it," he said angrily. "All this time!" He was practically shouting now, and Hermione looked nervously at the house.

"Harry, please, don't shout," she said, and she looked as though any moment she expected Mrs. Weasley to come out to inspect what the noise had been. "Harry, how could the locket be there? I mean, wouldn't Regulus have destroyed it?" Her eyes flickered at the scrap of parchment in the locket. "Look, he even said that's what he was going to do."

Harry shook his head. "No, he was killed before that. We held it in our hands!" he groaned. If only Dumbledore hadn't been so stupid that year ... if only he hadn't avoided Harry he might have been around more often and have seen the locket. "We were cleaning out the house, remember? There was that music box that made us all sleepy, and that metal spider thing tried to stab me ... remember?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Yes," she said, breathless with excitement. "We couldn't open it. Sirius even tried to use a file." She clutched Ron's arms excitedly and said, "Let's go get it!"

"We don't need to," said Harry. "Kreacher can get it."

"Oh ... " Hermione said, looking rather torn. "He would probably like going back there, though I don't think it's very good for him. Alright, now I can still help your mum with Ginny's dress, Ron."

The beast in Harry's chest that had always sniffed the air hopefully when Ginny's name was mentioned hid somewhere in Harry's stomach, and Harry wished he hadn't thought of Kreacher. He had almost forgotten that he had broken things off with Ginny, and he didn't know what he would say when he saw her. He had told her it was too dangerous for her to be with him, but here he was with his closest friends when he'd made it sound as though he'd not have a moment of peace. Harry was sure that Voldemort had heard from Wormtail and Bellatrix that Ron and Hermione were close to him, and Harry suddenly wished he was back at Number 4, Privet Drive rather than about to meet Ginny.

"Erm, maybe it wouldn't be good for Kreacher to go back there ... it's really a negative environment," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Harry!" Ron groaned. "Even Hermione is willing to let Kreacher do this. And who cares about the little blighter anyway? It's not like he can refuse a direct order ... just tell him to get in and out with the Horcrux."

"Wait a minute," said Hermione, holding up her hand and looking worried. "It might be cursed like how the ring was. Remember Dumbledore's hand?"

Ron shook his head. "We tried to open it, remember? And none of us was cursed. Come on, Hermione, Kreacher'll be fine."

"But Regulus might have put a curse on it that activates once it's left the house. Or maybe the curse goes off when you try and destroy the Horcrux," she insisted. Ron looked at her incredulously, but Harry stayed silent, still wanting very badly not to see Ginny. "Besides, Kreacher might have taken it to Narcissa Malfoy."

Ron and Harry stared at her. "What?" Ron demanded. "I thought you just said it was cursed. How could Kreacher take it out of the house then?"

"I said it *might* be cursed," she corrected. "Kreacher went to Bellatrix and Narcissa remember? He might have brought along the Horcrux for them to keep safe."

"But why?" Harry interjected. "How could he know what it was? Not a lot of people know about them. You couldn't find anything in the Hogwarts' Library remember?"

"Yes, but not everyone has robes that try to strangle you or blood in crystal bottles where normal people have flowers. Think of all the Dark Arts stuff we threw out, and how much do you think Kreacher snuck to his room?" said Hermione logically. "Maybe we should go back home and ask Malfoy if he knows anything about it."

Hermione had said exactly what Harry had been hoping to hear. He was about to agree with her when Ron interjected.

"Well we won't know 'till we try," he pointed out. "Call him, Harry."

Hermione sighed. "Fine. But if he gets blown into bits, Ron, I'll never forgive you."

"Fine!" Harry said tightly, and Ron and Hermione looked at him oddly. "Sorry ... I just hate him," he said. It wasn't strictly a lie ... he did hate Kreacher. "Kreacher!" he called loudly.

A loud *crack* sounded through the Weasley's garden and Kreacher appeared in front of Harry, covered with egg yolks and cilantro. Ron let out a snort of laughter, but Hermione started forward, her wand raised.

"*Scourgify!*" she cried.

Kreacher howled when the spell hit him and convulsed on the grass, screeching. Never had Harry seen Kreacher look so clean, and he was amazed to see that the loincloth had originally been white. He had been so sure it had been the color of burlap.

"What's that awful racket?" barked Mrs. Weasley from somewhere inside the house. "Fred? George?"

"Hermione, you idiot!" hissed Harry, and he and Ron cast the *Muffliato* spell at every door and window.

Hermione looked shocked. "Did it hurt, Kreacher? I'm very sorry ... I didn't know," she apologized.

"The Mudblood is talking to Kreacher. Oh my Mistress, if only she is seeing what friends his master has ... "

"Kreacher," Harry said warningly, and Kreacher sank into a bow, all the while muttering darkly about Harry.

"Kreacher what happened to you?" asked Hermione, sounding concerned.

"Yes, Kreacher, tell us," Harry said quickly before the elf could say something awful to Hermione.

Kreacher's shriveled face twisted with pride and he said, "The others did this to Kreacher when Kreacher told them that Dumbledore, the Mudblood lover, the leader who the Dark Lord hated ... they is not liking that Kreacher said he is getting his comeuppance."

Hermione gasped, and Ron swore angrily at Kreacher. Harry had to force himself to step back from Kreacher so that he wouldn't try to strangle the elf, and a roaring in his ears drowned Kreacher's raspy laughter.

"Kreacher, shut up," he said quietly, his voice shaking. Kreacher was silenced at the crescendo of one of his barks of laughter, and he grinned evilly at Harry, obviously delighted that he had hit a nerve.

Harry reached across Ron and took the fake Horcrux from Hermione's fingers, dangling it from its chain in front of Kreacher. "Open it," he ordered, and Kreacher's long and filthy fingernail slid in the crack between the two halves and the locket popped open. Kreacher's eyes widened when he stared at the writing on the parchment.

"Do you know who wrote that, Kreacher?" Harry asked.

For a moment Kreacher didn't speak, and they stood there under the hot sun with the tall grass brushing against their legs as a weak breeze rustled through the garden. Finally, Kreacher nodded, and Harry blinked, feeling sweat run down his face from his temple.

"Who?" Hermione whispered. Her hands trembled as she fisted her hair and pulled it off her neck, and Harry thought that she looked like she was about to either faint or scream.

Knowing that Kreacher wouldn't answer if he didn't have to, Harry repeated Hermione's question. Kreacher looked hatefully at him, his eyes filling with tears. "My old Mistress's favorite son, Master Regulus," he croaked.

He bared his teeth at Harry, and Harry saw that no one had mended them from when Dobby had punched Kreacher in the mouth in the Hospital Wing. Harry found that he didn't care very much. "Where's the real locket, Kreacher?"

Tears dribbled down Kreacher's long nose, and it was as though some supernatural force pried Kreacher's mouth open and forced him to answer Harry. "It is in the place where Kreacher used to sleep in his old Mistress's home."

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at one another, different values of surprise on their faces. Harry yanked the fake Horcrux back and squeezed it tightly in his hand, so tightly that he could feel the chain digging into his skin.

"Go get it," he ordered. "Bring it straight back to me, Kreacher. You don't open it. You don't tell anyone about it. You don't try to break it." He watched Kreacher's face carefully for any sign of victory or secrecy but didn't find any. Not entirely convinced that he had covered every possible angle from which Kreacher might try to get around bringing Harry back the locket, Harry said, "This is what the Blacks wanted. It was Regulus's last wish, Kreacher."

"Master Regulus!" moaned Kreacher, rocking back and forth on the ground as he cried. "My poor old Mistress ... she liked you best, Master Regulus!"

"Go, Kreacher," Harry ordered, and Kreacher disappeared with another sharp *crack*.

The minutes that passed before Kreacher returned crawled for Harry, and he paced along the garden path as thoughts beat frantically in his head. To think that he had never wanted to go back to Number 12, Grimmauld Place ... he might have never have discovered the Horcrux if it hadn't been for Hermione leaving the tent because she had been mad at Ron. If Greyback had never savaged Bill would Fleur have proved to Mrs. Weasley that she loved him? Would Mrs. Weasley have ever thrown herself into the wedding plans? Would she ever have dug out the family trees that had tipped Hermione off if it hadn't been for Draco Malfoy and his Vanishing Cabinet? Harry felt an absurd urge to laugh. Voldemort was root of all of this, and ultimately Harry could blame and thank Voldemort for bringing about his own destruction.

Kreacher reappeared with the locket clutched in his hands. "What is Master going to do with it?" he asked tremulously when Harry put it in his pocket.

"Go back to Hogwarts, now. Work in the kitchen with the other house-elves, and stop making them all hate you," said Harry, ignoring Kreacher's question. He heard Kreacher mutter something dark and terrible before he disappeared, and Harry hoped viciously that the other house-elves ambushed him upon his return.

"Let's go," said Harry, but Hermione stopped him.

"I need to help Ginny with her bridesmaid dress," she said.

"Didn't you want to ask my Mum about wedding gifts?" Ron reminded him.

Harry stared at both of them. They looked flushed with excitement and triumph, but Harry only felt a gripping coldness. Being around other people was the last thing he wanted to do, and he almost said that he was going to return to the Dursleys when a window above them opened. Looking resplendent in a gold gown, Ginny leaned out of the window. Her face lit up when she saw Harry, and he knew there was no way he could sneak back home without their being awkward questions at the wedding.

"Harry?" Hermione questioned, looking worriedly at him. "You okay?"

Harry smiled wearily. "Fine," he said, trying to look better than he felt. As much as he had been dreading seeing Ginny get upset with him, seeing her looking so happy to see him was much worse. They waited awkwardly for Ginny to come outside.

"*Harry!*" she cried, throwing her arms around Harry's neck and hugging him tightly.

Her breasts pressed against his chest, and automatically Harry wrapped his arms around Ginny. Her dress crinkled under his hands.

"We'll see you inside, Harry," Hermione said, and she dragged Ron into the house.

Ginny released Harry and smiled up at him. "How've you been?" she asked quietly, a sad look in her eyes.

Harry found that he could only nod. "You look really pretty," he said honestly. He desperately wanted to make up all the disappointment to her, but he knew he couldn't, and he rather thought she knew it, too.

"I'm not going anywhere, Harry," she said softly, stepping very close to him. Harry couldn't help but admire how her red hair contrasted with her pale shoulders, but distantly in his head a small voice warned him to step away from her.

A flash of hurt danced across Ginny's face but it was gone before Harry could examine it too closely. "What're you and Ron doing here?" she asked instead, her voice sounding too bright and cheery.

"We wanted to ask your Mum about wedding presents," Harry said, and this time he definitely caught the look of disappointment on her face. "Ginny ... " he sighed and he ran his hand through his hair.

She smiled sadly at him. "There's never going to be an after Tom chance for us, is there, Harry?"

He stared at her, not knowing what to say. He wanted to tell her that she was wrong ... that as soon as he finished off Voldemort they'd pick up where they had left off, but Harry knew it wasn't true. He couldn't explain it, but he knew that something irreparable had happened when Dumbledore died.

Ginny's eyes were bright but she didn't start crying. Instead, she smiled at him and said, "Mum's gonna freak when I tell her."

Harry winced. "You haven't told her?"

"I haven't told her that we're never getting back together," she corrected. "It was incredible, Harry," she said quietly. "It was my dream come true."

Harry hadn't felt this guilty since Dumbledore had been disappointed in him for not getting Slughorn's memory, and he barely kept himself from making wild promises that he would make everything better. Ginny sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and then rubbed it against her gold dress. Watching Ginny cry was very different from watching Cho cry, and Harry felt miserable.

"I'm really sorry," he said.

Ginny shook her head and stuck out her hand. "Friends?" she asked, smiling genuinely for the first time.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. "I mean, I understand if you never want to see me ... "

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Don't be a prat, Harry," she sniffed.

Harry grinned. "Friends then," he said. "What're you getting Bill and Fleur?"

They swapped ideas as they walked into the house, and Mrs. Weasley looked very put upon when they entered the kitchen.

"Hi, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry.

"Oh hello, dear," she said distractedly as she addressed an envelope. Then she saw Ginny and she looked up. "Ginny, how's that dress? Doesn't she look pretty, Harry?"



"Mum, stop it. We're never getting back together," Ginny said pulled a cookie out of the jar. She offered one to Harry, but any niggling appetite abandoned him when he looked over at Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley looked shocked and she looked over at Harry with her mouth hanging open. Harry wished the floor would open up and swallow him, but as floors are not very obliging at such moments, Harry was forced to nod.

"But *why*?" Mrs. Weasley wanted to know. "Ginny, don't eat in that dress!"

Ginny rolled her eyes but put the cookie down. "It's very simple, Mum. Harry's got things to do, and I'm not going to sit around and wait for him."

"If your father had Harry's responsibilities I would wait for him!" Mrs. Weasley said loudly, her face turning red.

Harry couldn't believe he was witnessing this conversation and he tried to make himself as invisible as possible.

"Well I'm not," Ginny said coolly, and she picked up her cookie.

Mrs. Weasley seemed to deflate and despite being a well rounded sort of woman, she looked very small to Harry just then. "We're still friends, Mrs. Weasley," he said, but that didn't seem to be the thing to say.

"Yes, we're *friends*, Mum. You should be happy!" said Ginny shrilly, and she threw down her cookie and picked up her hem and walked out of the room quickly.

Harry stared at her back, not knowing what to say. It was a while before he realized that Mrs. Weasley was looking at him, and he had to stop himself from flinching at the thoughtful look on her face. "Why don't you go see what Ron's up to, dear?"

Harry made a hasty retreat. When he passed Ginny's room he picked up the pace, not wanting to know what she was doing in there. When he got to Ron's room he shut the door hurriedly behind him.

"Why is it that girls are so bloody complicated?" he demanded, throwing himself across Ron's bed and burrowing his face in the pillow. "Why can't they ever say what they really mean?"

Ron clapped him sympathetically on the shoulder. "I know."

"What happened, Harry?" Hermione asked, coming to sit on the corner of the bed.

Harry straightened up and glared accusingly at her. "Your bloody half of mankind is crazy," he said flatly. He told them of what had happened with Ginny, and when he was done they were both staring at him with mixed looks of pity and amusement.

"How is it," Hermione began, "that you can figure out that the man who sold Hagrid the dragon egg also happened to be the man who wanted to get at the Sorcerer's Stone, but you can't figure out what's right in front of your nose?"

"What?" said Harry, too surprised to be angry. "What do you mean?"

"Lavender and I aren't friends, Harry," Ron said helpfully.

"What does Lavender have to do with Ginny?" Harry demanded.

Hermione sighed. "Harry, Ginny doesn't want to be friends with you. She wants to be your girlfriend again."

Harry stared at her. "But she's the one who asked if we were friends!"

Ron nodded ruefully. "Tricky breed, aren't they?"

Harry leaned against the pillow. At the rate he was going, he thought he'd never understand women. They blew too hot and cold ... Cho was always crying at the worst times, and Ginny's temper flared up without him even doing anything but agree with her. It galled, a little bit, that Ron understood women better than he did when he considered the fact that Ron and Hermione were always bickering.

He shook his head. "Do you still have to help her with the dress?" he asked. He pulled the Horcrux from his pocket. "Only, I wanted to go to Hogwarts and ask Professor Dumbledore how we should destroy this."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think Ginny's going to want to do a fitting after today. Come on."

Both Ron and Hermione made for the door, but Harry lingered on the bed, unable to get Mrs. Weasley's shrewd look out of his face. "Can't we just Apparate to Hogwarts from your room, Ron?" he asked wistfully.

Hermione looked at him severely. "Harry! We have to say goodbye to Mrs. Weasley at least.

Come on."

Harry sighed but followed them. Once again, as he passed Ginny's door he hurried past it on light feet. Mrs. Weasley hadn't moved from where Harry had left her, and she smiled warmly at all of them before they left.

Ron and Hermione left first, but Harry hung back. She looked up curiously from the table and he swallowed nervously.

"Mrs. Weasley ... I just wanted to say I'm really sorry," he said quietly.

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "You're going to break hearts, Harry," she said fondly, resting her elbows on the table. "Don't worry about Ginny. She'll come 'round. "

Harry nodded.

"Anything else dear?" asked Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh, yeah. Do you give the bride and groom individual wedding presents, or do you give it to them as a couple?" he asked.

Mrs. Weasley smiled at him, looking very pleased with him. "Whichever you prefer, Harry. Oh you are sweet ... "

"I know what I'm going to get Bill," Harry said as they walked up to the castle.

"Oh?" said Hermione, looking curious. "Is that why you stayed behind to talk with Mrs. Weasley?"

Harry nodded. "I'm going to get him a barbeque."

Ron looked at him funny. "A bobcue? What's that?"

"It's like this outdoor oven," Harry tried to explain. "You grill on it. You mean you've never done it before?"

Ron shook his head. "We have one at home. My dad likes to use it a lot," Hermione said.

"It's fun, isn't it?" said Harry, who was remembering having to stand watch over the grill while Dudley and his gang ran through the sprinklers when they were seven. He hadn't minded it so

much because one of the mothers at the party had showed him how to make s'mores. "I think he'll like it."

"It's a very good idea, Harry. Just make sure you get them a charcoal barbeque, because I don't think that the fancier ones will work with all the magic in the air," said Hermione. "I wonder what I'm going to get them ... "

Ron grinned at Harry. "Maybe a book?" he suggested.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "No, I don't think so. I'll ask my Mum."

The castle was getting closer now, and they wondered if they should stop by Hagrid's before they went up to see Dumbledore's portrait. But when they knocked on his door no one answered. Not even Fang was inside the house, and so they walked the rest of the way up to the castle.

"Don't even think about it Ron," Hermione said firmly as they passed the house hourglasses.

Harry was starting to get excited, and he slipped his hand inside his pocket to feel for the Horcrux. He had put the pair of them in the same pocket, and he could feel the difference between the two. Slytherin's locket was cold and smooth, and the fake Horcrux was smaller and warmer to his touch, and uneasily Harry wondered if the seventh of Voldemort's soul was what was making the locket so freezing.

"We need to see Professor McGonagall," Hermione told the gargoyles guarding McGonagall's office. But the large stone statues did not move or make any sign that they had heard her.

"Is she in?" Hermione asked, but they only stared unblinkingly at her.

"Oh honestly!" Hermione huffed. "I mean, it's so stupid."

Harry thought he saw one of the gargoyles grin, but it happened so quickly that he wasn't sure that it wasn't just a trick of the light. Either way, he was losing his temper.

"Tell her Harry Potter is here on Dumbledore's orders," he said loudly, and the gargoyle swiveled its head at Harry and looked at him carefully.

"Oh it figures that he would listen to *you*," Hermione said, glaring at the gargoyle, but she was the first to step onto the revolving stairs. She knocked on the door to McGonagall's office, and they heard a muffled voice telling them to enter.

"Ms. Granger," said Professor McGonagall, looking quite surprised to see them.

"We need a moment alone with Professor Dumbledore," said Harry.

Professor McGonagall frowned. "I'm afraid you can't, Mr. Potter. He's not here."

Harry craned his neck to look at Dumbledore's portrait, but Dumbledore wasn't there. "Why not? He's a portrait now ... do you mean he's gone off to visit another one of his portraits?"

McGonagall shook her head. "There are no other portraits of Professor Dumbledore. He must be somewhere in the castle."

"But it's important," said Harry, and he twisted around to look at Dumbledore's portrait again. "We need to speak with him." He could not believe that in his pocket was a Horcrux, and yet he didn't know how to destroy it.

"Can't we send a search team out for him?" suggested Ron. He looked at the portraits of the other headmasters and headmistresses, but they all seemed to be sleeping.

"What is it that you need to speak with Professor Dumbledore about?" asked Professor McGonagall.

Harry, who had been expecting her to ask again, shrugged. "I can't tell you, Professor," he said simply. He knew that she wasn't satisfied with what he had told her when Dumbledore died, but he found that he didn't care. It seemed incredible that Dumbledore had only died two weeks ago, and Harry clutched the real Horcrux tightly in his hand again.

"Dumbledore did not foresee himself ... dying, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, her voice catching at the mention of Dumbledore's murder. "If there is something I can do ... lives are at stake here, Harry."

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

He knew she was trying to be gentle and supporting, but he couldn't help but feel angry at her for thinking that she knew better than he did about what he needed to do. He wondered what she thought he and Dumbledore had been doing the night he died.

"Then ... " began Professor McGonagall, but Hermione interrupted her.

"He can't, Professor," Hermione said quietly.

McGonagall looked at Hermione sharply. "You mean to say that you know what Dumbledore and Potter were doing that night?" Hermione nodded, looking upset. McGonagall looked at Harry, her mouth drawn into a thin line.

"If you've told Ms. Granger I imagine you've told Mr. Weasley as well," she said coolly.

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore told me I could. I'm sorry, Professor," said Harry, who wasn't the least bit sorry. "But I can't tell you. Will you owl me when Professor Dumbledore comes back?"

Professor McGonagall blinked at him, startled by the sudden shift in the conversation but agreed. "One day, Mr. Potter, I'm going to know," she said, looking very determined.

"I hope you don't," Harry said quietly, and Professor McGonagall frowned at him, looking concerned, frustrated and curious all at once. Harry tried to imagine what the world would be like if more people knew about Horcruxes. Not that he worried that Professor McGonagall would follow in Voldemort's footsteps, but he imagined that some people would.

## Chapter 11

On the day before the wedding the postman delivered a large package at Number 4, Privet Drive. Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon was the one to see the package first, and he had shouted at Harry for having the audacity to use the Dursley's home for his abnormal dealings.

Harry had to shout louder than Uncle Vernon, which was no mean feat, to explain himself. "It's a barbeque!" he shouted. "A Muggle ... normal," he amended hastily, "barbeque. Wiz ... people like me don't even have barbeques."

Uncle Vernon's small eyes glared at him out of his enormous purple face. "Barbequing is manly ... of course people like *you* don't do it," Vernon said meanly, and Harry rather felt that Vernon wasn't talking about him being a wizard. "What're *you* doing with one?"

"It's a wedding present for Ron's brother," Harry explained. He supposed he could have just whipped out his wand and *Acciod* the barbeque, but years of being downtrodden and blasted every time he mentioned the M-word had made him forget that he was no longer hampered by Reasonable Restriction of Underage Magic.

"Anyway it's mine," said Harry coldly. He pulled out Draco's wand and tapped the fire engine red lid and shrunk the barbeque until it could fit in his pocket.

Uncle Vernon flinched away from him in thundering footsteps that made the windows tremble in their frames. He looked fearfully at Harry, but Harry was already walking up to the stairs. He could feel Uncle Vernon's eyes boring into the back of his head, and for added measure Harry waved his wand dramatically as he walked up the stairs. A long chain of small bubbles floated out of his wand and trailed behind him in the air, bouncing in the breeze the ceiling fan had created, and he hoped that they would frighten his uncle from coming upstairs.

Inside the tent, he could hear the rustling of wrapping paper from the sitting room where Ron and Hermione were wrapping their wedding presents for Bill and Fleur. Ron had bought his brother a remote controlled toy car, which he insisted Bill would really like, but Harry privately thought that Ron was hoping for a turn with it. For Fleur, Ron had wanted to buy her perfume, but ended up buying her a gift that Hermione pre-approved: a punch pitcher. Hermione, on the other hand, bought both Bill and Fleur something individually and then a gift for them as a couple.

"I still can't believe you bought Bill earrings," said Ron, shaking his head as he tried to curl ribbon with scissors. The ribbon shredded and he looked ruefully at it. "This is the kind of stuff

Flitwick should have taught us ... real life stuff."

"It's not something I would like," Hermione said as she curled a long strand of silver ribbon for Ron. "But it's something I think he'd like." She looked down at the bone earring she had bought with a critical eye before covering it with orange tissue paper as though imagining the look on Mrs. Weasley's face when she saw that Hermione was adding to her son's collection.

"Did the bar cube come yet?" asked Ron.

"It's barbeque, Ron," Hermione corrected, rolling her eyes. "Did it come, Harry?"

Harry pulled the shrunken red barbeque from his pocket, and Ron frowned at it. "How do you cook a whole meal on that thing?" he demanded.

"Oh honestly Ron," Hermione said, taking the barbeque from Harry's hand and placing it on the floor. "Harry's shrunk it." She tapped her wand on the hood and the barbeque grew to its normal size. "They're going to need charcoal, aren't they?"

"Can't they just magic a fire?" asked Ron, who was looking appraisingly at the barbeque now as though it appealed to him in some inexplicable way.

Harry and Hermione looked at one another. "I suppose ... " Harry said slowly. "But then it wouldn't be barbequing, not really."

Ron looked incomprehensibly at him and Harry shook his head. "Never mind. You'll see. Maybe Bill will use it tomorrow. What I want to know is how am I going to wrap it?"

"You could shrink it again and put it in a bag?" suggested Ron.

Harry nodded. He could do that, but barbeques weren't as impressive when they were small.

Hermione, who saw his unsatisfied look suggested another option. "Just do what they do with cars ... put a big bow on it." She handed him a spool of ribbon and held one end as Harry looped the other end under the belly of the barbeque and then he tied a large bow that flopped down the sides of the lid.

"It'll have to do," he said, and he flicked his wand at it, and put it on the counter.

"Let's have lunch," Hermione said. "And then we can do some research."



"It's summer vacation!" Ron said, looking indignant. "We're not even going back to school next year ... what do we have to do research for?"

"For the Horcrux," Hermione said witheringly, and Ron shut his mouth.

"Oh yeah."

Hermione pulled out a loaf of bread from on top of the refrigerator and began cutting slices. Harry was getting sick of sandwiches and craved and mashed potatoes and treacle tart.

"When are you going to figure out the oven?" he asked, sitting down on the counter.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and rested the hilt of the knife on the counter, and Harry kept one eye on the knife and the other on Hermione. He had forgotten how sensitive Hermione was about anything domestic, which seemed odd to him because of how casual she had been about potions. Harry didn't see much difference between potions and cooking, but he hurried to add, "You know how hopeless Ron and I are at really complicated and advanced magic."

Hermione resumed cutting slices of bread with more force than was strictly necessary, but she looked slightly mollified. "It's only because you two don't read anything besides your stupid Quidditch books."

Ron looked indignant but Harry shook his head at him. Having lived with Ron for all these years, Harry thought that living with Hermione would be the same, but it had been anything but like living with Ron. Hermione liked things orderly and clean. She drew up chores lists and tacked them up on the refrigerator, and whenever they complained too loudly Hermione would tell them that she'd already eaten and that they could make themselves dinner. Considering that Harry only knew how to make bacon and Ron could only make sandwiches, they generally complained when Hermione wasn't around.

"Malfoy only wants mustard on one half of his sandwich," he said, remembering Malfoy's comment from the other day. "And remember, he doesn't like the crust on the bread."

Ron snorted. "You sound like a housewife."

Harry made a rude gesture with his hand, which Ron tried to top, but his fingers got knotted. "Damn," he muttered as he untangled his fingers.

"Here's Malfoy's," Hermione said, pushing a plate toward him. "Come eat with us, Harry. You take every meal with him."

Harry shrugged. He didn't want to tell them that sometimes it was nice to get away from them and to have a chance to think in peace. Malfoy didn't talk very much when he was in the room, and while Lockhart tried to strike up a conversation every once in a while, it usually petered out after a series of monosyllabic answers from Harry. Beyond that, as much as Ron and Hermione bickered, they could be quite romantic, a subject that Harry wanted to stay as far away from as possible. After Cho and Ginny, Harry didn't want another girlfriend until well after he had finished off Voldemort.

"Maybe for dinner," he said evasively as he carried his and Malfoy's sandwich out of the kitchen with the glasses of juice floating behind him. They reminded him of the trail of bubbles he had left on the stairs and he wondered if they had ever popped.

"Malfoy," he called, tapping the door with his toe. "I'm coming in with lunch.

In what had become a familiar routine, Harry juggled the plates in one hand and unlocked the door, pushing it open with his shoulder. He knew it left his back vulnerable to whatever sinister plots Malfoy could have lying in wait for him, but he didn't let that bother him too much.

Draco rose to his feet when Harry entered and took his plate and juice.

"Mustard on only one side?" he asked. "You forgot napkins again."

"Yes, and yes I know," Harry said, sitting on the floor and balancing his plate on his knee. "Bill Weasley's getting married tomorrow to Fleur."

Draco paused, holding his sandwich still. "The girl from the Triwizard Tournament?" he asked curiously.

Harry nodded, taking an enormous bite out of his sandwich.

"What did you get them?" asked Draco, who wasn't quite sure why he was taking an interest in the Weasleys. He thought it was probably out of boredom.

Harry swallowed and felt a tightening in his chest from having swallowed too much. "A barbeque," he grunted, picking up his juice. Draco nodded. "You know what that is?" asked Harry, surprised.

"Of course," Draco said coolly, biting into his sandwich. Turkey again. He would rather have roast beef and a green salad.

"Ron didn't know about them," said Harry. "How did you? They're Muggle, you know."

"I know that, Potter," said Draco, annoyed. "I saw them in France with my mother last, well, the Christmas before last."

"Oh," said Harry.

For an inexplicable reason, Draco felt the need to elaborate, and as he spoke he kept wondering why he was breaking rank and form by talking to Potter. "A large Muggle, though not quite as big as your uncle," Harry nodded, "gave me a chicken wing covered in some sort of sauce."

"Did you like it?"

Draco shrugged. "It was good. Well, it was French, so of course it was good."

"Are you French?" asked Harry before he took another bite of his sandwich.

"Of course I'm French," said Draco, looking at Harry as though he were a rather stupid troll, which would, naturally, be quite something as trolls are already extremely dim. "Malfoy, Potter: bad faith."

Harry rolled his eyes. Was it his fault that Aunt Petunia had never paid for him to take foreign language lessons? When the other kids went off to study French or German or Spanish, he had to sit inside the principal's office until their lessons were over and he could return to the classroom. Dudley had studied German because he liked sausages. Harry suddenly remembered Fred and George's mints, which gave you an authentic accent, and he asked, "Do you speak it?"

"Yes, Potter, I speak French," said Draco, very slowly as though he thought Potter couldn't understand if he spoke any faster. Harry didn't ask anymore questions, and they ate their sandwiches in silence.

Harry leaned against the wall and stretched his legs out in front of him. Something fell onto the floor with a dull thunk, and Harry looked to his side. The locket had fallen out of his pocket although the chain was still inside. Hermione had said that she wanted to do research on the Horcrux, but Harry didn't know where she was planning to look. She had already searched the Hogwarts library, even the Restricted Section.

Harry sighed. He wished he knew how Dumbledore had destroyed the ring, but McGonagall hadn't owed him to say he had returned. He wondered if she might not be telling him in retaliation for him not telling her about the Horcruxes, but he dismissed the idea quickly. Professor McGonagall had always been fair, and Harry didn't think she would stop being so just out of feelings of frustration.

He turned the locket in his hands, tracing the serpentine S with his finger. What did Salazar Slytherin look like? Was it a portrait like the ones he had seen at Hogwarts and St. Mungo's? Or was it like a Muggle one? Unmoving? The Fat Lady and her friend Violet had gotten drunk off of wine that was five hundred years old, but Harry didn't know if magical portraits had been around in the Founders' time. He had never seen a picture of any of the Founders, and he hoped that he could open the locket before it was destroyed, if only to tell Salazar Slytherin what a mess the last of his descendents had made. Although, Slytherin might think Voldemort was in the right and be delighted to know of all the foul things Voldemort had done. If that were the case, Harry planned on putting Salazar Slytherin's portrait right across from Dumbledore's.

Hermione tapped on the door. "Harry? We're going to watch a movie ... do you want to watch?"

"Yeah, okay," he said. He got to his feet, stashing the locket in his pocket and gathered up the dishes before he left.

"What do you think is inside the locket?" Lockhart asked after Harry left with Draco's empty breakfast plates.

Draco frowned, looking thoughtfully at the space on the floor where Potter had been sitting. Potter never conjured a chair and Draco wondered if he didn't know how. A flare of triumph made him smirk. There was at least one thing he could do that Potter couldn't. For years, he had always been better at Potions than Potter. He had gotten an Outstanding in Potions on his O.W.L.S.. Last year, however, Potter had emerged as a Potions extraordinaire ... Slughorn's darling. Draco scowled, still not able to believe that Potter had managed to brew a perfect first potion of the year.

"Malfoy?"

Draco looked at Lockhart, who was looking at him expectantly and with a hint of annoyance. He didn't like not being answered, Draco thought, and he was tempted to ignore Lockhart just to see him get madder.

"Do you think it's of his girlfriend?" Lockhart asked and wagged his eyebrows at Draco.

Draco looked witheringly at the man. "I don't care about Potter's love life, Lockhart," he sneered. "Besides, they broke up."

Lockhart looked interested. "Really?" he said, tilting his head sideways. "But I heard from the Fat

Lady that they were most in love."

Draco shrugged. "Obviously they weren't," he said. If he weren't so bored, he would have let the subject drop, but Potter hadn't let him out of the room except to shower and use the bathroom. Sometimes he pounded on the door just to see the wall on the other side of his hallway. "Potter broke up with her."

"Then it must be of Granger," Lockhart said decidedly.

Draco stared at him. "As disgusting as it is to talk about, Granger's with the Weasel."

"Then what's in it?" Lockhart insisted. He looked disappointed to hear it wasn't anything scandalous.

Draco shrugged. "Maybe it's of his Mudblood mother."

"Don't say that," Lockhart said disapprovingly.

"Oh, what are you going to do? Turn me over on your knee and spank me?" Draco sneered.

Lockhart narrowed his eyes at him. "It couldn't be his mother anyway," he said. "There was an S on the locket."

"Then it couldn't have been Weasley or Granger then could it?" Draco said, annoyed that Lockhart would be so dim. "And I highly doubt it's Severus Snape," he said warningly when Lockhart next opened his mouth.

Lockhart wrinkled his nose, and Draco remembered how very obvious Snape had made his abhorrence of the foppish man. Perhaps Lockhart had heard what Snape used to say about him in the Slytherin common room, or maybe he hated Snape because of his greasy hair.

"Ask him next time he comes in," Lockhart urged.

"No," Draco said. He didn't want Potter thinking that he was interested in whatever it was inside the locket. He wondered if Potter hadn't just been playing with it in hopes that he would ask what it was. Potter hadn't baited him once during the week, but he had looked agitated at breakfast, and he had been rather obvious about handling the locket. All throughout breakfast Potter had been turning the locket over and over in his hands and playing with the chain. Well, if Potter thought to pique his interest with a stupid locket he was an idiot.

"I don't care what's in the locket. If you want to know so badly you ask him," he said, lying back

down on his bed and staring up at the stars. He wished he could see a different constellation other than Orion.

Lockhart sighed. "He won't tell me. He likes you better."

Draco sat up and looked at Lockhart in amazement. "Are you kidding?" he said. "He hates me. I just about offed his last father figure, you know," he said.

Lockhart shrugged. "He's got a funny way of showing hate," he said shrewdly.

Draco didn't answer. He remembered how Potter was willing to turn his back on his best friends for him. If there was anything more Gryffindor-ish than that he'd eat Lockhart whole.

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"Malfoy? I've got breakfast," called Harry from outside Draco's room.

Draco blinked groggily, wondering what time it was. Potter had to be at least two hours early, and Draco buried his head under his pillow.

"Come on, Malfoy, I'm running late," Harry said shortly. He stood over Draco with a plate of eggs and bacon, and the smell wafted down to Draco under the pillow.

"Why are you so early?" Draco asked, his voice rough with sleep. He sat up, blinking blearily at Harry, who shoved the plate onto Draco's lap. Draco hissed as the hot plate burned his legs underneath the thin material of the pajama bottoms Harry had given him.

Harry was shoveling eggs and bacon into his mouth as fast as he could and was halfway done before Malfoy had even picked up the fork.

"Come on, Malfoy," he said before draining his orange juice in one long gulp.

Draco stared at Harry in disgust before taking a very small bite of eggs. Harry made an irritated sound, and Draco hid his smirk behind his glass of orange juice. "What's the rush?" he asked casually.

"The wedding," Harry said, exasperated.

Draco shrugged, pretending he had forgotten. As soon as he was done, Harry grabbed the plate and juice from him. "We're going to be out late, so Lockhart's going to be watching you. One

word, Lockhart and you're a penniless pauper," said Harry very quickly and looking agitated. "Right. I'll nip back when I can for lunch, and I suppose you can shower then, and dinner'll be late, but I'll try to bring you back something from the wedding. I bet you're as sick of sandwiches as I am, but we can't figure out the oven because everything's just wonky in this place," he rambled. Draco stared at him, blinking slowly.

"Bye, Potter," he said pointedly, wanting very badly to go back to sleep.

"Right," said Harry. "Bye." And as he was leaving the room Draco noticed that Harry was in dress robes.

"Fuck," he groaned, flopping back onto the bed.

"Well it's easier for you, isn't it?" Lockhart complained. "All you have to do is sleep all day, but I've got to watch you, haven't I? I bet my social life's just in the toilet. By the time this is all done, if it's ever done, I bet people will have forgotten that I've ever existed!"

He sounded so upset that Draco asked, "But aren't there a lot of portraits of you?"

That obviously was the wrong thing to say because Lockhart swelled with anger. "Every portrait is his own self, even if we are all of the same man."

"Okay, okay," muttered Draco. He sighed and looked around the room, and he nearly stopped breathing when he saw the door. Potter hadn't shut it all the way, which meant that it wasn't locked. He couldn't believe it, and for a few minutes he just sat, staring at the door while Lockhart complained about how a portrait from four years ago had stolen his sweetheart from him.

Draco waited until the Gryffindors had left the tent before he took even a step toward the door. Lockhart cut himself off in mid-sentence to ask in an alarmed voice, "What are you doing?"

Draco ignored him, and Lockhart said, "If you go out that door, Malfoy, I'll tell Potter!"

Draco looked over his shoulder, smirking. "How?" he asked simply.

Lockhart stared at him. "How?" Draco repeated. "I highly doubt that Potter took that other portrait of you with him, and so there's no real way of you to show him, because I don't think there is a portrait of you in the Weasley's house."

Lockhart's face blanched. "You can't go," he pleaded. "He'll tell everyone."

Draco shrugged. "That's your problem, mate," he said, and he pulled the door open and took his first step into the hallway unchaperoned. Freedom trilled through his veins, and for a moment he did nothing more than walk the length of the hallway and back again just because he could.

He looked in at each of their rooms; something he'd been wanting to do ever since Weasley had marched him at wandpoint down the hallway on the first day. Granger's room was stuffed with books on every imaginable surface, but other than that there wasn't anything extraordinary about it. Weasley's and Potter's room, however, was a confusing combination of brilliant orange and Spartan messiness, which was the only way Draco could think of describing the room. Potter didn't seem to have very much, while Weasley had crammed his shelves with many things, and yet both sides of the room were messy. On Harry's side of the room, however, was his Firebolt, and Draco grinned as he walked over to it.

"Up!" he commanded, and the broom leapt into his hands.

Quite unexpectedly, Draco felt emotion swell in his chest, and he bowed his head, holding the broom in his hand. When he mounted, he forgot about everything else except the pleasure of flying, and he gently hovered in the air. It was incredible, and he was amazed at how much he had missed flying. He flew out of the bedroom and into the out parts of the room, dodging furniture and lamps as he did so.

He laughed out loud, something which he hadn't done in a long time, and the knot of fear and tenseness that had been balled in his gut loosened.

"Meow."

Draco swiveled, his breath frozen in his throat as he stared around the room, but it was only Granger's large and rather squashed-faced looking cat. He looked warily at it, not sure of what danger it posed to him.

But Crookshanks climbed on top of the coffee table and stretched, closing his eyes. Relief flooded Draco, and he dismounted. "Hello," he said quietly, walking over to Crookshanks.

Crookshanks opened one eye at him, and slowly Draco reached his hand forward to pet the cat. Crookshanks purred as Draco scratched his belly, and Draco grinned. The Slytherins had a house cat named Choco that had appeared one day in Draco's first year and came and went as he pleased, and Draco was rather reminded of him as he petted Crookshanks.

He looked over his shoulder, and pans and dirty plates were strewn across the counter. Obviously, they had been in a rush to get out the door. Curious, Draco walked behind the



counter to get a better look at the kitchen. He pulled the door to the refrigerator open, but shut it quickly as a blast of cold air hit him. He was, after all, only in Potter's pajama bottoms. The oven looked no different from the ones that Draco had seen in the Manor's kitchens, except that this one was crammed full with a variety of pans and looked as though it hadn't been used in a long time.

It struck Draco that he could walk out of the tent and out of the Dursley's at any time. He could Apparate back to the Manor and tell the Dark Lord, or at least Snape, about what he knew ... and yet, Draco couldn't help but remember what Potter had told him. Was it worth risking being caught and killed by venturing outside? What would Snape say when he found out that Draco had bungled the job? No, Draco decided, as of right now it was pointless for him to go back to the Manor.

He opened the oven again. Well, there was at least one thing he could do.

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"Fleur! Fleur come down!" Mrs. Weasley called from the foot of the stairs. She was dressed in her best robes and was wearing the hat and necklace that Fred and George had given her for Christmas last year.

When Fleur appeared at the top of the stairs Harry heard Ron's whoosh of breath that escaped him, and Harry himself felt rather lightheaded. Fleur looked gorgeous in long white robes. Her silvery hair was pulled off her face in an elegant bun, circled by flowers, and her veil sparkled, the tiny diamonds winking in the light. The goblin tiara hadn't been found, but Harry thought that Fleur didn't need it.

A few feet away, Harry saw Bill grinning broadly at Fleur. The slashes on his face had turned into scars, but it was obvious that Fleur didn't even notice them as she walked down the stairs, beaming at Bill.

Mrs. Weasley promptly burst into tears when Fleur and Bill joined hands, and Mr. Weasley passed her a hankie, smiling as he watched his son and future daughter-in-law lead the way into the garden.

Ginny and Gabrielle followed Fleur and Bill, and Harry thought he saw Ginny try to catch his eye as she walked passed him, but when he looked again she was staring at the back of Fleur's head.

Hermione nudged him, and Harry realized that he was holding back the line waiting to go

outside. He hurried out the door, his face burning as the dozens of eyes stared at him. Unexpectedly, Tonks appeared at his side, her hair a light shade of pink.

"Where's Remus?" asked Harry, looking around.

"He couldn't make it," she said, looking worried, and Harry saw her hair flash brown for a moment before going pink again. "There was a big get-together with another werewolf clan that he couldn't miss. But I expect he'll be back in time for some of the parties," she said with forced brightness.

Harry didn't know what to say to her, but the walk to the seats in the garden were still a ways away, and he knew he had to say something. "Do you know where he is?" he asked and then immediately wished he hadn't when she saw her face pinch.

"No," she said quietly. "That's the worst of it. He never tells me because he doesn't want me to go after him if anything happens to him."

Harry stared at her. "But somebody in the Order knows, don't they?" he asked, but Tonks shook her head, and her hair was definitely a mousey brown. "But then who goes after him if ... " he trailed off, not wanting to say aloud what he thought other werewolves might do to Lupin.

Tonks looked at him, her face miserable, and Harry's stomach clenched in fear. She was thinking the same thing he was. Harry moved without thinking as he thought of Fenrir Greyback. Greyback had bitten Lupin when he was a child. Lupin had said that he was very popular among the werewolves, and if that was true, there must be others who were like him, and shared his taste for violence.

When they reached the rows of white wooden chairs lined in front of a rose covered trellis, Harry sat down and stared at his hands. He tried to shake himself out of the fear that was gripping him. He was at a wedding, and Bill and Fleur and everyone else there deserved a day of happiness. He couldn't go walking around like a black cloud was over his head, and he stole a look at Tonks. Her hair was pink again, and Harry squared his shoulders. He cared about Remus a lot, but Tonks loved him, and if she was putting up the front that she was happy, he could too.

Hermione sat down on the other side of Harry, and she looked quizzically at him and nodded to Tonks. Harry shook his head. He'd tell her later. If there was ever a worrywart it was Hermione. Ron was sitting in the front row with his family, and Harry saw that Percy wasn't there. He scanned the first row again, and he was grimly satisfied to see that they hadn't even left a chair open in the hopes that he would come.

"Harry," whispered Hermione, "what's wrong?"

Harry blinked. "Nothing," he whispered back. She looked at him doubtfully and so he said, "Percy's not coming."

Hermione shook his head. "Ginny told me that he returned the wedding invitation unopened."

"He's an idiot," Harry said softly as he stared at Bill, who was grinning at the crowd and holding Fleur's hand very tightly. Gabrielle waved at him, smiling, and Harry waved back.

A tall wizard dressed in ceremonial robes walked down the aisle and up to Bill and Fleur. He shook their hands, smiling widely, and Harry realized that the man was probably the one who was going to marry Bill and Fleur. Music played through the garden, although Harry couldn't tell where it was coming from, and all the guests rose. The wizards took off their hats, and Harry hastily yanked his off, and looked around him, not knowing what was happening.

Hermione nudged him and leaned over to mutter, "It means the wedding's started."

Harry nodded, and took his cue from an elderly wizard sitting in front of him and put his hat back on when he did. Once again he felt very keenly how little he knew about customs in the Wizarding world. He had been expecting Fleur to process down the aisle to the traditional wedding march song just like he had seen in the movies, but the only traditional or Muggle thing about this wedding was the fact that Fleur was dressed all in white.

The wizard standing in front of Bill and Hermione and began to talk, and for several minutes, Harry was just like anyone else in the crowd ... laughing as the man shared some of Bill and Fleur's childhood stories.

Hermione leaned closer to him and whispered, "Mrs. Weasley told me that Fred and George invented this thing that let's you speak in two different languages at once."

"How?" he whispered back.

Hermione pointed across the aisle where Fleur's side of the family largely sat, and Harry was reminded that they spoke French. Every one of them had a large peony flower attached to their robes. "The flower?" he asked lowly.

Hermione nodded, suitably impressed by the twins. There was a time, Harry knew, where Hermione would have thought that the twins were little more than moronic troublemakers because of their bad grades. Yet Fred and George were quite brilliant, even if their O.W.L. score said they were only fit to work in Muggle relations.

Everyone was on their feet again, and Harry hurried to do the same. The old man in front of him

was looking expectantly at the aisle, and, curious, Harry did the same. A very handsome, almost beautiful boy of Harry's age with pale silver hair was walking down that aisle in measured steps with a pillow in his arms. Something shiny caught the light as he passed Harry's section of the seats, and Harry tried to get a look at the rings. They were plain gold bands, quite unlike the boulder-like diamonds Aunt Petunia was always looking at in magazines.

Bill and Fleur picked up a ring from the pillow, and the handsome boy stood next to Ginny. Harry nearly missed Bill and Fleur's kiss while he wondered about the boy. It was obvious that he had come from Fleur's side of the family, and an idea came to Harry that he almost dismissed as impossible. Then he saw Ginny look the boy secretly up and down with her eyes, and Harry raised his eyebrows.

The man ahead of Harry stood up and began clapping loudly, and Harry, who was so used to following the man, did the same. After that, everyone else began cheering and the party became considerably less formal as everyone wanted to talk to the newly married couple. Hermione hurried out of the aisle, and Harry followed her until he realized that she was going to see Ginny, and he did turned blindly in a different direction.

"Harry," Hermione said, sounding annoying. "What are you doing?" She grabbed him arm. "Let's go see Ron."

Ron was talking with a group of Fleur's relatives, and when Harry caught his eye said, "This is my best friend, Harry Potter, and my girlfriend, Hermione Granger."

Fleur's relatives turned, and Harry saw that they were all men in their twenties. "Very nice to meet you, Harry," they said, shaking his hand, and when they grasped his hand Harry felt a spark and burn. He found his cheeks reddening; he didn't understand.

"They're part Veela," Ron said in an undertone. "Crazy about Quidditch."

Harry nodded, understanding now.

"I'm Alexandre Nevarre," said one of them, stretching his hand out again to shake Harry's. He paid a lot of attention to Harry for a good deal of time, flattering him and incessantly touching him ... Harry wondered if that the French, the Delacour, or the Veela in him coming out ... and Harry didn't get away until Bill and Fleur started opening wedding presents.

"Oh Hermione!" Fleur cried when she pulled out the scarves Hermione had picked out for her. "They are beautiful, thank you!" She kissed Hermione on both cheeks and ran her finger over the silk.

Bill opened Ron's present next, and when Harry explained to him what it was, Bill's face lit up. "Very cool," he said to Ron, who grinned back at him.

"Just let me have a go when you open it," said Ron.

"Me too," said Mr. Weasley excitedly.

Fleur found Harry's present next. "What is it?" she said when she opened the lid.

Everyone looked expectantly at Harry. "It's a barbeque ... you cook on it," he explained, and Fleur looked appraisingly at the barbeque.

"Really? You can cook on it?" she asked, putting the lid on it. "To make soup?"

Harry shook his head. "To grill. You put charcoal ... I'll get you some, underneath this grill thing here, right? And then you light it so that the coals heat up, and then you put your food here and ... yeah," he trailed off, wishing he had bought them his and her aprons instead.

"It's wonderful, Harry," said Nevarre from behind him. "Is it Muggle?" he asked, leaning over Harry's shoulder.

Harry felt uncomfortable with how close Nevarre was to him and he took a step forward with the excuse of opening the air vents on the lid. "These are to let out the smoke," he said, feeling rather lame.

Bill looked excited. "I know what you're talking about! They grill all the time in Egypt, but they don't look like this."

"There are a lot of different kinds of barbeques," Harry agreed. He was getting tired of all the attention placed on him so he grabbed the closest present to him and handed it to Bill. He tried to fall back with Ron and Hermione, but Nevarre grabbed him, wanting him to explain barbeques more. He looked so genuinely eager that Harry wondered if Nevarre wasn't another Mr. Weasley in the making.

"Er ... " he said after Nevarre had asked him a question and he hadn't been paying attention. "Sorry, what's that?"

Nevarre leaned in, and Harry leaned back, very aware of how tall he was. He gulped down the punch, tasting the alcohol that someone had liberally poured into the punch bowl.

"Is the punch good?" asked Nevarre, holding up the ladle.

Harry nodded and watched as Nevarre poured himself a cup. "More?" Nevarre asked, dipping the ladle again.

Harry shook his head, wishing that he could get away. Nevarre was nice enough, but he paid so much attention to Harry that he felt as though he were the groom instead of Bill. He looked around the garden, but Ron was talking to Gabrielle and Hermione, strangely enough, was talking with the old man who had sat in front of them.

He saw Ginny walking toward them, her cup stretched out in front of her. "Want some punch, Ginny?" Harry asked when she was a few feet away. She sat down and nodded.

Nevarre poured her some punch, but he overfilled it and it dribbled onto Ginny's gold dress. Harry hurriedly pulled out Draco's wand and cleaned it. Ginny downed the punch quickly.

"Enjoying the wedding, Harry?" she asked casually.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, you?"

She shrugged and held out her glass again, which Nevarre refilled for her. "So, are we going to get the Quidditch Cup next year?" she asked.

Harry winced. He'd forgotten that he hadn't told Ginny that he wasn't going back to Hogwarts next year. "I'm not going back to school next year," he said.

Ginny stared at him but didn't say anything. She sipped her punch, looking at him over the rim of the glass, and finally said, "Maybe you can make it to some of the matches."

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry, who couldn't help but think that Ginny was putting on an act. He had expected her to protest, but then again, maybe she was over him and didn't very much want to see him again.

"Oh the dancing's started," Ginny said, rising to her feet. "I promised Fleur's cousin ... well, bye Harry."

"She is Bill's sister, isn't she?" Nevarre asked once she'd left.

Harry nodded and Nevarre pursed his lips, and Harry looked around the garden desperately for Ron and Hermione. If he could catch their eye maybe one of them would come over.

"It was very nice talking to you, Harry," said Nevarre. Harry looked up in surprise, and Nevarre bowed elegantly to him.

Harry felt his face flush and he bowed back, clumsily. Nevarre laughed. "You're a dying breed, Harry," he said before he left.

Harry didn't know if that was a compliment, but he hurried to join Ron and Gabrielle. "Hi," he said.

Gabrielle lit up when she saw him and kissed him on both cheeks. "Harry! It has been so long," she said happily.

"Who was that?" Ron asked, gesturing to Nevarre.

"My cousin. Did you like him Harry?" asked Gabrielle.

"He was nice," said Harry, and then he quickly changed the subject to the Headmistress of Beauxbatons. For several minutes they chatted amiably about her, and then Fleur's father tapped his knife against his glass of punch.

But before he could open his mouth a large grey owl swooped down and dropped a Howler on top of the wedding cake. Harry saw Fleur's eyes flash, and he, Ron, and Gabrielle hurried forward.

Bill reached for the letter but the Howler opened itself up and hovered in the air, revolving.

"One of Bill's ex girlfriends you think?" Ron asked, but Harry could tell that Ron was nervous.

Finally, the letter stopped and opened wide, and cold rage gripped Harry when Bellatrix Lestranger's voice echoed through the garden.

*"You were a fool, Andromeda. Turning against the Dark Lord and marrying that Mudblood ... and your blood traitor of a daughter about to marry a werewolf. Have you no shame? Do you not care about the purity of the blood that runs through your veins?"*

Tonks' mother raised her wand to vanish the Howler, but Tonks grabbed her arm, staring at the Howler with a look of revulsion and fear on her face. Bellatrix laughed, and it was a high and terrible sound.

*"There will be no nuptial joy for your daughter, Andromeda. Fenrir Greyback found him."*

The Howler shredding itself above the wedding cake, sending confetti and ashes on the white frosting, and Tonks sank into a chair, burying her face in her hands.

Harry was rooted to the spot, and the commotion of the garden ... of everyone wanting to know what was to be done ... sounded like a faint buzz to his ears. He looked over at Bill and saw that his head was bowed. Fleur looked worriedly at him, and then at Tonks, who was crying.

Mad-Eye Moody hobbled over to Tonks and clapped his hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry," he said gruffly. "We'll get him."

Tonks laughed mirthlessly. "We'll find what's left of him, you mean."

Harry looked at Mad-Eye, but when he didn't disagree Harry felt the air rush out of his chest. The hole that Sirius had made was being widened, if felt, and Harry clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palm.

"But we have to try," Hermione said, her voice shrill. She looked around at the other members of the Order, but none of them had any hope in their faces.

"We don't even know where he is," Tonks said thickly, tears falling fast down her cheeks. Her mother stood behind her, looked grim and terribly sad as she smoothed her daughter's hair with her hands.

"Dumbledore might know," Hermione persisted. "We can ask his portrait at Hogwarts."

The other members of the Order looked up hopefully, but Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "He has still not returned, Ms. Granger," she said, looking stricken.

Hermione bowed her head, out of ideas.

Mad-Eye Moody raised his flask. "Remus Lupin," he said loudly.

Everyone followed suit, and Harry raised his empty punch glass. He didn't know how, but he would kill Greyback one day. Cold satisfaction flooded him as he decided that, and he stared grimly through the glass at Tonks, who was crying so hard she was sliding off her chair.

The rest of the wedding was subdued, and Harry wanted to leave. He couldn't stand being around so many people when all he wanted to do was crawl into bed and stay in there until everything disappeared. "I'm going to get Malfoy lunch," he muttered to Ron.



Ron nodded, and Harry walked to the buffet table and filled a plate with Mrs. Weasley's cooking. He was looking around for napkins when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Harry turned around and Ginny's flushed face was inches from his own.

"Harry," she said longingly, alcohol on her breath. She leaned in and kissed him.

Harry held himself still, not responding. He couldn't bring himself to push her away and make a fool out of her in front of everyone, but when he didn't respond she looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears.

"You don't love me anymore," she said accusingly.

Harry sighed. "No, Ginny, I don't," he said quietly. He held Draco's plate of food in his hand and watched Ginny as tears ran down her cheeks, but she didn't make a sound.

"Why?" she asked, sounding broken and angry.

Harry felt sick as he stared at Ginny's hurt face. He didn't even know how to explain it to her, and he was frustrated that once more he had made an important decision but couldn't explain it fully. "I'm a different person, now," he said. He knew it was a worthless explanation, but it was true.

Ginny hiccupped, her slender shoulders bouncing. "He died two weeks ago," she said fiercely. "You don't change in two weeks."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sorry, Ginny," he said quietly, and he left the buffet table. There was no point in trying to reason with her when she was drunk. He wished he were drunk. Maybe everything would hurt less if he were. As he passed an ice chest, he picked up a bottle of champagne and walked through the Weasley's house as though he were in a dream.

People called his name as he passed, and Nevarre went so far as to even grab him by the arm and ask if he were alright, but when he saw Harry's face he let go.

"Bye Harry," he said, falling back.

Harry nodded, appreciating that Nevarre wasn't going to try and stop him. He Apparated back to Dursley's greenhouse, almost enjoying the pain of the Apparation. For less than a second he forgot about Lupin and Tonks and Ginny.

Aunt Petunia looked coldly at him when he walked up the stairs. She had a sewing needle in her hand and was popping the bubbles he had made earlier that day. That morning seemed like

such a long time ago.

Memories of Lupin scraped at his mind, raking over the hurt that was there. Lupin had been like an uncle to him, he realized, where Sirius had been like a brother and a father. Lupin watched out for him, gave him good advice, and taught him useful things. Harry only had Uncle Vernon to compare Lupin's avuncular deeds, and he wished he had grown up with Lupin.

His eyes were stinging by the time he pushed through the tent flap. He sniffed loudly and made his way to the kitchen to get glasses for him and Malfoy.

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Draco held himself still when he heard footsteps. Half his torso was in the oven, and he began to pull himself out, not liking the idea of being so vulnerable. He stood up slowly, and Potter's eyes widened when he saw him.

"If you kill me, I won't tell you how the oven works," Draco said quickly.

Harry continued to stare at them, and then quite unexpectedly he began to laugh. He laughed so hard he fell to his knees, the champagne bottle clinking on the floor as he set it down. Draco looked at him suspiciously.

"Potter, stop that," he said.

Harry looked up at him, and Draco was shocked to see tears running down Harry's cheeks. Harry stopped laughing and was silently shaking on the floor. Draco didn't think Harry was laughing anymore, but he didn't trust Harry not to hex him, so he stayed behind the counter.

"How did you get out?" Harry asked after some time.

Draco shrugged, deciding to be honest. "You didn't shut the door."

Harry groaned, getting to his feet. Draco eyed the plate of food and the bottle of champagne, and Harry caught his eye.

"The food's for you; the champagne's for me. Why didn't you leave?"

Draco shrugged and pulled open a drawer for a fork. Harry didn't press the issue and Draco handed him a corkscrew.

"No, not like that, Potter," he said, taking the corkscrew and bottle from Harry's hands. "You'll

destroy the cork like that. Do it like ... *this*." He pulled the cork out of the bottle and smelled it.

"Get some glasses," Harry sighed, sitting down at the counter.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I thought the champagne was for you," he said, but he pulled out two glasses. "Not quite champagne flutes," he said, looking down at the mugs.

Harry poured two cups and the two of them sat in silence, drinking and eating.

Harry looked sideways at Draco. "So you didn't leave," he said.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Obviously, Potter."

Harry nodded and took another sip. "I guess we don't need to keep you locked up so much," he said, and Draco nodded.

"What happened at the wedding?" asked Draco, and Harry's face tightened.

"Fenrir Greyback has Remus Lupin," he said dully.

Draco nearly said something which he was sure would have gotten him locked up in room again, but he bit his tongue instead. "Don't suppose you know where Lupin and Greyback are, do you?" asked Harry hopefully.

Draco shook his head, and Harry sighed. He poured himself another glass and raised it. "To Remus," he said softly.

Draco didn't raise his glass, but he didn't think Potter expected him to. Silently, however, he toasted to the hope that Greyback would die soon and painfully. He might not like Lupin, but Greyback was the werewolf Draco hated.

"Is that my broom?" asked Harry.

Draco nodded. "Yeah."

Harry, who was beginning to feel pleasantly buzzed, looked thoughtfully at it. "I've never flown inside a house," he said.

"It's fun," said Draco, and Harry nodded. Draco didn't know what it would be like when Granger and the Weasel got back, but for now he was going to enjoy taking turns on the Firebolt.

## Chapter 12

"R-re ... *Reparo!*" Harry snorted, flicking his wand at the broken lamp.

Draco hovered above the coffee table, snickering. "You suck, Potter," he crowed. "What?" he taunted. "Can't hold your locker ... liker ... champagne?"

Harry hiccupped. "Ha! You can say champion but you can't say li ... " he hiccupped again, and Draco cackled above him, doing laps around the room.

Harry watched him, frowning and swaying on his feet. "Stop it. 'M dizzy," he slurred, his cheeks flushed and his glasses slipping down his nose.

Draco laughed, and Harry thought it was a nice sound. "I want a turn," he said, reaching up for the broom, even though it was feet out of his reach.

Draco made a crash landing on the couch, sending cushions flying, and Harry stumbled towards him. He tripped over one of the cushions and fell on top of Draco with a loud "*oomph*," and his glasses fell between the cushions behind Draco.

"Gerroff!" Draco grunted.

"My glasses ... " Harry panted, worming one of his hands underneath Draco. He wiggled his hips, trying to slide further up Draco's body to get his hand further underneath the cushion. He hoped his glasses hadn't been crushed.

"Wait," said Draco, squirming underneath Harry as he tried to wriggle his arm free. "Hang on ... I think I've got them ... " He dragged his hand out from under the cushions, Harry's glasses dangling from his fingers.

Harry tried to pull his hand free from underneath Draco but couldn't.

"Put them on ... no, me, not you," he said, slightly out of breath. He took in a deep breath and smelled coconuts as he lowered his head so that Draco could push the frames onto his face. He felt Draco's fingers skim over his cheek and through his hair, and he shivered.

"Potter?" Draco asked, and the smell of coconuts whispered under the champagne on Draco's breath.

Harry blinked down at him, feeling the frames slip down his nose as he did. "You're not Ginny," he said, lowering his head even more as though to make sure that Draco wasn't her.

"No, I'm not," Draco said. He stared up at Harry, who looked both confused and carefree.

"That's good," Harry whispered, and he tilted his head at an angle and closed his eyes, lowering his head until his lips were centimeters above Draco's.

*"Harry!"*

Harry jerked and nearly hit Draco in the nose with his head when he looked over his shoulder at his friends. He didn't think they could look more surprised, and he disentangled himself from Malfoy and fell to the floor.

"Hermermony!" he cried, beaming at her even as he ran into the coffee table.

"What ... " Hermione squawked, staring at them in disbelief. "Harry, are you *drunk*?"

Ron picked up the empty champagne bottle, holding it upside-down, and Hermione sputtered. "Malfoy, are *you* drunk?"

"Nonono, Hermy," Harry said, waving his arms frantically. "He's can hold his locker."

Hermione and Ron looked as though they couldn't decide what was worse: Harry getting drunk with a Death Eater or that said Death Eater was out of his room.

Ron looked betrayed, and Harry hurried to explain. "I didn't shut his door all the way this morning," he began, and Hermione gasped. "And when I came back with his food after the wedding he was fixing the oven and then ... "

"What?" Ron asked, staring at Draco with a look of surprise on his face.

Harry nodded. "And then we drank a bottle of champagne and went flying. But he didn't leave," he reminded them, frowning at the coffee table as though it were intentionally getting in his way. "Move," he grunted.

*"Sobratium ... Sobratium,"* Hermione said, pointing her wand angrily at Harry and Draco.

Harry felt as though he had fallen in a pool of freezing water and he shivered as his drunken high ebbed. "Fuck," he stuttered, rubbing his arms, and he looked over to see Malfoy glaring at

Hermione.

"Well, that was an experience," Harry said lightly. "Never been drunk before." He grinned at Ron, but Ron didn't smile back. "What?" Harry asked defensively.

"*You forgot to lock his door?*" Hermione said shrilly, her face flushed with color.

"He didn't go anywhere," Harry snapped, wishing he were drunk again.

"That's because he had nowhere to go, Harry," Hermione said in a hard voice. "If he knew anything, he would have been out that door the moment we'd gone."

"But he doesn't know anything valuable," he said. He took a deep breath, knowing they weren't going to like what he said next. "I think we should let him out more."

Ron's bark of laughter sounded like a gunshot, and Harry tensed. If only they hadn't come back when he and Malfoy had been fooling around, he thought to himself, as Ron glared at him. He knew Ron had been trying to warm to the idea that Malfoy was going to be with them until the end, but he hadn't quite gotten over the feeling that Harry was being too soft on Malfoy.

"Harry, he's a Death Eater ... I understand keeping him here with us ... but letting him roam about like Crookshanks or something is out of the question," Ron spat, his face flooding with color.

Hermione nodded firmly and Harry glared at both of them. "I wouldn't let him 'roam about.' One of us would be with him. It's just miserable being locked in a room every day," he said angrily. "Look, I don't think we're all going to become great pals, or that he's going to change sides, but while he's here we might as well make it bearable. Hermione, you're getting sick of me never eating with you two, and I'm getting sick of being the one on guard duty most of the time."

"You're the one who wanted him to stay," Ron pointed out, but he looked calmer than he had when he'd first come through the door.

"He has to stay," Harry reminded him, struggling to keep the temper out of his voice. Ron was his most likely ally as Ron had rescued him after the Dursleys had locked him up in his room after Dobby dropped the pudding on Uncle Vernon's client. "He's pretty good at indoor Quidditch," he added casually.

"Ron!" Hermione said sharply as though she thought Ron were weakening. Ron shrugged.

"If one of us is with him ... " he trailed off, and Hermione's eyes bugged.

"I can't believe you're even thinking about it," she cried. "There are knives in the drawers that he could sneak into his pocket and stab us when we're sleeping! He could find out more about the Horcruxes!"

"He already knows what they are," Harry said. "And he knows that Voldemort's made some ... "

"Harry!" shrieked Hermione, looking outraged, but Harry plowed on.

"And he knows that we're looking for them and that we want that kept a secret," he continued, and Hermione looked so angry that her face had bleached of color.

"You're the one who said that he was a threat!" she said angrily.

"He is, but this isn't bloody Azkaban, Hermione," Harry said, running his hands through his hair. "If we keep him locked up we'll turn him into another Sirius, and look at how well *that* went," he said bitterly.

Hermione looked furious that Harry was comparing Sirius to a Death Eater, and violent red sparks shot out of her wand and smoldered on the carpet. "Sirius was innocent!"

Harry shrugged. "Innocent and guilty are relative terms, I think," he said quietly. Ron looked at him, frowning, and Hermione clearly thought that Draco had used a Confundus Charm on him.

"They are not," she said through clenched teeth. "Don't trivialize right and wrong just so you can have a Quidditch player."

"I'm not!" Harry said sharply. "Look, I'm not saying that Malfoy isn't guilty or that Sirius wasn't innocent. I'm saying that if you keep someone locked up like how we're keeping him, he's bound to go mental on us. Dumbledore gave him a shot at changing sides ... "

"Which he refused!" Hermione said loudly, but Harry continued on as though he hadn't been interrupted. He doubted that she would appreciate the inch that Malfoy had lowered his wand.

"... and Malfoy had the chance to run away today but he didn't. I know he doesn't know anything really valuable," he said quickly when Hermione opened her mouth. "But the fact that he knows that we know about the Horcruxes would give him some leverage with Voldemort."

Harry looked at Draco, who was holding the Firebolt in front of him. Draco nodded slowly. It

would have given him *some* leverage ... the Dark Lord might have left him alive after he had killed his parents, which wasn't good enough leverage.

He stayed silent while Harry and Hermione argued about letting him out, and he caught Weasley's eye. Ron was looking at him critically but not cruelly, and Draco tallied an imaginary scoreboard in his favor. The prospect of spending more mind-numbing hours staring at the same four walls made him not sneer at Ron, and he promised that he would call Potter's friend Weasel only in his head or to Lockhart.

"We should have him make an Unbreakable Vow," said Hermione in a high, breathy voice after Harry refused point blank to lock Malfoy up in his room all day again. "I've read about them ... I know how to be the Binder."

Draco froze. An Unbreakable Vow? He couldn't do it. He didn't kid himself for a moment that Potter didn't think he'd try to escape the moment he got any valuable information. How could he save his family without that information? The Dark Lord had trapped him, cornering him so that his only exit was one carefully designed by the Dark Lord himself ... there was no way for Draco to save his family without betraying Potter. He would never make an Unbreakable Vow.

Harry was staring at Hermione as though he had never seen her before. "So you would force him to either kill himself or his family?" he asked quietly, and Draco's eyes widened.

"What? No, of course not," Hermione said, sounding alarmed. "He wouldn't have to die if he kept his side of the Vow."

Harry clenched his hands into fists, furious at how blind Hermione was being. "Why do you think he was trying to kill Dumbledore?" Harry demanded. "Why do you think he's here to spy on me? Because Voldemort will kill him and his family if he didn't."

Hermione looked on the verge of tears as she said, "But if it's us or them, for the greater good Harry ... you at least have to make it. And Lucius Malfoy has done terrible things ... "

"And what about Mrs. Malfoy and Draco?" he demanded. "What have they ever really done?"

Hermione looked stunned. "What has Malfoy done?" she asked, her voice shrill. "He's nearly killed three people, Ron included! I would think that would constitute as ... "

"Dumbledore said he hadn't done any real damage," Harry said coldly. He knew what Hermione was thinking, what she was feeling. He had thought of putting Malfoy under an Unbreakable Vow, but the fact that someone would die if they broke their word was always what stopped



Harry from ever suggesting the idea. He would rather have to watch his back around Malfoy than force him into the position of having to choose between murder and death ... the position Harry himself was in because of the prophecy. Dumbledore was right ... taking a life wasn't easy.

Harry was under no illusions when it came to Mrs. Malfoy, but one thing he was sure about was that she loved her son. At the lengths Malfoy had gone to keep his parents alive, he obviously loved his parents. Harry hated the entire family, but he couldn't bring himself to justify their deaths for the greater good when he didn't think their deaths would change the balance of good and evil.

"If you're in such a hurry to kill people, you make the Unbreakable Vow," he said coldly. Hermione flinched, and Harry instantly regretted lashing out at her. He knew she was only trying to help, but she was bartering safety with lives, and Harry had never really been safe in his whole life.

"I don't think that we should do an Unbreakable Vow," Ron said, speaking for the first time. "I hate the git, but I don't want to kill him. And his mum seems nice enough for a snotty pureblood, and she's never been accused of anything." Ron shrugged. "If his dad dies ... well, he deserves it."

Draco stiffened at the hatred that crawled into Ron's voice when he talked about Lucius.

Angry and fearful tears raced down Hermione's cheeks, and Harry felt his heart twist painfully. He seemed to have a knack for making girls cry.

"So you're essentially saying that we should give Malfoy the opportunity to kill us in order for him to save his parents, who are Death Eaters," she said, her voice shaking.

Harry sighed. Of course she would come to that interpretation, and he wished he were better at expressing himself. He looked at Ron, and Ron's ears turned bright red, but he seemed to be thinking something.

"What if we got his family?" he suggested.

Harry tilted his head back. He hadn't thought of it like that, but what Ron was suggesting would solve many of their problems. It would also create many new ones, but he didn't want to think about that.

He turned to Malfoy, who looked shocked. Harry didn't blame him. He had never thought he'd

hear Ron proposing a rescue mission for the Malfoy family.

"Would your parents change sides? If we could protect them? Would you?" Harry asked.

Draco didn't know what to say. If it had only been him, he would have changed sides in a minute, but it wasn't only his life that was at stake. The Dark Lord required lifelong service, and no Death Eater who had run away ever truly escaped. Regulus Black had lived for three days, his father had told him, after he had turned his back on the Dark Lord. Karkaroff had lasted a year, and the other Death Eaters who had tried to escape fell somewhere between the two men. Draco had the advantage of already being in enemy hands. It wouldn't be unbelievable for Potter to have killed him in revenge for Dumbledore, and just as Dumbledore had said, Potter could hide him. But Draco's heart sank when he thought about his parents. The Dark Lord would kill them in retribution.

Even if he decided that Potter could keep them all alive, how would he rescue his parents? His mother was under the same roof as the Dark Lord, and his father was in Azkaban. Potter may have once been able to handle Dementors, but he couldn't any longer. If Potter couldn't even handle a Boggart there was no way that he could break Lucius out of a prison where hundreds of Dementors were.

There was also, of course, the issue of what would happen to his family if they had been 'rescued.' He didn't think his father would mind being locked up in a room as long as there weren't Dementors, but Draco didn't know what he could expect from his mother. Would Potter and his friends turn his family over to the Order? He doubted that Potter would turn them over to the Ministry, but he wondered what the Order would do to his mother and father.

"Malfoy?"

"I don't know," he admitted finally. The three Gryffindors looked down at him, and Draco thought that Harry looked disappointed. Why Potter was making such an effort to make him comfortable, even reasonably happy, was a mystery to him.

"Tell us your answer in the morning," said Hermione in a constricted voice. She seemed to have resigned herself to the fact that the rescue mission was her best assurance that Malfoy wouldn't try and kill them. Draco wasn't sure what she would do if he decided that his parents' chances of surviving the war were better on the Dark Lord's side.

Draco looked at Harry, but Harry was watching Hermione with a miserable face and followed her out of the room.

"Hermione, I'm sorry," he said quietly. Hermione stopped ahead of him, and Harry saw her wipe

her eyes with the sleeve of her dress robes.

"No you're not," she said, but there was nothing accusatory in her voice.

Harry didn't say anything. "No, I'm not sorry about not going along with you, but I am sorry that it's coming between us."

She didn't turn around, but she shrugged her shoulders. "Lupin's funeral is next week."

Harry bowed his head and listened to Hermione's footsteps until she disappeared into her own room. She must have Silenced and might have even Imperturbed her room, because Harry didn't hear a sound from her. He pushed the door to his room open.

"Go," he said tightly to Lockhart.

Lockhart glanced at him but ignored him. Harry clenched his teeth. "You have two seconds," he growled, "before I owl Rita Skeeter and tell her to do a special on you."

Lockhart hurried out of his portrait, and Harry lay back on his bed, memories of Lupin swimming behind his closed eyelids. He fisted the sheets in his hand and breathed roughly through clenched teeth.

"Damn it," he choked, staring up at the blurry ceiling.

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Neither Potter nor Granger had left their rooms to eat dinner, and so they missed the first meal cooked in the oven, which consisted of burnt garlic bread and hard potatoes.

Ron grimaced as he scraped the burnt part off his slice of garlic bread. "My brother got married today."

Draco's lip twitched, wanting to sneer at Weasley's attempt at conversation, but he remembered that he needed Weasley on his side. He shoved a steaming bite of potato into his mouth and almost choked as it burned his throat.

"Fleur's dad was about to read a speech, but Bellatrix Lestrange sent a Howler."

Draco's fork froze halfway to his mouth. Potter had failed to mention this when he told him about Lupin. He reached for the salt and began shaking it onto his potato.

"She's the one who told us that Fenrir Greyback has Lupin," Ron said quietly.  
"Everyone thinks he's dead by now."

Draco stared at Weasley, horrific memories of the battle at Hogwarts playing in his head. It had been Bill he had stepped over when he had run up to face Dumbledore. And when he and Snape were running through Hogwarts, trying to get beyond the school's boundaries to Apparate, he had heard Fenrir's terrible panting behind him. He remembered his frenzied panic that Fenrir was after him, and it made him sick to recall the desperation that drove him across the school grounds.

"Malfoy!" Ron said sharply, and Draco looked up. Ron was staring pointedly at Draco's potato, which had a small dune of salt piled on top of it.

Draco pushed his plate away from him and wished he were back in his room. He wanted to shower and crawl into bed with a bottle of scotch or Dreamless Sleep Potion. Both knocked him out and made the previous day pleasantly blurred around the edges.

He still had to think about what he was going to tell Potter about the rescue mission. If only there was some way to ask his mother if she would trade everything for freedom from the Dark Lord. She wouldn't be truly free, of course. He thought bitterly about Potter having the say so on what would happen to the Malfoys, and clenched his fork.

"I'm going to bed," he said shortly, standing up. Ron looked somewhat disappointed that he'd have to leave his dinner to take Malfoy up to his room, but he sighed and threw his napkin onto the table.

"Well, come on," he grumbled, waiting for Draco to walk ahead of him.

Why couldn't Potter have finished the Dark Lord off when he was a baby, he thought angrily. That would have made his life a lot less complicated than it was now. He wouldn't have to worry about things that no proper seventeen year old should have to worry about. He wanted to go back to Hogwarts, to wake up and have see a pile of books on his bed, to be telling the Slytherins that Dumbledore was a barmy old codger ...

He scowled. Well this was his life now ... Potter, Granger and Weasley and Lockhart topped off by the Dark Lord and Snape. He hadn't been outside in a week, and he wished Potter had bought a tent with a greenhouse.

Weasley left after he locked Draco back in his room, and as soon as the door was shut, Lockhart lost it.

"YOU IDIOT!" he screamed, his normally smooth hair messy and his face bright red.

Draco looked coolly at him. "Be quiet," he said. "Or I'll turn your portrait around."

Lockhart swelled with anger, and Draco watched curiously. Lockhart looked like a bullfrog that was about to burst, and, feeling ruthless, Draco said in a casual voice, "Potter told me to tell you that it'll be in the Prophet tomorrow."

Lockhart made a sound like a water-pipe bursting. "I HATE YOU!" he screamed, looking savage.

Lockhart's unhappiness filled Draco with a kind of sharp satisfaction. "Life's a bitch and then you die," Draco snapped, enjoying having someone to rage against.

Lockhart's eyes were glossed with tears. "*You're a bitch*," he hissed.

Draco smiled coldly. "I'm all male, mate," he said, lying down on his bed. Lockhart was silent, and Draco looked at him from beneath his lashes. Lockhart's head was bowed and he looked like he was torn.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Merlin, Lockhart, I'm lying. That's what not telling the truth is called," he sighed.

Just as he thought it would, Lockhart's head snapped up. "What?" Lockhart asked, his voice cracking.

Draco sneered at him. "Potter and I played Quidditch and drank champagne," he said honestly. "He didn't seem all that upset about me being out to be honest."

Lockhart narrowed his eyes at him. "You're lying," he accused.

Draco had about had it with Lockhart's idiocy. "Think about it," he demanded. "What good would it do me to get you in trouble with Potter?" He looked at Lockhart in disgust and shook his head. "Honestly, I miss Crabbe and Goyle. At least they never questioned."

But that wasn't true. For five years they never questioned what he'd told them to do, but last year they had. He thought maybe it was because he was turning them into girls on a regular basis, but he thought they were making a big deal out of it. He only asked for fifty minutes of their time. They could spend the last ten minutes holed up in a broom cupboard exploring their girl body with their fingers. He thought that maybe Crabbe had figured that out, because he hadn't complained the last time Draco told him he needed a lookout.

"Are you telling the truth?" Lockhart asked, hope lancing his voice.

"Yes," he sighed. He looked sideways at Lockhart. "Although maybe I should tell him that you've been sneaking off to go have sex with another portrait."

Lockhart spluttered. "But I haven't!" he cried.

Draco shrugged. "Well you've been really rude to me ... maybe I could benefit from Potter burning your portrait after hitting you with a Freezing Charm.

The color drained out of Lockhart's face, and he swallowed. "Come on, Draco!" he said winningly, smiling at him. "We've bonded, haven't we? If Potter gets another portrait you're going to have to train him how you like him to sleep, and remember what a bother that was?"

Draco pretended to wrestle with the idea. "I don't know ... " he said, sounding unsure, and Lockhart fumbled for a reply. "Maybe ... " Draco said loudly, and cutting off Lockhart before he could get in full steam. An idea had hit him. He knew how he could get his mother's input on this decision.

Lockhart snapped his mouth closed and looked eagerly at him. Draco hid his smile by pretending to rub his jaw. "Maybe if you do me a favor we can work something out between us."

Lockhart looked instantly wary. "What kind of favor?" he asked sharply.

Draco was impressed. He had expected Lockhart to agree right away.

"It's nothing strenuous," he said. "It's just a note I want you to deliver. Get pen and paper," he said.

Lockhart shook his head. "The painter was a minimalist," he said bitterly. "There's nothing in here but myself ... not even a bed or a chair."

Draco nodded, distracted by the workings in his mind. This rather threw a wrench in his scheme, but Draco had become a proficient at working around huge holes in his plans. When the Dark Lord had told him to kill Dumbledore, had he offered any advice? Of course not. Draco had figured it all out on his own, even though the backbone of his plan took a year to fix. He remembered the day he had successfully vanished himself into the Vanishing Cabinet at Borgin and Burke's.

"You could always take the message in blood," he joked, and Lockhart shuddered. Draco forgot that Lockhart was a Hufflepuff. They were a squeamish lot.

"I want you to memorize what I'm about to tell you, okay?" he said, thinking of what to say. "And then you're going to tell the portrait of my grandfather at the Ministry of Magic, and ... "

"Absolutely not!" Lockhart hissed, looking angry.

"Yes you will," Draco said coldly. "Either you do this or Potter'll make good on his threats." He smiled viciously at Lockhart. "He likes me better, remember?"

Lockhart's eyes fluttered closed. "What's the message?" he asked wearily.

Draco grinned for a moment, feeling his cheek muscles strain against the unfamiliar expression. "Tell him this: The artist of the lovely snap dragon flower pots in the garden wants to know if you'd like another pair in your new home," he said in French.

Lockhart's eyes bugged. "J'e what?" he demanded.

Draco frowned. "Don't you speak French?" he asked, disappointment already welling up inside of him.

"No," said Lockhart. He saw Draco's dark look and he hurried to add, "Make it shorter."

Draco exhaled loudly. He had liked his cryptic code. The artist of the pots had of course been Potter, and the mention of the dragon was to indicate himself, and the new home meant an escape. He didn't know if he could do much better than that.

"Alright ... how about this ... " He cleared his throat, searching for the words. He had to make it a riddle or something that sounded innocuous if the message were ever intercepted. "I am buying pots, would you like one?"

Lockhart still looked flummoxed, and Draco felt impatience build inside. "Come on ... that's only eight words. Even you can do that."

"Oh yeah!" Lockhart said, sounding confident. "Say it one more time."

Draco repeated himself. "Again," Lockhart said, frowning.

Draco sighed. "Last time," he warned. "You better get it right."

Lockhart nodded when he was done. "Okay, what does it mean?"

Draco thought fast. "Uh ... it means that I'm fine and not to worry," he lied. Lockhart looked at him with narrowed eyes, and Draco struggled to keep his face blank. He hoped Lockhart wouldn't bungle the job.

"Can you get paper from the other portrait?" he asked suddenly. "Wouldn't he have some for autographs or something?"

Lockhart frowned. "He might, but he's not there. Potter sent him away."

"Well, go get him!"

Lockhart shook his head. "And leave you to go break out again?" he demanded. "I'm only barely relaying the message for you, Malfoy. I'm not going to go searching in every portrait for him. Where is your grandfather at the Ministry anyway?" he asked.

"In the Atrium," Draco said. Lockhart nodded and repeated his memorized phrase to himself. Draco flinched at the butchered pronunciation and hoped his grandfather would understand.

"I suppose I'd better go now, while everyone's asleep," said Lockhart, sounding very reluctant.

Draco nodded. "He's the only Malfoy in the Atrium, so you'll find him. Wait for his reply."

Lockhart looked up sharply. "You didn't say there was going to be a reply," he said accusingly.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I have to make sure that you delivered the message, don't I? You'll be fine. There's a humungous chair in his portrait that you can hide behind if you must."

Lockhart nodded and walked out of his frame. As soon as he was gone, Draco let out a breath of air he hadn't known he'd been holding. If this worked he would know what to do, and if it didn't, he'd make a decision in the morning.

His stomach growled loudly, and he found himself missing the sandwich that Potter would have normally brought for him by now: wheat bread, mustard on one side, turkey, lettuce and tomato, and a tall glass of grapefruit juice.

He sat down on his bed and faced the portrait. He'd just have to wait it out. He closed his eyes, bowing his head and thought about what they could do if his mother said yes. He had no idea how they would get her out of the Manor without the Dark Lord noticing, and she had been forbidden to leave the house except for scheduled appearances. He rubbed his eyes,



exhausted, and decided to lie down and watch the stars.

He stared unfocused at their twinkling points and blinked slowly. Exhaustion suffused his limbs, and he closed his eyes. His bed felt comfortable and the pillow was soft beneath his head. His breathing slowed, but he struggled to stay awake. He had to stay awake for Lockhart's message

...

"Wake up, Malfoy."

Draco's eyes flew open, and his heart thudded frantically in his chest. He looked at Lockhart, but he was sleeping in his portrait, leaning against the frame. Draco looked to the other side of him. Potter was standing above him, holding breakfast in his hands.

"So what's your decision?" Potter asked, handing him his juice.

Draco stalled. "Can't I wake up and eat first?" he said irritably, stealing another look at Lockhart. This time, Lockhart gave the barest of nods, but Draco couldn't be sure if that was from sleeping or if he had received Narcissa's answer.

He ate slowly. He hadn't eaten since early yesterday afternoon, but nerves turned the food to sawdust in his mouth. Had his mother said yes? Did Lockhart bungle the message and end up saying something completely different to his grandfather? What if he were wrong? What if Narcissa didn't want to be rescued by the Order?

"If I say yes, how would the Order rescue my mum and dad?" he asked curiously.

Harry looked up. "The Order? They're not going to do it; we four would be."

Draco stared at him. He hadn't known that. Would his mother still want to be rescued if she knew that it would be four teenagers rescuing her rather than the Order of the Phoenix? He didn't know, and he thought about asking Potter to give him more time.

But then he caught Lockhart's eye, and the portrait nodded. Draco sighed. 'Okay,' he said finally.

Harry looked up. "You mean it?" he asked warily.

Draco nodded. He was only on the Dark Lord's side to keep his family alive. If Potter could keep his family alive, he would switch sides.

Harry jumped to his feet, sending eggs and toast flying across the floor. "Let's go tell Ron and Hermione," he said, his voice tight with excitement.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Let's?" he repeated. "As in you and me?"

"No, Lockhart," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Yes you, come on."

Draco shook his head. "Not before I shower," he said firmly. Harry opened his mouth to protest and Draco pinned him with a glare. "I didn't get to shower yesterday," he reminded Harry.

Harry muttered something to himself, and vanished the mess on the floor. "Alright then, let's go."

"What, you're going with me?" said Draco, indignant. "I thought you were going to let me out more."

"Not alone," Harry said.

"I think you just fancy seeing me starkers," Draco snapped. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Malfoy. Because my secret desire is to bugger you," he said scathingly. "Hurry up already!"

When Draco had showered and shaved and was in a fresh pair of Harry's clothes, he was ready to go into the living room and tell Ron and Hermione. Ron didn't look surprised by the news but Hermione went to her room after he told them.

Harry watched her leave and ran his hands through his hair, falling into the couch. "What's her problem?" he sighed.

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Malfoy, go in the kitchen," he ordered. Draco rolled his eyes, but left. From behind the counter he watched Ron bend his head forward and whisper to Harry.

"She thinks you're obsessed with Malfoy," Ron whispered. "That you're losing sight of the mission Dumbledore gave you so that you can play hero to Malfoy," he finished uncomfortably.

Harry's hands shook he was so angry. She thought he was losing sight of the mission? Dumbledore had still been headmaster of Hogwarts while he searched for the Horcruxes and information on Voldemort. Why couldn't Harry do more than one thing at once? Hadn't everyone pushed away his suspicions about Malfoy last year? Hadn't everyone told him he was getting obsessed and it was a waste of time? Wasn't Dumbledore dead now?

"So that's what she thinks," he said flatly. Ron didn't meet his eye. "And that's what you think, too, isn't it?"

Ron looked at him. "I think you're taking on more than you can handle," he said bluntly. "We're just barely handling Malfoy ... how do you think it'll be when his parents are here?"

"We'll manage," Harry said stubbornly. He wanted to go into Hermione's room and yell at her for being such an idiot. She was awful keen for Harry to take responsibility of the deaths of people ... for the greater good as she called it. But when he had used the Imperius Curses against Borgin she hadn't like that. And hadn't she said in the greenhouse that she didn't want him to use any more Unforgivables than were necessary? Well, killing someone by Unbreakable Vow made them just as dead as killing them with the Avada Kedavra, he thought angrily.

"We can always give his mum and dad to the Order," you know," Ron suggested suddenly.

Harry grunted. That thought had crossed his mind last night. The only snare in that was that the Order would find out that he had Malfoy, and he doubted that his clout as the Chosen One extended as far as telling Professor McGonagall to shove it when she came knocking on the door.

"But then they'd learn we have Malfoy," Ron said after a moment. He looked disappointed, and Harry could tell that his best friend had thought for a second that he'd found a way to patch things up between Harry and Hermione.

Harry didn't blame him for trying to smooth things over. This was his first fight with Hermione without Ron being on his side. Ron might be talking to him, but Harry knew that his best friend would have preferred if Snape had never turned Malfoy into a ferret and dropped him off at the Dursley's. Harry sighed. It wasn't as though he liked having Malfoy around, but he had just accepted it. He didn't know how he would react when he saw Lucius Malfoy. The last time he had seen him, Lucius had tried to kill him. But Dumbledore had offered protection for the Malfoys, and Harry had to agree that even decreasing the number of Voldemort supporters by three was an improvement. And while Draco didn't know anything valuable about Voldemort's long term plans, his father might.

"I'm going for a walk," Harry muttered, pushing off the couch. He saw Ron's eyes flicker to Malfoy, and Harry forced himself not to sneer. "Come on, Malfoy."

Draco tried not to appear eager about going outside, but he hadn't been outside of the tent in over a week now. He couldn't pretend that he wasn't looking forward to it.

"I need to get my trainers," Harry said, walking out of the room.

Weasley looked at him peculiarly as he followed Potter. Draco stared back at him, and he thought he saw something like guilt flicker across Weasley's face.

"I'll stay here with Weasley," Draco said, sitting down on the couch. Harry paused and turned around, looking at him questioningly. Draco shrugged and crossed his legs.

"Okay," said Harry, leaving the room.

Once he was sure that Harry was out of earshot, Draco turned to Ron. "What didn't you tell him?" he demanded quietly.

Ron shot him a filthy look that Draco rolled his eyes at. "You're hiding something from him," he said thoughtfully, looking at Weasley out of the corner of his eye. "Something that has to do with Granger, I think?" he asked slyly.

Ron's eyes widened fractionally, and Draco knew he was right. "Go on," he said, leaning back.

"Are you gay?"

Draco nearly fell sideways. "*What?*"

Weasley looked strained but determined. "Look, I'm okay with it and everything. My brother's gay. But if you hurt him I will kill you," he threatened in a low voice. "And you don't even want to think about what Hermione'll do to you."

Draco gaped at him. "Me and Potter?" he sputtered, shocked. "You're mad, Weasel. Pansy was my girlfriend, remember?"

Weasley shrugged. "Yeah, well, Harry was dating my sister, but he was obsessed with you last year, and it's not any different now. So if you hurt him I will kill you," he said seriously, and Draco knew that Ron wasn't making idle threats.

The conversation was so bizarre that Draco couldn't get properly angry about Weasley and Granger thinking he and Potter were together. "We're not together," Draco said as firmly as he could.

Ron didn't look convinced, and Draco opened his mouth again, but Harry's voice in the hallway cut him off.

"Let's go, Malfoy," he called.

Draco glared at Ron, still reeling. He gave Ron a look that clearly said this conversation was not over, before he joined Potter in the hallway.

"You okay?" Harry asked, frowning when he saw Draco.

Draco nodded curtly, breathing hard. "Let's just go," he said shortly.

Potter looked at him curiously one more time, but then opened the tent flap and indicated for Draco to go ahead of him. Draco looked at him curiously as he passed. Was Potter in love with him? He hated to admit it, but it would explain the lengths Potter was going to make him happy.

Potter gripped his arm when they left his room, and Draco jumped at the touch.

"You okay?" Potter whispered, bending close to Draco.

Draco nodded curtly. Potter was just making sure that he didn't Apparate ... but did he have to hold him that tightly? And why was he gripping him at the elbow like the way Draco's dad did with his mother when the streets were crowded? Was he being protective like his father had been? He seriously considered whether Potter might truly be in love with him.

"What's *wrong* with you?" Potter demanded.

"The toast," Draco muttered. "Too much jam," he lied.

"Oh ... " Potter said. "Sorry. Hermione made the toast today. I'll make your breakfast tomorrow," he said as they walked down the stairs. He motioned for silence as they passed the kitchen. Draco could see the front door, and he grew excited as he thought about being outside again.

"What's this?" Potter asked, bending down to pick up a bouquet of Lupin flowers that was on the front step.

"There's a card," Draco said, plucking a small white envelope from the flowers. Potter grabbed it from him before he could see it and quickly ripped it open.

He's at Greenwood.

An old friend.

Harry crumpled the note in his hand and turned to Draco. "What kind of flowers are these?" he demanded lowly, his voice taugth.

"Lupins," Draco said automatically. "Why ... oh," Draco said, his eyes wide as he stared at the flowers.

Harry was too distracted to reply. How long had the flowers been there, and who had sent them? He didn't event think about whether Lupin was still alive. He would worry about that when he got there, but he knew one thing: if Lupin was alive, he didn't have long to live.

## Chapter 13

"Ron! Hermione!" Harry yelled as he ran up the stairs. "Come quick!"

Uncle Vernon poked his head out of the living room door, looking angry. "What is the meaning of ... " he began. His eyes bugged when he saw Draco. "Not another one of you freaks!" he raged, his face flushing purple.

Harry ignored his uncle, and called Hermione's name again. He could hear Draco's feet thundering behind him and Uncle Vernon's angry bellowing, but he didn't care. Hermione would know where Greenwood was, and then they would rescue Lupin. Maybe he would know how to destroy the locket. He had been the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

He pushed his door open and heard the doorknob hit the wall hard. He distractedly hoped *Reparo* worked on walls; Aunt Petunia wouldn't like the hole underneath the light switch.

Ron and Hermione were standing by the window where a large tawny owl was perched on the window ledge, its leg stretched in front of him. "It's from Hogwarts," Ron said excitedly as he unwound the letter from the owl's leg.

Harry shook his head. "Never mind that, look what Malfoy and I found."

But Ron and Hermione were reading the letter. "He's back, Harry," Hermione said, sounding relieved. "Oh good, now the Order can tell him about poor Lupin."

"Will you listen to me?" Harry said, almost shouting. Hermione looked up at him, frowning.

"There's no need to shout," she said stiffly, and Harry remembered that she was angry with him.

Draco saw the way Ron was eyeing the flowers and then him, and he wanted to cross the room and strangle the idiot for thinking anything smutty about him and Potter.

"What's, uh, with the flowers, mate?" asked Ron in a deliberately friendly voice.

Harry held up the flowers. "He's at Greenwood," he said. Hermione's eyes widened.

"You mean Lupin?" she asked. Harry nodded, and Ron let out a whoop of happiness.

"But how do you know?" asked Ron, looked flummoxed but still exuberant. Harry showed them the note and the flowers, but instead of looking convinced or even reassured, Hermione frowned.

"I don't think that we should trust this person," she said, not looking at either Ron or Harry but instead at Draco. Draco stared coolly back at her, but inside he was struggling to keep calm.

Had Lockhart said something to her? Had he told her about delivering the message to his grandfather? Draco remembered something about her having a crush on Lockhart in their second year; was she resenting that he manipulated him? If Granger could convince Potter that he was tricking them ... would Potter kill him? A month ago, Draco would have thought that the strongest hex Potter could have managed was a Stinging Hex. Now, however ...

"What?" demanded Harry, sounding angry, snapping Draco back to the present. "Why not? Look at the note again," he said, thrusting the card into her hands. "It says 'from an old friend' ... what kind of friend ... "

"I think it's a trap," she snapped. Harry made a disgusted sound, and Hermione glared at him. "No, think about it," she said. "Malfoy was by himself for hours yesterday. Who's to say that he didn't go back to Voldemort and tell him what he knew about the Horcruxes and Voldemort ordered him back here to find out more?"

"He didn't ... " Harry began angrily, but Hermione cut him off.

"And now someone leaves a message telling us where Lupin is? Even if Malfoy didn't leave yesterday, the note itself could be a trap like how the Department of Mysteries had been."

A heavy silence hung in the room for several seconds before Harry shrugged. "I have to try," he said.

"No you don't!" Ron said sharply. "I know you don't like the Order, mate, but they're not useless. Let them work it out."

Hermione nodded. "I think that we should show this to Professor McGonagall," she said firmly.

"Why? So she can say it's a trap?" said Harry bitterly.

"I have to know," Harry continued. Unexpectedly, he felt a lump rise in his throat and his eyes stung. He took deep breaths, trying to calm himself. It wasn't right for Lupin to have to go like this ... he had had such a hard life, and just when he and Tonks had gotten together ... Harry



clenched his jaw, trying to get a hold of himself.

What Hermione said made sense, and yet Harry's gut told him that it wasn't a trap. He didn't know where Greenwood was, and so he concentrated instead on who the old friend might be.

He didn't know that much about Lupin. Out of all the Marauders, he was the most mysterious, and in the years between the fall of Voldemort and Harry's third year, Harry had no idea what Lupin had been doing. The only friends of Lupin that he knew about were in the Order, but Harry couldn't see why one of them would deliver the note to Harry. It didn't make any sense, and, unconsciously, Harry began pacing the room.

Draco stared at Harry. Potter's lips were moving soundlessly as he thought to himself, and if the circumstances weren't so serious Draco might have found it funny. He looked at Ron and Hermione, but both of them were staring suspiciously at him, Granger looking positively foreboding, and so he returned to stare at Potter.

Abruptly, Potter stopped pacing. "It's Wormtail," he said softly to himself.

"What?" laughed Ron in disbelief. "Harry, c'mon, anyone who knows you knows that you would celebrate Wormtail being mauled by Greyback."

Harry shook his head. "No ... he's the old friend. He owes me a life debt," he said, thinking quickly. "Dumbledore said it creates a bond between wizards."

Ron frowned. "But why would he be trying to save Lupin? If he owes you, wouldn't he try to save you?" he pointed out.

Harry was silent for a moment as he thought. "My dad saved Snape's life, but I don't know if Snape ever tried to save my dad's," he said. "Snape tried to save mine during the Quidditch match first year." He shrugged. "Wormtail knows Lupin's important to me, so maybe he figures that by saving him he squares things between us."

Hermione didn't look convinced. "Then why didn't Wormtail try and save you at the Triwizard Tournament? You said he cut off his *hand* to revive Voldemort."

"But he did try to save me," Harry said, remembering the night vividly. "When Voldemort was talking about the three ingredients for the potions, he said that Wormtail wanted him to use any old enemy ... "

Ron and Hermione were silent, listening attentively. Harry never told them what had exactly

happened that night, and they had never asked him. Harry wondered if Sirius had told them anything while they were at Grimmauld Place. Harry closed his eyes, the hateful image of Wormtail's agonized face as he pierced the crook of his arm swimming behind his eyelids ... he could no more forget the feel of Wormtail's hand on him and the ghostly feeling of the missing digit than he could forget the scar on his forehead.

Hermione licked her lips, and her voice broke the spell that locked Harry in his memories. "But maybe he thinks he's fulfilled his part of the debt, Harry. No, wait ... " she said, when he opened his mouth to contradict her. "Snape tried to save you in first year, but he killed Dumbledore, who was your biggest support ... obviously he didn't feel indebted to you anymore."

Harry shook his head. "No, I mean, yes, I know that. But when I was running after him he could have killed me loads of times ... but all he did was block every spell I hit at him." He didn't mention the curse Snape had done that felt like lightning had sliced across his face, but he didn't think it mattered. Snape hadn't killed him.

"I thought you said that was because he said that You-Know-Who wanted to kill you," said Ron, frowning.

"He told that the Death Eater who was using the Cruciatus Curse on me," said Harry, frustrated that Ron was being so objective. They were wasting time: Lupin could be dying while they debated what was the cautious way to go about testing the validity of the note and flowers. But they were in a war ... they didn't have time to get into a theoretical discussion on the nature of life debts. "But maybe he was just trying to put the Death Eater off ... "

"No," Draco interrupted, and everyone looked at him, clearly surprised that he had spoken. He cleared his throat. "He was telling the truth. The Dark Lord won't let anyone else kill you," he said.

"Okay ... well, maybe he fulfilled his debt by saving me at the Quidditch match," Harry said stubbornly. "Quirrell said that Snape was muttering the countercurse to save me." He snapped his fingers, remembering something Dumbledore had told him a long time ago. "Even Dumbledore told me that he tried to save me to make things even between him and my dad."

Hermione didn't look convinced. "Harry, I don't doubt that it creates a bond between people, but Dumbledore didn't say it put them under a magical contract, and Wormtail's conscience is underdeveloped ... " she said.

Ron nodded, and Harry glared at both of them, furious with how logical they were being. It

wasn't as though Malfoy was being any help either, and he clenched his teeth, feeling exactly as he had last year when no one believed that Malfoy was a Death Eater.

"Look," he said flatly. "I'm going to Greenwood and I'm going to see for myself."

"You can't!" Hermione exploded. "You're the only one!" She looked at Malfoy before biting her lip, looking frustrated. "You can't go."

Draco looked at her curiously. This wasn't the first time she had started to say why Potter had to be kept safe, but she always remembered that hew as there and stopped herself. Was Potter really the Chosen One? Was he truly the one destined to kill the Dark Lord? Draco knew his father had been sent to the Department of Mysteries to get a prophecy regarding Potter, and he looked appraisingly at him.

Harry shrugged. "If Voldemort's the only one who's allowed to kill me then I should be fine," he said coldly.

His brand of logic clearly didn't settle well with anyone else in the room, but he didn't care. "I'm going to get my Invisibility Cloak," he muttered, pushing past them to get inside the tent.

Draco, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

"He's such an idiot!" Hermione exploded.

"You've only just realized?" Draco drawled.

It was a sign of Ron and Hermione's anxiety that they didn't even look at him for insulting Harry. Draco sighed. It would be just his luck to have changed sides just when Potter had decided to throw himself into a rescue mission that was bound to fail. Draco hadn't said anything, but privately he thought that Granger was right. He thought the note might have been from his aunt, she hated half-breeds, but he couldn't be sure; he hadn't seen the handwriting. He sighed. Maybe Lockhart would deliver another message for him ...

"Let me see the note," Ron said after several moments of tense silence. Hermione passed Ron the note, and as she did so Draco got a glimpse of an elegant H.

Draco frowned. Bellatrix had terrible handwriting ... pigeon scratch his mother had called it. Narcissa, on the other hand, had beautiful handwriting. She always handwrote invitations to balls at the Manor.

Draco held himself very still, but inside, his mind was racing. The flowers weren't from Bellatrix. She favored the dramatic and sensational ... cryptic messages that didn't give her any credit or worship the Dark Lord wasn't her style. Sneaky, subdued and very subtle, however, was Narcissa's area of expertise. Draco nearly laughed out loud to think how close Granger had been to thinking the note was from a Death Eater. For a fleeting moment, Draco worried that the note might be a trap. Handwriting Charms were obscure, but not difficult to perform. Crabbe and Goyle wouldn't have passed first year if Draco hadn't used them on occasion. Even if Narcissa did write the note, who knew that she was writing it? What if someone was forcing her to write to him? A worse thought filled Draco with a sick feeling, and he felt bile creep up his throat. What if Narcissa was getting back at him for never telling her he loved her?

What drove the panic from his mind wasn't a cozy thought, but it was comforting: He was all she had left. Narcissa might be vengeful and vicious when it suited her, but she wasn't an idiot. They needed one another, and he didn't think she would have let him fall into a trap without warning him. He couldn't help but wonder though why his mum's first move after she had switched sides would be saving Lupin. His mother rarely explained herself, to him or anybody else. He would have to, much as he didn't want to, trust her. He just hoped that her reasons for saving Lupin weren't for any notion of the greater good ... Draco didn't care about that. He cared about staying alive.

Potter came out of the tent with his cloak in hand, and he wouldn't look at any of them. "I'm going," he said determinedly.

"I'm going with you," Draco said. The three Gryffindors stared at him in shock and he sneered at them. "If Potter dies then switching sides was pointless."

Potter frowned. "I won't die."

"I know. Because I'll be there," Draco drawled, sounding more confident and relaxed than he really felt. It was with some pleasure that he watched Granger's mouth open and close soundlessly, and Ron was shooting warning looks at him again. Honestly, when this was all over he was going to smash the Weasel's head into the wall for every look of death he had ever given him.

"How are we going to defend against werewolves?" Ron wondered aloud.

"You're coming?" Harry asked, and he didn't try to disguise the relief in his voice.

"Can we at least go to Hogwarts first and see what Dumbledore has to say?" Hermione said, sighing, but she smiled slightly when Ron hugged her, shouting, "All right, Hermione!"

"It would take too long. Lupin might be dying, Hermione," Harry pointed out.

Hermione bit her lip. "This is such a bad idea," she fretted. "We don't know who sent the note ... "

Draco schooled his features into an expression of curiosity ... it wouldn't do for them to really think that he knew who sent the flowers. They might be on the same side, but Draco's first priority was doing what it took to keep him and his family alive. If Potter was the means to doing that, then he would keep Potter alive, too.

" ... and we don't know anything about defeating werewolves except the essay I wrote for Snape," she continued, looking more distressed. "Not to mention that this is probably a trap and we'll be outnumbered by Death Eaters and werewolves."

"Stop being so optimistic, Hermione," Harry said sarcastically. "If you don't want to come then stay here."

"Well I'm sorry!" Hermione cried, looking on the verge of tears. "But I think this is a really bad idea, and Lupin wouldn't want us to put ourselves in danger like this. And how are we all going to fit under the cloak?" Her voice had risen until she was almost screaming, and Draco winced, reminded all too much of Pansy.

"Look, if there's any trouble we'll just Apparate," said Ron. He turned to Harry. "But I think she's right, mate. We should see what Dumbledore has to say. It won't do Lupin much good if we find him but don't know how to get rid of the werewolves."

"It's not the full moon, so can't we just stun them?" Draco asked, wanting desperately to avoid seeing Dumbledore.

Hermione blinked. "I'd forgotten ... but I think we should at least tell Dumbledore where we're going."

Draco's heart sank, and he was seized by a sudden urge to run out of the house and even try Apparating again. Anything, even the agony of being Splinched, was better than the prospect of seeing Dumbledore again. It didn't matter that Dumbledore was a portrait; his blue eyes had been immortalized on canvas and would, Draco knew, pierce just as knowingly as they did when the man had been alive.

"What're we gonna do with Malfoy?" asked Ron. All three looked at them, and when Granger drew her wand he tensed. He had to clench his teeth to keep from laughing in hysteria when he

saw Potter surreptitiously drawing his wand and pointing it at the Mudblood. Potter was in love with him, was his last thought before he was engulfed in purple smoke and felt his body twist in a way that should have been unfamiliar but wasn't.

"Cool!" Ron exclaimed, squatting down on the carpet. "Now we can get him into Hogwarts."

Draco stumbled to his feet but swayed, dizzy. His claws caught in the carpet, and he squeaked in misery.

"Looks like I'll get to use those expensive toys after all," Potter said, a smile in his voice. Draco felt himself being lifted up, and soon Potter's face was level with his.

"Hi, Draco," he said, smirking.

Harry couldn't see it, but over his shoulder, Ron and Hermione give each other significant looks. Draco lashed his tail, slapping it against Potter's wrist. He hated Gryffindors.

--

Vernon Dursley had turned purple when he saw the three of them trooping down the stairs and into the backyard. It hadn't helped that there had been a bit of a fiasco when Draco had nearly fallen out of Harry's pocket, and Vernon had tried to wrestle him from Harry's grip to give him back to Dudley. He stopped only after Draco bit him in the flesh between thumb and pointer finger.

They Apparated just outside of the gates of Hogwarts, but Draco couldn't appreciate the grounds. He stared at Potter's shoes, watching the grass fold under his feet. He didn't want to remember anything about the night he'd let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, and when memories of running across the grounds began to assail him, he counted Potter's footsteps.

He rubbed his paw against his throat ... he wasn't wearing robes, but as they walked, he could feel phantom hands yanking him by the scruff of the neck, nearly choking him with his collar. He knew it was only the heat of the day, but when he closed his eyes he remembered the flames dancing on Hagrid's house ... the heat and the roar surrounding him as he retched. The air reeked of magic and of latent power waiting to be tapped. He shuddered: he couldn't stand it, and he began to claw out of Potter's pocket.

Potter's hands came up and caught him before he fell, and Draco forced his body into stillness. Potter put him back in the pocket, and Draco closed his eyes and resigned himself to his memories.

Harry had only noticed Malfoy was dangling from his pocket because he had remembered that he had the locket in his other pocket. Ever since Ron and Hermione had come back, Malfoy had been acting oddly around him, and more than once Harry had caught Malfoy looking at him when the other boy thought he wasn't looking. An absurd notion struck Harry, and he nearly laughed out loud at how ridiculously impossible it was. Of course Malfoy couldn't be looking at him like *that*. Malfoy was as straight as Harry was.

He wondered how McGonagall would react when he told her that they needed the office to themselves to talk to Dumbledore. He hoped Dumbledore knew of a way to destroy the Horcrux without any of them losing a hand or any other body part. And what would they do with Draco? Turning him into a ferret only got them through the obstacle of getting him into Hogwarts ... it didn't solve the problem of how to keep him from overhearing more than they wanted him to know.

Harry sighed. They would have to Stupefy him, he supposed.

As though she had been expecting them, Professor McGonagall was waiting by the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to her office.

"He would like to speak with you. Alone," she said, white lines appearing on the side of her nose, and her eyes flashed angrily. Harry had to remind himself that he was no longer a student of hers, or he was sure that he would have worried that Gryffindor was about to lose a serious number of house points.

"O-okay," Harry said, swallowing. He hadn't been expecting her to be in the hallway with them; he had been planning on Stupefying Malfoy before they had gone into the office.

Draco's heart slammed against his chest, and he felt a peculiar sort of burning pain when he saw Dumbledore's office. How many times last year had he tried to find a way in Dumbledore's quarters to kill him when he was asleep? He had never been in Dumbledore's office before, and he wanted nothing more than to slip out the door and down the revolving steps. Hundreds of portraits lined the walls, and a murmur went through them when they saw Potter and his friends.

"I see you've brought a friend," Dumbledore said when he saw Draco trying to hide in Harry's pocket.

Harry hesitated for a moment before he said, "He's really Draco Malfoy, and, uh, he's switched sides."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Well done, my boy," he said softly, and both Harry

and Draco got the distinct feeling that Dumbledore was talking to them and yet not to them. "I think, Ms. Granger, that it would be alright to Transfigure Mr. Malfoy so that he is ambulatory again."

Once again, purple smoke filled the general vicinity, and Draco found himself on all fours.

"Professor, Lupin's been taken by Greyback, but I got flowers at my house saying he's at Greenwood," Harry said.

Dumbledore's eyes flashed behind his gold spectacles. "Who sent the note?"

"It only said it was from an old friend," Hermione said, and she held up the note.

For several moments, Dumbledore didn't say anything. Harry was starting to get impatient. Lupin's life was on the line; they didn't have time to waste.

Dumbledore sighed very deeply, but he turned to Draco rather than Harry. "The best defense against a werewolf is, of course, silver. When I was working on alchemy with my dear friend Nicholas, we devised a spell that turned tree bark into silver ... not exactly what we were looking for, but it is, as Mrs. Cole would say, better than a rusty poker up one's nostrils."

Draco stared at him. Death had made Dumbledore even odder.

Dumbledore drew his wand and waved it in the air as though he were trailing after a rising note in a song. "Augrundra," he said, and a milky white spell shimmered in the wand's wake. "Unfortunately, the bark does not stay silver for long ... we never worked out the kinks of the spell, but it was a lot of fun."

Harry heard Ron sigh with relief. Harry couldn't deny that he was glad to have some sort of defense against the werewolves, but he was more concerned with actually getting to Greenwood. "Right. How do we get to Greenwood? Can we Apparate?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "As you've never been there, you'll have to take the Knight Bus to Greenwood, I'm afraid."

Harry nodded and was about to pivot on his heel for the door when Hermione spoke. "Sir, don't you think that we should tell the Order about Lupin?" she asked, not meeting Harry's eyes when he gaped at her.

Dumbledore shook his head, and Hermione sighed.



Ron cleared his throat, and Dumbledore turned to him, looking attentive. Ron flushed under the attention, and Harry knew all too well how it felt to have Dumbledore's undivided attention ... uncomfortable. "We found one, Professor," he said.

Dumbledore sat up very straight in his chair. "Which one?" he asked quickly.

"The locket," said Harry. He dangled the locket by its chain, and Dumbledore was very quiet as he stared at the locket. "It was at Grimmauld Place," said Harry. "Kreacher had it."

"Well done," Dumbledore said, smiling broadly at them. "I presume that you do not know how to destroy it?"

Harry shook his head.

"That is something we can concentrate on at another time," said Dumbledore. "I believe we have more pressing matters."

Throughout the entire meeting, Draco had stayed silent, not even looking at Dumbledore. Hearing his voice sent lancing pain through his body, and when he heard that it was time to go, he tried to be the first out the door.

"Malfoy!" said Hermione, sharply.

Draco turned in time to see the spell zooming toward him, and just before it hit him he tensed his muscles. Potter scooped him into his pocket again, and left the office.

McGonagall wasn't standing outside her office when they left. Nor did they find her on their way out of the castle and across the grounds. Outside the school gates, Hermione thrust out her wand arm.

A great *bang* sent them jumping back a few feet, and moments later a gaudy purple bus pulled up along side of them. A boy only a few years older than Harry stepped out of the bus, and Harry decided immediately that he didn't like him.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus. My name is Gregory Elpiks," he said, sounding very pompous.

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Harry said hurriedly. "We're going to Greenwood, and we want the cheapest fare," he said quickly when the Gregory opened his mouth, undoubtedly to sell them toothbrushes and hot chocolate.

"Certainly, sir," said Gregory crisply before his confident look faltered. "Greenwood, you say? I

... Let me check that we go there. I've never had a request for there before."

He disappeared inside the bus for a moment, but returned to announce that they could take them to Greenwood.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Draco boarded the Knight Bus quickly, and Harry chose a seat that seemed firmly attached to the side of the bus. Harry counted out the Sickles for each of them, and Gregory looked almost disappointed that Harry had given him exact change.

"Carry on, Ed," Gregory said commandingly. He turned to the four of them. "You mustn't be alarmed at what you might have read about the previous conductor's dealings with You-Know-Who ... we have taken all precautions against future scum from ever ... "

"Stan's no more a Death Eater than my ferret," Harry said angrily. Ron made a choking sound that sounded like badly muffled laughter, and Harry realized a moment too late that his ferret was really Malfoy. "And he wasn't scum. I thought he was brilliant."

Gregory looked patronizingly at Harry. "Yes, well, you're entitled to your opinion ... "

"Of course I am," Harry said coldly, liking the conductor even less. "I'm Harry Potter," he sneered. He had meant it as a joke, but Gregory's wide eyes and open mouth told Harry that Gregory hadn't known who he was.

Ron laughed openly this time, and Gregory flushed so darkly that Harry thought he would have given Uncle Vernon a challenge. Harry ignored him, wishing he had kept his mouth closed.

Gregory left to go talk with the driver, and after he had gone, Ron said, "Reminded me of Percy. Good for you, Harry."

Gregory wouldn't look Harry in the eye when they walked passed him to leave the bus at their stop, but Harry didn't care. Gregory had reminded him of Percy, too.

--

Greenwood was a tiny village in front of a forest filled with tall, dark trees. Small, worn looking houses the size of Hagrid's were spotted through the village, and as soon as they walked into the town, Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He gripped his wand tightly and made sure Draco was secure in his pocket.

The village was silent, and no smoke curled out of the chimneys. Harry got the feeling that no

one was at home. They walked deeper into the village until they had passed the very last house and had entered the forest.

Hermione and Ron walked very close together, and every so often, one of them would turn around. Harry swallowed, his mouth dry. He had a bad feeling about this place. It looked as though it had been abandoned, and yet Harry knew that there were people there---someone was watching them.

"What's that?" Ron asked, his voice sharp.

Harry froze, his wand drawn, and his heart hammering in his chest. He wished they had the Order with them. Safety in numbers seemed like a very good investment to him at the moment.

"I don't hear anything," Harry said, but just then Draco began to claw at his pocket, shredding the material with his claws in his panic. "I think Malfoy hears something though," he said grimly. "Hermione, change him back."

Hermione looked at him, her face white. "What?" she gasped.

Harry nodded. "Just do it," he said shortly, and then he heard it ... very faint drumming that was growing louder the deeper they walked into the forest. Hermione changed Malfoy back, and Malfoy grabbed Harry's arm, rooting him to the spot.

"Let's go," he said earnestly, his face pale.

Harry shook his arm free. "If you want to go, you go back alone," he said flatly.

Draco moaned, his eyes wide. He knew what was happening deeper in the forest. He had heard Greyback talk about them when he had been at the Manor last summer. There would be crude stone alter, wide enough for a man to be laid on top of, his arms stretched apart. And there would be a goblet and a knife, for slaying and drinking the blood of a traitor. He thought he was going to be sick.

"Let's at least make some of the silver bark," he pleaded.

"I think that's a good idea," Ron said, his voice an octave higher than normal. Harry nodded in agreement, and the four of them looked for the nearest tree. None of them wanted to leave the unit they had formed, and Harry wondered if all of them felt as though they were being watched.

It was Hermione who solved the problem. "Accio bark," she said softly, pointing her wand at

the bark on the ground. Strips of bark flew into her arms, and she waved her wand over them, casting the Silver Charm Dumbledore had taught them. Harry and Ron followed suit, and Draco quickly filled his pockets and arms with as much of the silver bark as he could carry.

They could clearly hear the drums now, and Harry kept an eye on Draco to make sure the Slytherin didn't try and bolt. Gritting his teeth, Harry led the way deeper into the forest, fighting to keep his head with every snapping twig or rustle in the trees.

Suddenly, he was being yanked to his side, silver bark spilling from his arm, and he would have fired a hex if he didn't know that it was Malfoy who was dragging behind a tree. He opened his mouth for an explanation, but Hermione's stark white face silenced him. He looked to where Ron was staring fixedly, and he almost retched when he saw.

Just as he had thought, Lupin was stretched across a rough slab of stone, his head hanging forward. Standing above him, with a bloodied knife, was Greyback. He growled something, and the werewolves watching the ceremony screamed in approbation.

"He said the Dark Lord was using us ... that we were his pawns!" roared Greyback. He held up something that flashed gold in the sunlight, and a murmur went through the assembled werewolves. Draco heard Potter inhale sharply, and Draco thought that had Potter only allowed them to turn back minutes before, they could have avoided this.

"What are we going to do?" Hermione whispered shakily.

They looked at Harry, but Harry was staring at the cup. It wasn't possible ...

"If we were the Dark Lord's expendable pawns, would he give us this? His most precious possession?" Greyback asked, turning around and holding the cup aloft. "As a sign of good faith?"

"Harry is that?" Ron asked, his eyes wide. Harry could only nod, barely daring to believe his eyes. Voldemort had given Greyback the Hufflepuff cup. The four of them stared in horror as Greyback pressed the cup against one of the many freely bleeding wounds on Lupin's body.

"Oh my God," Hermione whispered in shock. "He's filling it with his blood!" Greyback raised the cup as though he were toasting the other werewolves, and Harry knew that Greyback planned to drink Lupin's blood.

Fury pumped through Harry, and he wasn't even aware that he had left the shelter of the tree until he saw werewolves pointing at him. He heard Ron and Hermione and Draco crashing

through the forest from somewhere behind him, but he didn't turn around, his eyes fixed on Greyback.

"Put the cup down and leave," he said calmly.

Greyback threw his head back and laughed. "Harry Potter!" he cried, now toasting him. "To your imminent death," he said, before lowering the glass to his lips.

Harry did the only thing he could think of doing, and so he threw a fist-full of the bark at Greyback. There was a splashing sound, quickly followed by screams of agony, before a female werewolf pushed Harry down to the ground. His wand was knocked to the ground and out of his reach. She howled, though, when her hands grazed the silver bark, and she jumped away from Harry.

Two invisible hands yanked him from under the armpits and to his feet, leading him to where Lupin was strapped to the altar. Harry wondered who was under his Invisibility Cloak.

"You've got to heal him now or he'll die," Draco said, pushing Harry's wand back into his hand.

Harry stared at Lupin's back, hoping to see his back rise and fall. "I don't know how to heal him," Harry said, feeling panic bubble up inside of him. He wrenched his head over his shoulder. Ron and Hermione were battling the werewolves, hurling a dwindling supply of silver bark at them. The werewolves screamed in pain when it stuck to their skin, burning through it. Ron was down to his last piece, and three werewolves were advancing on him.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry cried, taking down one of the them before turning back to Lupin. "I don't know anything about healing!" he cried above Greyback's agonized screams. He watched the blood pour out Lupin's wounds helplessly.

A jet of red light burned past his ear, and Harry turned in time to see one of the werewolves tackle Malfoy, ripping the cloak off of the Slytherin. Draco stared up in horror at the werewolf, his body refusing to obey his screaming mind's orders to save himself. His mouth worked uselessly in terror when the werewolf lowered his bloodied teeth to Draco's neck.

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry roared, and the werewolf was thrown off of Draco into a tree, where he lay in a crumpled heap. Harry could hear Hermione's ragged voice as she screamed hexes at the werewolves, and he hurried to help her and Ron.

"*Stupefy!*" Harry cried, sending a jet of red light at another werewolf. Dust from the forest's floor was flying in the air, making him cough. Harry knew that they were fighting a losing battle.

"Apparate to the greenhouse!" he cried as he fought his way back to Lupin. "MALFOY!" he

yelled, only just remembering that Draco didn't have a wand.

"HELP!" Draco screamed, running towards Harry and away from a werewolf who was firing hexes at his back.

Harry dropped to his knees, ducking under a hex, and fired a Stunner at the werewolf. He caught Draco around the middle before the boy could pass him, and pulled him back to Lupin. "Take him back to the Dursleys'," he ordered as he cut the ropes binding Lupin to the stone.

Draco's eyes, already wide with terror and shock, grew even rounder as he stared at Lupin's limp body. "I can't," he choked, shaking his head. "I c ... " He cut himself off when he saw the werewolves were regrouping, Ennervating the Stupefied ones. Draco clutched Lupin's arm and disappeared with a sharp crack.

"Greyback!" one of the werewolves shouted, her matted hair crusty with blood. A piece of silver bark was welded to the side of her face, burning through her skin. She crawled on all fours to Greyback, who was on his knees, his hands clawing at the air in agony.

Harry saw with a mix of horror and satisfaction that Greyback's lips had been welded to the melting cup: the metal dripped in golden globs down his neck. Greyback's eyes bugged with pain, and his screaming gurgled around the rim of the cup. Angry black smoke rose from the cup in a dark pillar. Greyback's screaming grew louder and louder as the black pillar rose

Brilliant white light flashed, blinding everyone, and Harry could hear panicked voices calling one another's names. Greyback, however, was silent. When the black spots faded, and Harry could see, he tried to find Greyback.

The woman who had been looking for Greyback found him first, and she screamed, scrambling backwards from him. The cup had ripped itself clean from Greyback's face and had flung itself several feet away. It lay on the ground in a misshapen puddle, a dead black color, like old cast-iron. Harry felt his stomach roll, but he couldn't turn away when he saw Greyback's face. The cup had burned holes into his face and throat, and the smell of cooked meat rose from Greyback's body.

A mourning wail rose from the women, and the mounting rage was palpable.

"Accio Horcrux," Harry said, and the distorted disc that had once been a cup flew to him

Someone fired a jet of green light at him, and Harry ducked, turning as he did and Disapparating back to the Dursleys'. Hands grabbed him, and Harry instinctively brought his wand up, ready to cast a hex.

"Harry, it's me!" Ron said, and Harry lowered his wand and clutched the cup in his hands.

"Are you okay?" he demanded, looking Ron over. There were some cuts on his Ron's face, and his shoulder was bleeding, but other than that he looked fine. "Hermione? Malfoy?"

"Hermione's fine ... Harry, I think Malfoy's in shock," Ron said in a low voice. "He won't let go of Lupin."

"Where are they?" Harry said, already leaving the greenhouse.

"In the tent," Ron said, running next to him. "Harry, we gotta take Lupin to St. Mungo's."

"We can't!" Harry said harshly, slamming the back door behind him and ignoring the Dursleys as he ran up the stairs. "They'll ask too many questions. We need Madam Pomfrey."

"Harry!" Hermione cried as soon as he entered the tent. "Harry, Lupin, he needs help." She too had long scratches down her face, but Harry was thankful to see that she looked otherwise fine. To think that just that morning they had been arguing ... if she had died ...

Harry crushed her in a hug, the melted cup caught between them for a moment before he turned his attention to Lupin. Lupin's thin face was pale, and his face was contorted in pain. He seemed to be unconscious, and Harry winced at all of the bite marks and long gashes down Lupin's torso. Draco was clutching Lupin's arm, staring at his former professor blankly.

"Why did they do this to him?" Hermione whispered.

"Because he betrayed them," Draco said in a shaky voice. "Greyback was telling us about it at dinner last summer ... this is what they do to traitors." He closed his eyes, a shudder going through his body.

"We have to get him to Hogwarts. Malfoy, you have to be a ferret again," Harry said. Draco nodded jerkily. "We're going to have to carry him across the grounds."

"Can't we just Floo him over?" asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "We can't carry him and fit in the fireplace." She pushed back her sleeves and shook her hair out of her face. "*Mobilicorpus*," she murmured, and Lupin's body rose until he hovered at shoulder height.

"Let's go," Harry said grimly, and Hermione quickly turned Malfoy into a ferret again. Harry

scooped Malfoy into his hand, dangling the cup by his pinky, and led the way out of the house and back into the greenhouse.

"Harry," said Hagrid, sounding surprised to see them standing behind the gates to Hogwarts.

"Hagrid, it's Lupin," Harry gasped, a stitch in his side. "Greyback and the other werewolves were going to kill him."

Hagrid flinched when he saw Lupin's body. "Bastards," he growled. "Lemme take him, Hermione. I'll get him straight to Madam Pomfrey." He scooped Lupin's body into his arms, being careful about the gashes running up Lupin's ribcage, and he took off for the castle at top speed.

Please, not Lupin, Harry thought over and over in his head as they followed Hagrid. Someone had to tell Tonks, and gasping for breath, he told Ron to Apparate to The Burrow and find her.

"But ... Lupin ... " Ron trailed off, sounding unsure.

"He might die, Ron," Hermione panted. "She'd want ... to know."

Ron Disapparated, and Harry bent his head down, pushing himself faster. Hermione lagged behind him, and Hagrid was gaining ground ahead of him. Harry had no idea that Hagrid could run that fast.

Madam Pomfrey's face drained of color when she saw Lupin, and she immediately began snapping orders to Hermione to pull vials of potions from the cupboard. Feeling useless, Harry retreated to one of the beds and stared, watching tensely as Madam Pomfrey forced potions down Lupin's throat.

Tonks, Ron and the Weasleys burst into the hospital wing minutes later, and Tonks choked down a sob when she saw Lupin. Harry didn't realize it, but he was petting Draco in long strokes as he watched Madam Pomfrey and Hermione work over Lupin's body.

What seemed like hours later, Hermione collapsed against Ron and Madam Pomfrey sagged in a chair and said wearily, "He's in a healing coma, but he'll live."

The Weasleys exploded with excitement, and Harry caught Hermione's eye. She smiled in exhaustion, and then looked pointedly at the Horcrux.

"We're gonna win, Harry," she said quietly. "I know it."



Chapter 13 concludes Part One

The author, FemmeFerret has provided us with An Interlude

## Interlude

"Dooney passes the Quaffal to Bilbrey who dodges a Bludger hit by McMallard and is zooming down the pitch ... Johnston is moving to intercept ...OH ! Johnston takes a Bludger to the face! Where's the referee...Canadians ... McMallard has a clear path to score, and it looks like Keeper Gorgon isn't going to be able to—I DON'T BELIEVE IT—GORGON BLOCKS!"

Weasley punched the couch cushion, grinning. "Gorgon's brilliant—last season he saved—"

"Ten out of twelve, yes, we know, Weasley," said Draco tensely, restraining himself from beating him around the head with his cushion. Typical that Weasley would be a Cannon's fan, he internally sneered; underdogs must hum on a sympathetic chord.

"Shh," said, Potter, sitting on the edge of his seat. He always sat like that when we listened to the games—his body tense and yet his expression dazed, as though he were lost in his head.

Chudley Cannons' fans are doing the wave in the stands...looks like someone dropped their side and got drenched. Gordon passes the Quaffal to Johnston, whose nose looks to be broken, and avoids Dooney and Punut, who were trying to slam him into the goal post. Is that...YES! BROWN HAS SEEN THE SNITCH! Smith is scrambling to catch up—OH! Brown has pulled out of the dive...but Smith keeps plummeting. What's he thinking? Brown nearly falls off his broom to dive again, and Smith has made a hard right ... Yes, I can see it—the Snitch. Smith and Brown are neck and neck, Punut has sent a Bludger Smith's way and it looks like it's going to—

"Granger!"

"Hermione!"

"Hey!"

Granger glowered at the three boys, her bushy hair poking out of the handkerchief she had tied it back with. Her face was sweating and in her arms was an enormous box. "You three can help!" she snapped.

Weasley spluttered, his arm outstretched and pointing at the wireless she had silenced. Potter looked gobsmacked that she would interrupt at a crucial moment of the game, and Draco eyed the box in her arms with suspicion. Granger had taken to house cleaning and nagged at them constantly to "pull their weight," which usually translated to unpleasant tasks he had never before done in his life—such as mopping.

She had not been pleased when they suggested a house-elf.

"We're listening to the game!" Weasley protested. Granger's brow furrowed in a most foreboding way, her handkerchief sliding down her forehead, giving her a distinctly hippogryff look.

"I gotta ... " began Potter, but Granger swiveled her head, pinning him to the couch with a glare.

"You. Clean the bathroom," she ordered, and Draco breathed easier. He loathed cleaning the bathroom. It was one of the few jobs Granger would allow him to do because it in no way involved anything sharp and pointy he could pocket to attack them with at a later time. Weasley warned her of the dangers of being bludgeoned by a toilet bowl scrubber, but Granger had obviously been in a risky mood.

Potter was made to clean the kitchen.

"What am I going to do?" asked Draco. Granger's eyes gleamed.

LATER:

"Stupid cow," Draco muttered, grabbing another stack of photos from the big brown box that Granger had put on the coffee table. "It was a rhetorical question."

He had been filling the plastic sleeves to photo albums for well over an hour now, and he was getting sick of the Gryffindors' school photos. If he had to see one more photo of Weasley playing chess...

Draco stared at the picture in his hand; it was unlike any of the ones he had seen in the past hour—it didn't move. For several moments, Draco held himself very still as he watched the photograph, but when it still didn't move, he sank back against the cushions of the couch, puzzled.

He didn't know why it interested him—maybe because he had never seen a Muggle photograph up close before. He glanced down at the picture again. Sure enough, Potter was still stationary. He was still in an apron, batter splashed across his forearms, grinning at the camera and holding a plate piled with pancakes.

Draco smirked. He would have to make fun of Potter for wearing the apron...right after he got a pancake out of him.

## Chapter 14

A loud sound outside his room woke Draco up with a start, and he tensed under the sheets, not for the first time cursing how vulnerable being wandless made him. Even though he had changed sides, the Gryffindors still didn't trust him. His heart was pounding in his chest as he imagined who or what was outside his room.

Was it Snape? Draco imagined the tall, thin wizard outside his door, his sallowness illuminated by the tip of his wand.

*"Be quiet, Ron."*

Blood rushed in his ears, and he expelled the breath he'd been holding and tried to coax his heart to beat at less than a gallop. This wasn't the first time noises in the night had startled him into terrified consciousness. He used to be such a heavy sleeper, having to set his alarm across the room, but now the slightest noise seemed to wake him.

He frowned. What were Granger and Weasley doing up at this time of the night? He looked up at his skylight to see bright afternoon sky and guessed that it was about midnight. Curious, Draco pushed off the bedclothes and walked softly across the room so as not to wake up Lockhart.

The hallway was empty when he opened the door, and Draco wondered if Weasley hadn't been sneaking into Granger's room. Awake now, Draco resigned himself to endless hands of solitaire. Just as he was about to go back into his room for his now worn deck of cards he heard a smothered giggle from Potter's room.

"On the count of three, okay?" Draco heard Granger say.

Extremely curious now, Draco hurried down the hallway as quietly as he could to peak in Potter and Weasley's room. Either Granger or Weasley had left the door open, and Draco looked inside only to be surprised at what he saw.

Weasley was holding a tall cake topped with sparkling candles, and Granger was gripping several plates and forks and a long knife excitedly. Potter was asleep in his bed, and Draco frowned when he saw that Potter wasn't wearing his glasses. He couldn't remember ever having seen Potter without them, and he felt more like the intruder he was than he had in the past several weeks. A Gryffindor birthday party was the last place he belonged, and he turned to leave.

He had had no idea that it was Potter's birthday today. Potter hadn't given any hint that he was coming of age anytime soon, which Draco found a little odd. The entire Slytherin house knew when his birthday was, and ever since fifth year he had received a present from almost every first year.

*"Happy birthday to you ... "*

"Whuzzgoingin?" Harry slurred, looking blearily at them.

*"Happy Birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Harry, happy birthday to you!"* belted out Potter's friends, Granger woefully off key.

By the last "happy birthday," Potter had found his glasses and was staring at them with a look of dazed shock. They pushed three brightly wrapped presents at him, and Potter's eyes were large behind his glasses, his mouth slightly agape.

Draco knew he should look away; every second he lingered was a chance that they'd discover him. Potter had seen him get caught by Filch when he was trying to get in the Room of Requirement. Luckily, Filch had thought that he was trying to get into the party. Draco still smarted at having never received an invitation to one of Slughorn's stupid parties ... something else Potter had bested him at.

Just as he was turning to leave though, Potter spotted him.

"Malfoy?" he asked, smoke curling around him his face in grey swirls. Weasley, who had pulled out a candle and about to lick the frosting off, twisted to look at Draco.

Knowing he was caught, Draco glowered at them. "Some of us are trying to sleep, you know," he sneered.

Potter grinned at him. "Want some cake?" he offered, gesturing to the monster of pastry that Weasley was holding. The air smelled pleasantly of smoke and dessert, but Draco remained just outside of the room.

"It's chocolate," said Grange, surprising him a little. Ever since Greenwood, Granger and Weasley had been nicer to him, although they still hadn't given him back his wand. He had raged and seethed about that, but he was still wandless three weeks later.

"No thanks," he said, and he turned to walk back to his room.

"Hey, Malfoy. Catch," said Harry, and he tossed something at Draco. His Seeker reflexes automatically had him reaching out for it before he even knew what it was. A spark shocked him when his fingers closed around a long, slender wooden object.

"You sleep with that under your pillow?" demanded Weasley, sounding not a little exasperated.

Draco stared down at his wand, unable to believe he finally had it again. He was a wizard again. He could do almost anything, now, and the first thing he thought of was Transfiguring and conjuring more furniture. Having his wand back was like regaining the feeling in his arm after it had fallen asleep.

"Why now?" he finally asked, gripping his wand in his hand tightly.

Harry shrugged. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," he advised. "And have some cake."

Harry grinned to himself as he sliced several generous pieces. He'd never had a surprise birthday party before. Malfoy stepped further into the room and raised his wand. Hermione and Ron flinched, but when Malfoy only conjured a chair, they seemed to put him out of their minds.

"Open your presents," said Ron, sitting on the corner of Harry's bed with an enormous slice of cake that threatened to buckle the paper plate. Harry reached for one of the three presents, wondering how they had managed to keep them a secret from him.

Ron had given him a Wizarding razor that promised to never rust or cut, and Hermione had given him a wand holster designed by Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

"Thanks!" he said, grinning.

"The last present's from Fleur's cousin, Andy or Rex or something," said Ron, smirking, and Harry rolled his eyes at Ron's abysmal memory for names. "And we're to go to my house for a party tonight."

"Open it, Harry," said Hermione, and Harry sighed as he picked up the large present. "Fleur said he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to make it tonight."

"He didn't have to get me anything. We only met once," Harry muttered as he tore the paper off. An unassuming plain brown box was underneath the paper, and Harry steeled himself as he lifted the top off.

"Whoa," said Ron, extremely impressed. "That's not a Weasley sweater."

Harry gaped at the black bathrobe in the box and ran his fingers over the softest material he had ever felt in his life. "Touch it," he demanded, pushing the box at Hermione and Ron.

"Nice," said Ron, but when Hermione touched it she gasped.

"What's it made out of? Look at the tag," she said, abandoning her cake on the bed.

Draco watched as they searched the robe for a tag. A bathrobe? Wasn't that a little personal from someone Potter had only met once? And if he were right, that robe cost over six hundred Galleons.

"There's no tag," said Hermione, disappointment in her voice. "I hope he's there tonight, Harry. I want to ask him."

"I can't accept this," said Harry, shaking his head. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Let me see it," Draco said, standing up. He reached for the robe that Potter wordlessly offered. Just as he thought, it was just like the one he had at the Manor, only this was even nicer. If things had been different, he would have had a new Alexander Navarre robe on his bed when he got home.

"It looks like terrycloth," said Granger doubtfully. "But that's nothing like mine."

"That's because it's got about a hundred complicated charms in it," said Draco, folding the robe back into the box. "And it's designer."

"What? There's no tag," said Hermione, pulling the robe toward her again. Draco rolled his eyes.

"It's Alexander Navarre. Just out, I'd say," said Draco. Potter's eyes popped. "Someone must really like you, Potter," he said, smirking at the red-faced Gryffindor. Granger began picking up the wrapping paper.

"He never said he was a designer," said Harry, and Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Hey, what'd you get Harry for his birthday?" asked Ron with deliberate casualness. Granger crushed some paper in her hands and looked at him expectantly.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I'm even poorer than you are, Weasley," he snapped.

"Didn't you even make a card?"

Draco clenched his teeth, reminding himself that they were on the same side. "I didn't know it was his birthday." He shook his head. "Happy birthday, Potter," he said stiffly. "I'm going to bed."

He could feel their eyes boring into the back of his head as he walked out of the room, but he didn't care. He had his wand back. He smiled to himself in the dark hallway, glad no one could see him. He'd controlled his emotions in front of the Gryffindors, not wanting to let on how relieved he was to have his wand again, but now there was no need.

He felt like a wizard again.

--

Ron and Hermione went to bed shortly after Malfoy left, but Harry found that he couldn't sleep. Ron's snores weren't helping, and Harry swung his legs onto the floor. His hand brushed the robe Navarre had sent him, and he hesitated for a moment before deciding to put it on. Harry smiled as the soft material slid over his bare chest, and he tied the sash. He was pleasantly surprised to find that he didn't feel hot at all. He wondered if that had anything to do with the charms Malfoy had said went into the robe.

He put his wand in his pocket and shut the door softly behind him. He was prone to nighttime wanderings of Hogwarts when he couldn't sleep, but he hadn't explored the tent as of yet ... he'd been too busy visiting Lupin, who was still in the healing coma, and researching ways to destroy the locket. Dumbledore had disappeared again, much to their consternation, and they'd been left to themselves to figure out the locket's weakness.

His feet carried him toward the sitting room, and he thought that he might have another go at Dumbledore's Pensieve, which they kept locked up in the cupboard under the sink. It probably wasn't the most respectful place for a man's memories, but under the sink was the only place they had room for the Pensieve. Every surface and cupboard was filled with research books. They had yet to find Dumbledore's memory of destroying the ring. Hermione pointed out that they didn't even know if Dumbledore had put it in there, but Harry was sure Dumbledore would have.

He heard a noise and he froze, plunging his hand in his pocket for his wand. He crept down the hallway, wondering if the charm that protected him from Voldemort had stopped working, and Voldemort was already in the tent. Harry was surprised to find himself hoping that the Dursleys were still alive, and he squeezed his wand tightly.

He was shocked to see Malfoy dueling with the microwave, surrounded by broken cups.

"Malfoy?" he asked, gaping at the pale boy. Malfoy had stripped his shirt and a sheen of sweat glinted on his back.

"What?" Draco snarled angrily.

"What are you doing to the microwave?" asked Harry, stepping further into the room.

"It's got my tea," Draco hissed, looking murderously at the microwave.

The microwave made a sputtering sound before the door launched open, hurling the mug at Draco, who ducked. The mug sailed over Draco, and shattered against the floor without making a sound. Draco swore, and pointed his wand at the microwave, red light shooting from the tip of his wand.

The microwave door flapped weakly before falling still, and Draco waved his wand over the cups. The shattered pieces reformed, and Draco angrily jabbed his wand at each of them, muttering, "Silencio! Silencio! Silencio!"

"Erm ... " Harry started, not quite sure what he wanted to say.

"I'm fixing the microwave," Draco said stiffly, ignoring Potter's incredulous look. It had been something he'd been wanting to do ever since he'd fixed the oven.

"The cups?" Potter asked wonderingly.

Draco could feel something twitch in his jaw, and he wished that he were alone again. He supposed he had to be grateful that it was Potter and not Granger or Weasley instead. He looked at Potter out of the corner of his eye and saw him absentmindedly rubbing his robe.

Draco grudgingly admitted that the robe looked good on Potter, even though it galled him that he, a Malfoy, should be slumming in somebody else's pajamas. It wasn't as though he could Transfigure himself a new wardrobe, either. He knew how to turn a piggy bank into mittens and pillowcases into undershirts, but that was it.

"I need clothes, Potter," he said, looking fixedly the microwave rather than at Potter.

He saw Potter nod out of the corner of his eye, and Draco thought he would have to be satisfied with that for now. He hated not having any money.

"When we rescue your mum we can get your Gringotts key," said Potter. "Until then, though, I



guess we can go to the mall."

Draco shook his head. "My key's in my trunk, and who knows what they've done with that?" he said bitterly. "Besides, I'm a Death Eater, remember? Even if I had the key they wouldn't take me down to my vault."

Unexpectedly, Potter grinned. "If Crookshanks could get in, I bet I could."

Draco looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"My godfather, Sirius Black, sent me my Firebolt by using Crookshanks to take the order." He shrugged. "Worth a shot, anyway."

Draco only nodded, not sure what to say. It had been his aunt, after all, who had killed Black.

There was an awkward silence for a few moments before Potter cleared his throat. "How did you get the microwave to turn on, and ... uh, spit things at you?"

Glad for the change in topic, Draco launched into an explanation. "I think the microwave needs an activation spell for it to properly work ... whoever did the runes for this thing had a twisted sense of humor: watch," he said. He picked up one of the mugs from the floor and pointed his wand at it.

*"Aguamenti,"* he said.

Harry watched as Malfoy put the mug in the microwave and shut the door, wondering what was about to happen. He kept his wand alert, ready to put a shield on himself in case the microwave chucked the mug at him.

"Rennervate," said Malfoy, pointing his wand at the microwave. Harry tensed when Malfoy pressed the frozen entre button, but nothing happened.

"Malfoy," he began, but Malfoy shook his head.

"Wait," he said, and a moment later Harry choked down a yell when blue light flashed inside the microwave. Malfoy opened the door and pulled out the mug and turned it upside-down.

Nothing fell out.

"It's frozen?" asked Harry uncertainly. Malfoy nodded, and Harry shook his head. "Microwaves

are supposed to heat things up, not freeze," he said.

"Clearly, this isn't normal," drawled Draco. "But it's not consistent. Watch."

He put the mug back inside the microwave and shut the door. "Rennervate," he said. Just before he pressed the popcorn button he turned to Potter. "You might want to duck," he suggested just before he pressed the button.

Harry was a second too slow to duck when the door flung itself open, and his forehead was blasted by pebble sized bits of hale. Malfoy wrestled the door shut, grunting, and Harry hurried to help him. The door was surprisingly willful, and Harry felt his muscles strain.

Finally, they pushed the door shut. Panting, they leaned against the counter. "So ... it does the opposite of what a microwave's suppose to do?" he said, untying his robe, sweaty from the exertion.

Draco caught his breath before shaking his head. "If you put bread in there and push the popcorn picture, it flings melba toast at you."

"Maybe we just shouldn't use it," Harry suggested, but instead of agreeing with him, Malfoy scoffed.

"*You* might not, but I'm going to," he said, and he stood up for another round.

"Well, let me get the Pensieve," said Harry, giving the microwave a wide birth as he passed it on his way to the sink. "And keep it down. I'm doing research in the living room."

Hermione had made him and Ron learn a nonverbal Password Charm to unlock the cupboard, and he squatted on the floor, raising his wand to tap the lock.

"*Quid agis*," he thought determinedly. It had been their last password to the common room at Hogwarts, and the cupboard swung open. Carefully, Harry pulled the Pensieve out and rose to his feet.

Malfoy didn't say anything when Harry walked past him, but Harry saw him looking curiously into the shimmering pool of memories. Harry set the Pensieve on the coffee table and prodded his wand in the bowl, thinking determinedly about the ring. He peered hopefully in the bowl, but he only saw familiar memories of the Gaunt's house that Dumbledore had already shown Harry.

He was positive that Dumbledore would have put a memory about destroying the ring into the

Pensieve. Determined not to give up just yet, Harry sifted through those familiar memories for what must have been the hundredth time.

Frustrated, Harry prodded his wand, stirring all the memories again. Maybe Dumbledore hadn't been concentrating on the Horcrux, but on his hand. It had been his hand, after all, that had been sacrificed when he'd destroyed the Horcrux. Concentrating, he looked expectantly for a memory to surface, but the only ones that did were ones Harry himself remembered.

He tilted his head back on the couch, sighing. It didn't make sense. Dumbledore had put every memory he had about the Horcruxes in the Pensieve. How could he not put in something so important?

An explosion in the kitchen was a welcome distraction, and he twisted around in his seat to see what had caused the noise. A smile spread across his face as he took in the sight of Malfoy covered in what looked to be cake batter.

"What did you put in there?"

Malfoy wiped the batter from his face. "A box of cake mix," he said. "And I pressed the baked potato picture."

"Huh," said Harry, turning back to the Pensieve. He'd never have thought Malfoy to be someone who actually enjoyed fixing things. Manual labor seemed more along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle. "You like fixing stuff, don't you?" he said.

Harry heard Malfoy's faint snort. "It's not just 'fixing stuff,'" he said scornfully. "It's the thinking through a problem ... being a critical thinker."

Harry didn't say anything, but he privately thought that Malfoy just liked to work with his hands. He could never tell either of them, he could just imagine their twin looks of outrage, but Malfoy reminded him very strongly of Mr. Weasley at the moment. He thought that whoever had combined science and magic together in the tent must have been a lot like Mr. Weasley, who had once charmed a Ford Anglia to fly.

"Hey," he said. "You know who could help us sort all this stuff out? Mr. Weasley. He used to be the head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts ... bet he knows loads about this kind of stuff and could make it work normally again."

"Potter," said Malfoy in a withering tone. "If he strips the magic out of it, it won't work at all because of the magic in the tent. Besides, I don't need help," he said, scraping cake batter out

of his ear.

Harry raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

For a few minutes they worked in silence on their individual projects until finally Harry had to admit there was absolutely nothing in the Pensieve about the ring that Harry hadn't already known about. He stood up and tied the sash to his robe again before he carried the Pensieve back into the kitchen.

"Hey, quit it for a second," he said as he curled a protective arm around the stone basin. He stepped carefully onto the kitchen floor, wincing as cake batter squished in between his toes.

"You better have this all cleaned up before Hermione comes down for breakfast," he warned as he locked the Pensieve back in the cupboard. "Speaking of which, are you coming with us to the Weasleys? As a ferret, of course?"

Draco shrugged. "Of course. Sure. Beats hanging about with Lockhart."

Harry rolled his eyes. "We can't get rid of him," he said.

"I know," Draco sighed. "Just don't let anybody try and pet me," he said firmly.

Harry laughed and pulled out his wand. "*Scourgify*," he said, pointing his wand at his feet. He jumped nimbly in between piles and puddles. " 'Night."

Later in bed, Harry couldn't help but grin into his pillow. Malfoy wasn't so bad when he wasn't being an arse. He yawned hugely, hardly hearing Ron's snores. He had only been seventeen for two hours, but he had already decided that this was one of his better birthdays.

--

Harry woke up to the smell of pancakes hours later, and it was a moment before he remembered that it was his birthday. He put on his glasses and looked at Ron's side of the room. His bed was empty, unmade as Harry's would be, he thought as he put on his new robe.

He shuffled down the hallway and into the kitchen, not completely awake yet.

"Happy birthday, mate," said Ron happily from the kitchen counter. An enormous stack of pancakes was piled high between him and Hermione, who smiled when she saw him.

"Malfoy's made breakfast," she said.

Harry only nodded. "You got the microwave sorted out?" he asked, and Malfoy turned around. Dark circles were under the Slytherin's eyes, but he looked smug.

"I made these in the microwave," he said, smirking in a very self-satisfied sort of way.

"How are they?" asked Harry, but he didn't think he needed to, as Ron was substantially shortening the stack of pancakes.

"Good," Hermione said, looking surprised.

Harry piled several pancakes on a plate that Hermione had handed him and poured a generous serving of maple syrup over them. He couldn't get it out of his head that microwaved food always turned as hard as Hagrid's rock cakes, and so he took a bite quickly before the pancakes could harden.

"Hey, these are good," he said, digging into his breakfast with gusto.

"That's a really nice robe, Harry," Hermione said, changing the subject. "Nevarre must really like you." Harry didn't catch it, but Hermione was watching Draco carefully for his reaction. Draco forced himself not to roll his eyes.

Harry shrugged, remembering all the attention Nevarre paid to him at the wedding. "Maybe he's just generous. It's not like would've cost him to give me something he had made, you know?"

Hermione looked disappointed at Harry's reasoning, and Harry got a suspicious feeling that Hermione *wanted* him and Nevarre to get together, which was ridiculous, because Nevarre was much too tall for him.

His fork froze halfway to his mouth as he realized what he had just thought.

"Harry, you're dripping syrup on the floor," Hermione said, and she looked curiously at him. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Harry said, standing up. Ron, Hermione and Draco looked at him, and Harry felt his face redden. "I've just shotta gower now," he said quickly.

"What?" asked Ron, frowning.

"Shower," croaked Harry, all but fleeing from the kitchen.

His bare feet slapped against the floor as he ran down the hallway. Needing to be alone, he locked himself in the bathroom, sliding down the door and sticking his head between his knees, not even bothering to light the tip of his wand.

"Too tall," he laughed weekly, his cheek pressing against his knee. He closed his eyes, and Nevarre's handsome face swam behind his eyelids. It was too much to swallow ... people didn't just turn gay, he told himself severely.

But Charlie dated a few girls before he knew he was gay, a small voice said, cutting through his stubborn thoughts like sharp razor. Harry groaned, his frustration echoing in the room.

"I'm not gay," he said, sounding more confident than he really felt.

"Are you sure?" his own voice asked.

Harry jumped, his hands grasping at air, and he suddenly remembered he had left his wand in the bedroom.

"Oh relax," said the mysterious voice, sounding both amused and exasperated.

"Who are you?" asked Harry, not able to keep the tremble out of his voice.

He heard the other person with his voice sigh. "The mirror, of course."

No magical mirror Harry had encountered before ever had his voice.

"How do I turn on the lights?" he asked, standing up and squinting in the darkness.

"Clap your hands," it said, sounding amused, and Harry's mouth dropped.

"But that's like the seventies," he blurted out. The mirror didn't respond, and Harry, thinking that he might have offended it, hurriedly clapped his hands. The lights flickered on immediately, bathing the room in soft light, and Harry got to his feet.

He stood in front of the sink, looking at his reflection, which gazed back at him steadily. Harry was suddenly reminded of his reflection in the Mirror of Erised when he had been with Quirrel. Unsure what to expect, Harry waved at the mirror.

His reflection rolled his eyes, and Harry dropped his hand. "Why did you ask if I was sure about me not being gay?" he asked.

His reflection shrugged, but Harry's eyes narrowed at the knowing look on his reflection's face. "How come you've never spoken before?" he demanded. "How come you've never shown up before when I've used the mirror?"

"I've been here," his reflection said coolly. "I almost said something to Draco," his reflection said, drawing out the Slytherin's name, "but I think he might have smashed me."

Harry started at seeing his reflection say Malfoy's first name, and his reflection smirked. Harry had never been more frustrated with himself ... his reflection, that is.

"You're not like any other magical mirror I've ever seen," he said carefully, watching his reflection even more closely.

The Harry in the mirror shrugged again, but a shadow of dark emotion crossed his face. "Yeah, well," he said bitterly. "You're not a white picket fence either."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded, but his reflection shook his head.

"Forget it."

A horrible thought came to Harry, and his breath caught. "Can you read my thoughts?" Harry asked sharply.

His reflection snorted. "Don't be an idiot ... there's no such thing as mind reading. And no, I'm not using Legilimency on you ... I don't have a wand," he said, waving his empty hands.

Harry wasn't convinced. "But if I had a wand, you'd have a wand, too, wouldn't you?" he pointed out.

"No, actually," the mirror said shortly. "Now do you want to know if you're gay or not?"

"I'm not," Harry said automatically, taking a half step back from the sink.

His reflection stared at him with an indefinable expression, and Harry felt his hands start to sweat. "It's not like it would matter if I were," he said, needing to explain. "There's nothing wrong with being gay. I have tons of gay friends."

"No you don't," his reflection snorted, and Harry felt his face flame. He didn't know why he had said that.

"Well, I have one ... Ron's brother's gay. And maybe Nevarre." Harry frowned. "We're not exactly friends, but he sent me a birthday present. It's really expensive apparently, but I don't think it cost him any money because he designed it. Not that how much something costs is important," he said quickly, knowing he was babbling and not able to stop.

"I think maybe he likes me, you know, *likes* me, like how I liked Ginny and Cho," said Harry.

He looked up at his reflection as though to make sure he was still listening. The mirror was staring right back at him, not moving, and for a moment Harry thought he was just talking to an ordinary mirror, until his reflection raised his eyebrows.

"And?" he prompted.

"But I don't really like him," Harry said truthfully. "Not like that, you know? He's a nice enough bloke, and I guess he's ... " Harry swallowed. "Good looking. He's part Veela, so I can't really help how I feel around him."

He swallowed thickly as his words sank in. "Oh God," he said shakily, leaning on the counter and bowing his head, his ears ringing as the realization hit him. "I found a guy attractive."

He looked up at his reflection, but this time he only saw himself, exactly as he looked. "Hello?"

He saw his lips move and his drawn eyebrows, and he sighed. He didn't know where his magical reflection went, or if he had even left at all.

Rapping on the door startled him.

"Harry?"

It was Ron, and Harry hoped that his friend hadn't heard any of the conversation.

"Yeah?" he called, forcing brightness into his voice as he remembered it was his birthday ... not Realization That He Might Not Be Entirely Straight Day.

"You almost out?"

Harry remembered that he had said he was going to be showering, although breakfast in the kitchen seemed like a very long time ago. "Erm ... almost. Five minutes?" he called.

"Sure," said Ron, and Harry heard his footsteps fade down the hallway. Harry sighed and



stripped his clothing quickly. "You're mostly straight, old son," he muttered as he stepped into the shower.

--

It was Draco, not Ron, who was waiting outside in the hallway, wearing nothing but a towel. To his horror, Harry found his eyes staring at Draco's torso, which had filled out in the weeks he'd been with him.

"Took you long enough," Draco snorted, pushing away from the wall. He glanced at Harry as he walked past him. "You were in there for all that time and you didn't even shave? What were you doing?"

Miraculously, Harry had an answer. "I left the razor Ron gave me in the room," he said, looking Draco in the eye, not trusting himself to let his gaze dip any lower. He distractedly wondered how he was going to change with Ron in the same room ... now that he knew he wasn't one hundred percent straight.

"Well that was dumb," Draco said, his shoulder almost brushing Harry's as he passed him on the way to the doorway.

"*You* forgot your clothes," Harry shot back at him, jerking back into the wall so that they didn't touch, distinctly uncomfortable.

Draco merely stared pointedly at the towel wrapped around Harry's own hips, and Harry clenched his teeth, squeezing the pajama bottoms in his hands tightly. He didn't say anything when Draco went into the bathroom, shutting the door in his face.

"What's wrong?" asked Hermione, poking her head out of her room. "Oh, Harry, you forgot to shave," she said, bringing her hand up to her face.

Harry made a sound in the back of his throat like a badly tuned saxophone, and he slammed the door to his room. He almost careened into Ron, who was standing right inside the door, wearing nothing but a towel.

"Shower's free? Good," said Ron, striding out of the room.

"Wait ... " began Harry, and Ron turned around. An idea came to Harry, and he shook his head. "Nothing," he said, smiling feebly and shutting the door. Quickly, before Ron could realize that Malfoy was in the shower and come back, Harry stripped of his towel and put on pants and

jeans. He was just doing the buttons to his jeans when Ron pushed the door open, scowling.

"What?" Harry asked, trying to sound baffled. "I thought you were going to shower."

"Malfoy's in there," Ron said, sitting down on the bed, glowering. "Now there won't be any hot water."

Harry murmured something sympathetic as he buttoned up his shirt, and telling Ron he was going to clean the kitchen, Harry escaped from the room.

Next time he'd remember to bring clothes.

## Chapter 15

Harry washed the dishes in a daze, his mind still reeling from the unequivocal horror of finding his arch nemesis attractive. Something jerked in Harry's stomach as he remembered Malfoy's lean, hard torso, and his hand slipped from the sponge, his palm opening on the blade of the knife he had been cleaning.

"Bloody bugging hell," he swore, pulling his stinging hand out of the water. An angry gash bled freely, dripping down his arm into the soapy water, red holes in the white foam.

"Harry!"

Harry turned and saw Hermione standing behind the counter, frowning at him.

"Harry, don't swear ... oh, Harry! Your hand!" she said, hurrying towards him.

"I cut it," he said angrily, squeezing the wound. He clenched his teeth when Hermione pried his hand away, spreading his palm as she examined it.

"Why'd you'd you go and do something stupid like that?" she demanded, holding her wand over the wound. She ran her wand over the wound and it began to stitch slowly back together.

Harry was reminded of the charm Snape had used on Malfoy, but Hermione's wasn't as effective as Snape's.

She frowned as she stared at it and asked, "Do we have a first aid kit?"

"I'm not putting hydrogen peroxide on it," said Harry quickly, pulling his hand back. He wrapped his hand in a tea towel.

"Anyway," said Hermione, "we got a letter from Neville, and he's coming tonight."

"Really? You know, Neville was born at the end of July too," said Harry, remembering the prophecy. With a jolt he realized he had never told either Ron or Hermione that it had nearly been Neville, not him, Voldemort could have chosen. Dumbledore's words came back to him clearly, like a bruise he hadn't known he'd had.

*"Sybill's prophecy could have applied to two wizard boys, both born at the end of July that year, both of whom had parents in the Order of the Phoenix, both sets of parents having narrowly*

*escaped Voldemort three times."*

He never found out how his parents had thrice defied Voldemort, he realized. He had never asked ... Dumbledore had never told him. Did everyone know? No, he thought. Sirius would have told him; Lupin would have told him, or Hagrid ...

"Harry?" asked Hermione hesitantly.

"What? Sorry, what did you say?" asked Harry, jolting himself out of his thoughts.

"Are you okay?" she asked, looking concerned and sympathetic.

"Fine," he lied, and he smiled at her, but she didn't look remotely convinced.

She looked as though she wanted to make him say what he was thinking, but at that moment Malfoy walked into the room, to Harry's relief, fully clothed.

"Does the toaster work?" he said, striding into the kitchen, his pale eyes fixed on the white toaster next to the basin.

"Err ... " said Harry.

Malfoy tapped the toaster with his wand, muttering something too softly for Harry to hear, and the toaster spat sparks at him and scuttled like a crab across the counter.

"Obviously not," snorted Malfoy.

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances that Malfoy didn't see, and Harry had to suppress a smile.

"I thought you were working on the microwave," said Hermione, watching Malfoy as he tried to herd the toaster against the wall.

"I don't always want melba toast, Granger," said Malfoy, a touch of scorn in his voice.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Where's Ron, Harry?" she asked.

"In the shower," said Harry.

They watched Malfoy's failed attempts of coaxing the toaster into submission until Ron arrived.

"*No hot water*," he said angrily, his wet hair plastered to his head. "Thanks a lot, Malfoy."

"The pleasure was mine," said Draco, smirking as he dodged the belching toaster's latest attempt of setting him afire.

"Neville's coming tonight," said Hermione. "And Harry says today's his birthday, too."

"Cool," said Ron. "What are we getting him?"

Harry shrugged. What did you get someone who had nearly been you?

"I thought we could get him bonsai," said Hermione brightly. "I saw them in a shop when we went to the market."

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. "He'd like that."

"I'll just go get my purse, shall I?" said Hermione, and she left for her room.

"Harry ... " said Ron, looking uncomfortable as they walked back to their room for their wallets. "I haven't got any Muggle money. And I still owe you for Bill and Fleur's present ... "

"Forget about it. No, really," he said when Ron looked like he was going to protest. He opened his wallet and counted the bills inside as discretely as he could.

"Malfoy," called Harry from the doorway to the sitting room just before they left. "We're going to the shopping center ... want to come?"

Malfoy did not want to go, and so the three of them set out by themselves. Harry was pleased that neither Ron nor Hermione commented on the wisdom of leaving Malfoy by himself. He supposed that they had come to accept that the Slytherin was truly on their side, or perhaps they were just grateful that Malfoy had figured out the microwave.

Draco absently noticed the shutting of the front door as he stuck a fork into the toaster.

"Come on you stupid little bugger," he growled, dodging the sparks the toaster spat at him. He hadn't yet figured out what the toaster was supposed to do other than try to burn him. It most certainly didn't toast bread, although the flames from the last attempt had been of a rather impressive height.

He had been put off by Potter's comment about him liking to use his hands. That was like saying

that Snape liked Potions because he liked cooking ... the two were not remotely connected he told himself firmly. Making things work as they are supposed to was much more complicated than simple manual labor. Determining how the engineered item was supposed to function was as difficult as deciphering an unfamiliar rune. You didn't just poke and prod at it, hoping something would work ... that kind of behavior resulted in purple flames of impressive height.

Potions was the same way, he thought, as he jabbed the fork at a knotted coil inside the toaster. It was a physical science requiring all of the senses, just as his battles with the kitchen equipment was.

His hands froze at the heavy shuffling in the entryway. After spending a week being locked up in his room and having his meals delivered to him by Potter, Weasley and Granger, he had come to know all of their footsteps. Whoever was in the tent with him wasn't supposed to be there, and a knot formed in Draco's stomach.

Silently, he set down the toaster and unfolded his wand from the waistband of his pajama bottoms. He pressed himself in the corner of the kitchen and watched the mirror in sitting room that reflected the entryway. Whoever it was hadn't stepped far enough into the entryway to be visible in the mirror.

Sweat broke out on his forehead as a horrible thought came to him. What if they had an Invisibility Cloak? What if he was farther into the room than he thought? What if he was right in front of him? This was exactly as he had been dreading every night he went to bed without a wand, with only a Muggle door lock to protect him from his enemies.

His breath hitched as he nearly gave into panic, and he clenched his hand nervously. The hard wood in his palm startled him, and a tiny pool of relief swelled inside of him. He had a wand. He wasn't completely helpless.

*Accio Invisibility Cloak*, he thought determinedly. He flinched at the muffled thud somewhere down the hallway. When the thud turned into a shuffling sound, as though something heavy was being dragged across the floor, Draco frowned.

What kind of Invisibility Cloak was that heavy?

A startled yelp nearly upset his wand from his hand, and what he saw next very nearly did make him drop his wand.

Dudley Dursley was running into the sitting room with Potter's school trunk chasing him.

Dudley froze when he saw Draco, and the trunk plowed into him, knocking him off his feet.

"*Finite Incantatum*," cried Draco, pointing his wand at the trunk.

Dudley whimpered when he saw Draco and his wand leveled at him. "W-who are you?" he stuttered, all four of his chins wobbling in terror. "Are you the one who sacrifices the goats?"

Draco blinked at him. "No," he said honestly, quite startled by the absurdity of the question.

"Are you Potter's boyfriend?" squeaked Dudley, his eyes fixed on Draco's wand.

"I'm ... " he trailed off, unsure of what to say. What was he to Potter? Certainly not a friend, but neither an enemy ... a colleague perhaps? "Yeah," he said lamely.

If possible, Dudley looked even more terrified. "It wasn't my idea to put him in the cupboard," he babbled, looking fearfully at Draco.

"What?" asked Draco, frowning. "What cupboard?"

"Uh ... " Dudley stalled, his eyes flickering from Draco's wand to his face.

"Tell me," Draco said lowly, remembering very vividly now how it was Dudley who had pitted him against the rat. "Tell me or I'll turn you into a goat."

Dudley shuddered. "The cupboard under the stairs," he whispered, cowering.

Draco stared at him, unable to believe what he was hearing. Dobby used to sleep in the cupboard under the stairs, he remembered.

Fury welled up inside of him as he stared at the Muggle cowering in front of him, and he felt rage sing in his blood. His wand hand was twitching to curse the boy. No wonder Potter never returned back to his relatives for the holidays. He had thought that he understood ... for Muggles to treat wizards like house-elves ... he had switched sides, but that did not in any way negate how he felt about Muggles.

"You'll be expelled," Dudley gasped, a large, smoking scorch mark inches from his head. Draco didn't remember casting the hex, but he smiled coldly at the shaking boy.

He leaned over the trunk, his face only a few inches from Dudley's. Dudley's terrified eyes stared unblinkingly into his, the light from Draco's illuminated wand making the sweat rolling

down Dudley's face glimmer. Draco could smell Dudley's breakfast as the boy panted in abject fear, and it mingled with the smoke rising from the scorch mark.

"I'm a Death Eater," he said softly. "Wanted for assisting the murder of Albus Dumbledore" ... there was a flash of recognition in Dudley's eyes ... "I think I've already been expelled."

Dudley's bottom lip trembled, and tears rolled down his face. He was whimpering incoherently, and while Draco saw the boy's lips move, he didn't hear any sound, his mind far away.

"Please, please don't kill me," begged Dudley, sobbing wetly.

"MALFOY!"

Draco looked up, and Potter, Weasley, and Granger were standing, frozen in the doorway, all three of them clutching a bonsai.

"Let him go," demanded Harry, and slowly, reluctantly Draco pushed himself away from the crying boy.

"What did you do to him?" Harry snarled, hauling Dudley to his feet. A damp spot appeared on the floor, and Draco realized that Dudley had wet himself.

"Nothing," he muttered.

"Harry, he's a Death Eater," whimpered Dudley, clawing at his cousin's arm. "He tried to kill me!"

"I did not," snapped Draco. "He snuck in here, and I thought that he was wearing an Invisibility Cloak, so I *Accio*d it, and your trunk chased him in here."

"Why's there a hex mark on the floor?" demanded Hermione, who was helping Dudley into a chair.

Draco shrugged, his face a cold mask.

"Malfoy ... " began Harry, his voice low with fury.

Draco leaned forward, until his face was scant inches from Harry's face, and he whispered, "I found out about your cupboard. And I snapped."



"Why?" asked Harry, looking both embarrassed and baffled.

"What's going on?" asked Ron sharply.

There was a moment of silence in which everyone but Dudley, who was still gazing in terror at Draco, turned to stare at Harry.

Harry's eyes blazed at Draco when he said, "Forget it, Ron."

Ron seemed at loss for words, although his face was flooding with color. Suddenly, he turned on his heel, and marched out of the sitting room, slamming the door behind him.

"Where's he going?" wondered Hermione, looking worried.

"Ah, fuck," muttered Harry. "Hold this," he said, pushing the bonsai into Hermione's hands before he took off after Ron. "RON!"

"Can I go now?" pleaded Dudley, who was sniffing on the couch.

"No," snarled Draco, his lip curling.

"Malfoy," said Hermione sharply, and Draco noticed that she had her wand in her hand. She turned to Dudley. "Do you, um, want a cup of tea?"

If possible, the offer made Dudley seem even more terrified. "No thank you, Daisy," he rasped, flinching into the cushions. Draco raised his eyebrows at the name.

"Fine," snapped Hermione. "I'm making some, Malfoy."

"Ginger peach, please," said Draco civilly, knowing he had all but ruined the progress he had made with Hermione. He didn't dwell on that; he was too busy thinking about Potter and his cupboard.

Dudley watched him fearfully when he sat in the chair opposite from him, but his fear lessened when Hermione sat next to Malfoy.

"What hex did you use on him?" she asked in a deliberately calm voice.

Draco shrugged. "Uncontrollable magic."

Hermione looked at him critically but didn't say anything.

The front door slammed open, and Petunia burst into the room, looking hysterical. She launched herself at Dudley, her hands smoothing back his hair as tears streamed down her face as she made sure he was alive.

"You're monsters," she spat at them, cradling her son's massive head in her bony arms.

"He's fine ... he's the one who snuck in here," returned Hermione, looking just as angry. "Besides, Malfoy didn't do anything to him. The hex didn't even touch him."

Petunia's arms tightened around her son at Hermione's words, and she glared hatefully at them. When Ron and Harry appeared, she fixed her sharp eyes on her nephew.

"I want you gone," she said, her voice trembling with rage. "You're of age ... go, and never come back," she hissed at him.

"Gladly," said Harry coldly.

"We should have never taken you in," she continued in a loud voice as though he hadn't spoken. "You ... You've been nothing but trouble since the start."

Harry didn't say anything, didn't flinch, just looked at her as she continued, her voice rising to a shriek.

"WE SAVED YOUR LIFE!" she screamed.

"You don't honestly think I'm going to say 'thank you,' do you?" said Harry coldly.

"You should," she breathed, her voice rough with hatred and her eyes narrowed angrily at him.

"At least I escaped the appalling damage you've inflicted on Dudley," said Harry quietly, an odd light in his eyes. Petunia's hands spasmed, and she looked hatefully at Harry.

Harry laughed, and it was a dark sound. "You know what? Thank you, Aunt Petunia. Thank you for being the most miserable person to live with ... thank you ... thank you ... "

His voice broke, and Ron and Hermione made to move closer to him. Harry shook his head violently and they froze. "Thank you for never letting me have friends ... for never giving me enough food. Thank you, *Petunia*, for trying to *stamp the magic out of me*."

He breathed harshly, his chest feeling very tight, as though all the things he had dreamed of

saying to his relatives were fighting to be the first to be said and were clogged in his throat. He wanted to make them hurt, like they had made him hurt for seventeen years ...

But he couldn't. Nothing he said would ever make them feel as he had felt. He could never make them feel the desperate hope of dreaming of unknown relatives who would rescue him. And that was almost the worst thing about it ... they would never see themselves in the wrong.

"Just get out of my house," he said, his eyes burning.

"Your house?" sneered Petunia. "This is *my* house ... "

"*This* ... " Harry flung his arm in a sweeping gesture at the blurry room ... "Is mine."

She glared hatefully at him as she and Dudley shuffled out of the room. None of them moved until they heard the door slam so hard the mirror above the mantle trembled, and Harry closed his eyes, trying with all his might to not let his lower lip tremble.

"We gotta leave," he said thickly, sniffing loudly in a determined sort of way. He refused to cry. This was the day he'd been dreaming about ever since he could remember, and it didn't hurt, it didn't hurt at all that they didn't care he was leaving. He didn't care that they wanted him gone. He didn't care at all.

"Tea, Granger," said Draco sharply, pushing Harry into a chair. "I think Potter's going to faint."

"I am not!" said Harry angrily, old resentment from the fainting jokes Draco used to make during fourth year.

"Shut up, Scarhead," sneered Draco, and Harry felt the anger take the edge off his overwhelming feelings. "You're more interesting when you're not talking."

"Don't treat him like that," said Ron angrily. He spun Draco around, his face furious. "What kind of boy ... "

He cut himself off when Harry started laughing. "Harry?" he asked tentatively, turning to face his best friend.

Draco smirked and sipped his tea.

"Why are you laughing?" Ron demanded, looking confused and angry.

Harry shook his head. "Never mind," he said. He took the cup of tea Hermione handed him, and toasted Ron jauntily with his cup. Ron looked even more confused at the sudden change in Harry's emotions, but Hermione shook her head at him when he opened his mouth, a knowing look on her face.

"Will someone please tell me what's going on?" Ron grumbled.

Harry surveyed Draco over his teacup, and Draco looked blandly at him, his smooth face revealing nothing.

Hermione cleared her throat, and everyone turned to her expectantly.

"Harry, could Ron and I talk to you, privately?" she asked.

Harry sighed. He had been expecting this since Malfoy had told them about the cupboard. "If it's about my childhood, then no," he said, making his voice firm.

"It was lousy, yeah," he continued, making his voice light. "But it's like Dumbledore said, I escaped the *appalling damage* that Dudley suffered."

Ron frowned. "You mean Dumbledore knew?" he asked incredulously.

Harry nodded. "I think so. It got better," he said, shrugging and standing up. "But it's over."

Hermione looked very much like she wanted to say something else, but she restrained herself. Instead, she said, "Do you think everything will get knocked about when we fold up the tent?"

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought about that. He could just imagine unfolding the tent to find all the food in the cupboard strewn across the room, and the numerous books littering the floor. "I dunno," he admitted.

"It won't," said Draco. "It's part of the magic of the tent. Where are we moving to?"

"To The Burrow for now," said Ron, also standing up. "But let's wrap Neville's bonsai first, okay?"

While he tied a bow around the trunk of the Japanese Pine he had bought Neville, Harry couldn't help but think about how he wasn't going to be seeing his uncle before he left. It wasn't as though he wanted to say goodbye to him, but Harry did want some sort of closure ... the last word, laugh, whatever you could call watching Uncle Vernon's great huge face turn puce in rage.

His lips twitched when an idea came to him. If he couldn't say something in words to his uncle, he could say it in magic.

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On their way down to the greenhouse Harry paused at his cupboard. He drew out his wand, ignoring Hermione's questions, and leveled his wand at the hinges.

"*Reducto!*" he shouted, blasting the door off.

The tremendous bang brought Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the hallway, but she froze when she saw Harry crawling into the cupboard. Draco looked darkly at her, and she flinched at the naked hatred on his pale face.

Draco looked threateningly at her until she disappeared behind the door again, and he forced himself to lower his wand. Potter wouldn't like seeing his aunt cursed, which Draco suspected had to do with some noble Gryffindor principles that were utterly useless in war.

"Did it," muttered Harry crawling back out, and he pushed something into his pocket. "Let's go," he said, leading the way past his aunt and cousin. He didn't look at them as he passed them by, although he could feel their eyes staring at him.

"Harry, what ... " began Hermione, but Harry shook his head, ducking his head as his grin spread across his face. When they walked into the kitchen he pressed himself against the wall.

"Just wait for it," he promised them mysteriously. "It'll be any minute now ... she's the nosiest person in the world."

"But what did you do? Why'd you destroy it?" Ron wanted to know.

Harry pulled a sheet of shiny paper out of his pocket, and Ron's eyes widened. "You didn't," he said.

Petunia's scream had Ron and Harry doubled up in laughter. Dudley roared in terror, and Harry snorted with laughter when he heard his cousin and aunt scramble down the hallway.

Hermione dug her nails into Harry's arm, jerking him upright. "What is it? What did you do?" she demanded.

Draco tugged the sheet of paper out of Harry's hands and showed it to Hermione. "He put one

of these up, apparently," he said, remembering all too well how very lifelike the illusions had been.

"I don't understand," said Hermione, looking frustrated.

Ron wheezed, tears leaking out of his eyes, and between sniggers, both he and Harry managed to explain everything to Hermione.

Instead of laughing along or even cracking a smile, Hermione bristled. "Your relatives don't know that they're fake, do they?" she said angrily. "What if they call the exterminators to get rid of them?"

"They won't," chuckled Harry. "Petunia," it felt strange calling her by her first name, "she'd go spare at the idea of someone thinking she didn't have normal spiders."

Hermione's glower didn't soften. "They don't know that they're just illusions," she said angrily. "And I don't think the MLE would approve of Muggle terrorization."

"Technically, he used magic on a cupboard," said Draco slyly.

She pressed her lips together tightly and didn't speak to them until they got to The Burrow, and he thought that she had been rougher than necessary when she'd turned him into a ferret.

From Potter's hands, Draco had an unobstructed view of the tall, slightly leaning, and narrow house that Weasley grew up in. Dozens of poverty jokes came to his mind, but they were overshadowed by his curiosity for the heavily smoking red barbecue that a tall man with long red hair was trying to beat down with his wand.

"I don't think they ever read the instruction book," said Harry, smiling at the dark cloud Bill was trying to vanish. Fleur came out of the house and stood behind Bill, saying something.

Draco's sensitive nose burned as they passed Bill and Fleur, and he dug his claws into Harry's injured hand to make him go faster.

"Malfoy," hissed Harry, his hand throbbing. Harry nodded at Bill, who now seemed to be swearing at the barbeque, and he and Ron and Hermione hurried on up to the house.

"Harry!" cried Mrs. Weasley when she saw him. "Ron, Hermione, hello dears. Happy birthday, Harry," she said affectionately, hugging him so tightly that Harry was worried Malfoy might get squashed.

"Your parents would be so proud," she whispered, squeezing him even tighter before she let go to hug Ron and Hermione.

Their entry had not gone unnoticed by anyone else either, and soon Harry was being hugged and clapped on the back.

"Hagrid says hi," said Charlie, shaking his hand. He looked admiringly at Draco and said, "That's a handsome ferret. Got any powers?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say microwaves and ovens, but Harry bit his tongue and shook his head.

"How's Draco doing?" asked Fred when he and George came to wish Harry happy birthday. He turned to George, an excited smile on his face. "You know, I think we should ... "

"Start a pet line," finished George, nodding smartly. "Mind if we borrow Draco here for a little while?"

"Sorry, no," said Harry flatly, trying not to wince as Malfoy's dug his claws in sharply into his hand again. Fred and George looked disappointed, and Harry hurriedly changed the subject to Remus.

"No word on him today," said Fred, shaking his head. "Tonks is going spare ... she's over there right now."

"Practically lives in the hospital wing," continued George, an unfamiliar seriousness to his tone. "But she said she'd drop in to say hi and give you your present."

Fred cleared his throat and Harry looked up curiously at him. Fred looked behind Harry pointedly before giving him a knowing look. "So ... we heard you broke up with Ginny," he said conversationally.

"Heard?" scoffed George. "More like felt the house shaking, nearly coming apart with how much she was slamming her damn door."

Harry winced, but luckily he never had to answer the twins because Neville called his name.

"Happy birthday Harry!" said the other boy cheerfully, carrying a small plate of nibbles. " 'Lo Fred, George," he said, a note of wariness in his voice that wasn't helped by the wide, crocodile smiles the twins gave him.

"Neville!" they said together, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "Good to see you, mate ... nobody else took a Canary Cream better than you."

"Yeah ... well," said Neville nervously.

"Happy birthday, Neville," said Harry, grinning. "Hermione and Ron have your presents. Get anything good?"

Neville looked excited. "Harry, I'm Head Boy!"

Draco was so surprised he almost lost his balance. *"Longbottom? He's not even a Prefect!"*

"Neville that's great!" exclaimed Harry. "When'd you find out?"

"Two days ago," said Neville, beaming. "Gran was really pleased ... my dad was never Head Boy," he said.

Fred and George looked too stunned to make any Humungous Bighead jokes, but Harry could tell what they were thinking. Neville Head Boy? But then Harry recalled how it had been Neville at the Department of Mysteries, and fighting off the Death Eaters in Hogwarts a month ago. Neville might flinch at the sight of Snape ... whom Harry realized with a jolt wouldn't be a professor next year ... but he was brave when it really mattered.

Ron and Hermione came to say hi, handing Neville the bonsai. Neville told them the news shyly but with pride in his voice. Hermione dropped her plate in an unusual bout of clumsiness, but Ron grinned.

"That'll put Terry Boot's nose out of place," he said cheerfully, and Harry remembered how Terry had told Hermione she should have been in Ravenclaw in their fifth year.

Hermione's eyes were oddly bright when she congratulated Neville, and she hurried over to Ginny, who still had not come over to say hi. Harry was dreading speaking to her again, as the last time she had kissed him and burst into tears.

"Is Hermione okay? Isn't ... isn't she Head Girl?" asked Neville.

Harry realized with a sinking feeling that they had yet to tell Neville that they wouldn't be going back to Hogwarts. Ron's smile became rather strained, but he made no move to say anything.

Harry sighed. "Ron, Hermione and me ... we're not going back to Hogwarts next year," he said.



"Taking a leaf out of our book?" asked George lightly, but there was nothing amused in his face.

Neville looked crushed. "Because of You-Know-Who?" he asked.

Harry nodded, feeling miserable.

"Harry! Harry come and get something to eat!" said Mrs. Weasley, waving at him from the table with food. "We can't send you back to Hogwarts looking as though you've never had a decent meal."

Her eyes flashed darkly for a moment before she offered him a plate of crackers and cheese. Harry felt any appetite he had had shrivel at the thought of telling Mrs. Weasley that they weren't going back to Hogwarts. He'd tell her after the party ... there was no point in upsetting her now. He looked warningly at Fred and George, and they nodded their heads.

Bill came into the kitchen, flooding the house with the delicious smell of hotdogs and hamburgers.

" 'Arry!" cried Fleur, kissing him on both cheeks when he reached for a plate.

"Hi!" said Harry, grinning. "How's married life?"

Fleur smiled prettily at him. "You are sweet," she said. "I must go 'elp Bill with the 'otdogs," she said, pronouncing the word slowly. " 'Appy Birthday 'Arry," she said throatily.

"Happy birthday, Harry."

Harry started at Ginny's voice and turned around. She smiled at him, and Harry was glad to see no sign of tears, alcohol or anger.

"Hi," he said slowly. "Thanks."

She shook her head, her pretty red hair dancing across her shoulders. "I'm really sorry about the wedding ... I had a splitting headache the next day if it makes you feel any better."

Harry didn't know what to say. She seemed both apologetic and calm, as though it had all happened a very long time ago. "That's okay," he said lamely.

She grinned at him. "I'll say. Fleur's cousin took care of me the next morning," she said her eyes gleaming, and Harry's eyes popped as he remembered the extremely good looking boy Ginny

had noticed at the wedding.

"You mean ... " he said, his mouth hanging slightly agape.

"He has more Veela in his blood than Fleur does. He just graduated from Beauxbatons last year," she said. "He's was gonna try and come with Navarre tonight, but Navarre can't come."

Draco's tail lashed unexpectedly at the designer's name.

"So you're together?" blurted Harry, unable to disguise the relief in his voice. His eyes widened. "Navarre can't come?"

She laughed. "Yeah. And sorry Harry, about last time. I see now that we wouldn't have worked out ... and Jon Paul is a really great guy."

"That's great," he said, grinning, although he schooled his features into innocence when she looked carefully at him. It was then that she noticed Draco, and her eyebrows shot up.

"I rescued him from my cousin," he explained. "He was pitting it against a rat."

Dinner was a lot of fun, and as Mrs. Weasley was cutting the large cake she had made Harry, everyone passed him their presents. Curled in Harry's lap, Draco heard the wrapping paper being torn off the presents and caught flashes of the brightly colored paper as it fell to the floor. A piece of tissue paper fell in Harry's lap, and Draco batted at it.

The last present was from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Harry found himself nervous as he pulled the wrapping apart. The Weasleys were very nice and very poor, and Harry wished that he could have given them all the gold Sirius left to him, but they would never accept it.

An old fashioned gold watch fell into his hands, similar to the one Ron had gotten for his birthday.

Mrs. Weasley shifted nervously at the table and began talking, her hands fluttering. "Arthur's shown me those Muggle watches, dear," she began, her voice oddly high. "Silly little things ... Harry, dear ... "

Harry wanted to ask what was wrong, why she seemed so nervous.

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat, his ears flushed, but he was smiling broadly at Harry. "Parents traditionally give their children a watch when they come of age," he explained in a quiet voice.

Harry felt his as though he had just tilted his head back on the swings and pleasant rush tingled through him. He didn't know what to say, didn't trust himself to say anything as he picked up the watch, running his fingers over the smooth metal.

"We ... uh ... understand if you don't want it, Harry," Mr. Weasley said quickly. "We're not your parents ... can't replace them, but ... you're a son to us."

"Thank you," said Harry, his voice thick with emotion, and Mrs. Weasley beamed at him.

Harry was flooded with warmth and affection as he took the enormous piece of cake Mrs. Weasley handed him. She smiled at everyone, a little sadly. "We won't all be together again until Christmas when you come back from Hogwarts."

Harry nearly choked on his cake, and he saw Ron and Hermione have similar reactions.

Mrs. Weasley turned kindly to Neville and said, "You and your grandmother are of course welcome to come."

Neville flushed. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

Harry let the conversation wash over him. He knew he'd have to tell the Mr. and Mrs. Weasley that they weren't going back, but not tonight ... not when everything was perfect.

## Chapter 16

A tall, thin man paused just outside of the door, his hand frozen in mid-reach for the knocker. Had he heard something? His upper lip sweated, and he felt his sallow face flush as he scanned the darkness for the flash of pallor he had thought he'd seen.

No ... no, perhaps not.

The nerves.

But the hesitation had cut through the numbness that had made it easy to walk down the torch-lit hallway and to the heavy oak door with iron crossings. He struggled to swallow, but his mouth had gone dry. His rasping breath was loud in the dead silence, and his thighs trembled as he stood, straining to hear past the sudden roar of his thoughts in his head.

*He's waiting.*

His breath caught in his throat, and his vision blurred as he stared at the waiting door. It wouldn't do to keep him waiting. That would only make things worse. He had spent too long with the book, had lost track of time, and Avery had probably already arrived with his report.

His arm was like a lead weight as he raised it to the door, and the feel of the hard wood underneath his knuckles was a pain he relished.

He was alive.

The door swung open on the third knock, and a hulking figure whose mask was not on quite straight loomed over him. He jerked up the sleeve of his left arm, revealing the dark tattoo, and the large man granted him entrance.

"Master," he murmured, dropping to one knee and bowing his head.

"You're late, Severus," said Voldemort softly. "But you are still in time for Avery's report on Greenwood."

Snape knew the dismissal in Voldemort's tone, and he rose quickly to take his place in the half circle behind the crouching Avery.

"Avery," said Voldemort coldly, his soft voice reverberating in every Death Eater's head.

"My Lord," he murmured, and Snape noticed how tightly the man's hands were clasped together.

"Three days have passed since the full moon, and Greyback has not sent even an owl to tell me of his new recruits," said Voldemort softly. He smiled thinly. "Is the Malfoy hospitality so lacking that even a werewolf would refuse their lodgings during the full moon?"

A murmur went through the room, and the Death Eaters shifted, causing their long black robes to sweep the stone floor in a quiet rustle.

Avery wetted his lips with his tongue. "My Lord, the werewolves aren't at Greenwood anymore," he said softly, his voice wavering.

Voldemort's red eyes flared, and Avery flinched as though burned. "Their camp has been deserted." His tongue darted out again, and he seemed to struggle with himself. "There ... there seems to have been signs of a battle."

The intake of breath and the whisper of black robes on cold stone filled the room. Avery trembled on the ground, his eyes fixed firmly at Voldemort's feet, and none in the room envied him his position as the messenger.

"Signs?" echoed Voldemort softly, and he held himself very still.

Avery swallowed audibly. "Yes, my Lord," he said quickly. "The bark of the trees ... " he faltered under Voldemort's penetrating gaze. "The bark ... had scorch marks, hex marks, Master ... "

The room fell into silence, so thick that it seemed to strangle Avery.

"I ... I was going to look for them ... " said Avery, almost desperately.

"Liar," crooned Voldemort, and Avery cringed.

"Master," he cried, his voice thick with terror. "Master, I will, I will," he promised, and his eyes glittered with terror from behind the mask. There was a slight movement from Voldemort, and Avery screamed, writhing on the floor when the unspoken curse struck his body.

"Snape," said Voldemort sharply over Avery's agonized cries.

The Death Eater closest to Voldemort genuflected. "Master," murmured the former Potions professor.

Voldemort didn't look away from Avery's convulsing body as he said, "Find them, and bring me back what is mine."

"Yes, Master," said Snape, and he stood up and walked out of the room. Avery's screams were only slightly muffled from behind the door, but even that was a welcome relief.

He slipped the mask from his face and into the pocket of his robes, wondering idly who would drag Avery out of the room.

Sharp nails dug into his arm, and he stiffened as the blunt edge of a wand dug under his chin. The air smelt faintly of roses, and his eyes narrowed.

"Narcissa," he growled, easily breaking her hold and crushing her wrist in his grip so tightly that she cried out and dropped the wand. He gripped her by the upper arm and led her forcefully into an alcove some ways away from the door he had just exited.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded harshly.

Limp strands of platinum blonde hair fell in her shadowed face. "Where have you taken him?" she breathed, straining against his grip.

Snape pulled away from her in disgust and turned away without answering.

"Severus!" she cried, her voice breaking. She dug her nails in his forearm again, and once more asked, "My son, Severus, is he safe?"

He turned back, his face tight with barely suppressed anger. "He's safe," he spat, and he stared at her coldly until she released him. "But you knew that of course," he said coldly, his eyes burning with barely suppressed rage.

"Where are you going?" she whispered, falling away from him.

Snape smiled nastily at her. "Weren't you listening at the door?"

"Do ... " She swallowed, and clutched her suddenly trembling hands together. "Do you need help?"

Snape let out a derisive snort. "From a witch who can't even control her son? Hardly," he sneered.

"Why you?" asked Narcissa softly, her eyes searching.

Snape left her without answering, and this time she didn't try to hold him back. He swept down the long hallways of Malfoy Manor, striding past portraits of Malfoy ancestors and suits of armor as though he didn't see him.

"Veritas," he muttered, and the door opened.

Cupboards flew open at the flick of his wand, and he choked the neck of vials in his hand as though he wished his fingers were wrapped around something else.

"Fool," he breathed softly, his voice pulsating with fury. The tinkling of glass echoed in the room, and he forced himself to still his trembling hands as he placed the bottles into his traveling bag.

*Why you?*

His bark of laughter was bitter. He mock bowed to the empty room as though it had been a member of the audience who had asked him the question. But it hadn't been, he remembered, suddenly jarred as Narcissa's frail visage came unbidden to his mind.

He clenched his hands into fists, digging his nail into the tender flesh of his palm until he felt the nails bend backwards.

She had no right to ask him that question. She, she who had forced him to deceive his master with lies of omission, to risk a punishment he would not be guaranteed to live to regret, to forfeit his freedom and live life on the fringe of society, downing bottles of Polyjuice just so he could step outside without being recognized by Aurors.

God *damn* her.

*Why you?*

*What is mine ...*

Snape held himself still. What did the Dark Lord mean by that? Snape had a feeling his master didn't mean the werewolves but something else. Something more.

He turned to the bookshelves, pulling books out only to put them back into the bookcase, but on a different shelf. There was a faint whispering sound, like the sound of fluttering wings, and Snape's hand rested on a plain brown book that seemed to have somehow escaped his rearrangement.

He pulled the unassuming looking book from the shelf and flipped back the cover.

"I want the truth," he hissed, bringing the book to eyelevel.

A voice sighed. "The truth. It is a beautiful and terrible thing ... "

"I ... Want ... To ... Know," snarled Snape, gripping the book tightly in his fingers.

The voice sighed very deeply. "Very well, Severus. Yes ... yes, I believe you have a right to know, too."



## Chapter 17

Harry couldn't sleep that night, and so he stared up at the blurry Cannons posters plastered on Ron's ceiling. Ron, stuffed with dinner and cake, had fallen asleep almost as soon as his head had hit the pillow. His deep snoring had become a distant background to Harry's thoughts.

It felt strange to be sleeping in Ron's room again when so much had happened since the last time he'd been there at Christmas. Dumbledore had been alive then; Bill had been whole; Remus, well, he hadn't been happy about being a spy but at least he wasn't in a healing coma at Hogwarts where no one knew when he'd wake up.

Harry sighed quietly, so as not to wake Malfoy, who was in his ferret form and sleeping in a makeshift bed of Ron's old clothes. Guilt squirmed in his stomach as he caught sight of Malfoy's pure white fur in the moonlight shining in through the window. He hadn't given the barest thought to rescuing the other boy's parents. He knew he had promised Malfoy he would, but what with the Horcruxes, and Lupin and his birthday, he'd been distracted. Malfoy had tried to bring it up a couple of times, wanting to talk about strategies and where his parents were going to live, but Harry had waved him off. If he were completely honest with himself, he didn't much care if Lucius died.

*But Malfoy does*, said a sly voice, cutting across his thoughts, and Harry clenched his teeth. He had no illusions about Malfoy's loyalties ... if his parents, or his mother at least, weren't rescued, the Slytherin would disappear. He could now ... Harry had given him his wand back after all. Malfoy was far more dangerous now to them than he had been when they'd discovered him. He knew almost as much about the Horcruxes as Ron and Hermione did, and Harry fisted the sheets in his hands as he thought about how badly Voldemort would want that information.

It was a cold comfort to remember that the werewolves had seen Malfoy when they'd gone to Greenwood to rescue Remus. Voldemort wouldn't be pleased to know that Malfoy had helped destroy one of his Horcruxes. Besides, thought Harry, he doubted that Voldemort had ever told his Death Eaters about his Horcruxes in fear that one of them would try to destroy them. Like Sirius' brother, Harry remembered with a jolt.

Harry hesitated for a moment before he reached his hand underneath his pillow. Cold, smooth metal brushed against his fingers, and he dragged the locket towards him by its chain.

He stared at it, running the tips of his fingers over the serpentine S engraved in the gold. How had Regulus found out about it? From what Harry had gleaned over the years, it was Sirius who

everyone said was brilliant. No one ever talked about Regulus like that; in fact, Harry hadn't even known that Sirius had a brother until Sirius had told him the summer before fifth year. Harry thought that Regulus had known Voldemort had made more than one Horcrux, but Harry had no idea how Regulus had learned that, or how he had found out about the cave and the locket.

Harry frowned. How could Regulus have known that the cave would conceal the locket? The basin with the potion that had weakened Dumbledore hadn't revealed the locket until after Dumbledore had drunk the last drop. Dumbledore had said that he couldn't have completed the mission without Harry's help; how had Regulus managed? The boat that allowed them to cross the lake would only give passage to one person of age, and Harry doubted that Regulus had an underaged companion when he went to the cave. It had only been Regulus' initials on the note. So how had he managed to drink the potion, find water without alerting the Inferi, and get himself back to Number Twelve, Grimmauld place in one piece?

Ron grunted loudly, and Harry, who was tense and agitated by his thoughts, jumped at the sound, his heart beating madly.

Harry threw the covers back quickly, kicking his legs out of his sheets. He had to tell Ron, had to tell him ...

Harry paused, frowning. What would he tell Ron? That he didn't know how Regulus had gotten the Horcrux? Hermione might have been interested in discovering more about Regulus' past, but not at two o'clock in the morning.

Harry looked half-heartedly at Malfoy, but he didn't think the Slytherin would appreciate being a sounding board for Harry's questions either, especially not when Harry had yet to even think about a rescue plan for the Malfoys.

Reluctantly, Harry drew the covers back over his body and pushed the locket back under the pillow. He tried to think more about Regulus, but he kept getting distracted by thoughts about Malfoy's situation. He had no idea how he was supposed to rescue Narcissa Malfoy, let alone Lucius. Could he Apparate into Malfoy Manor? He didn't think Azkaban's wards would permit Apparation, and now that the Dementors had abandoned their post, what new security measures were being taken? He imagined himself pitted against dozens of Aurors, and he grimaced.

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Draco woke up before the others did the next morning, and he wrinkled his nose at the sight of

Weasley drooling on his pillow. Honestly, how Granger tolerated him ...

He looked over at Potter and was surprised to see a frown on the Gryffindor's face, as though he were thinking about something of immense importance.

Not his parents' rescue mission then, he thought bitterly.

He'd tried to bring it up a couple of times, but Potter had put him off, saying he was too busy with the Horcruxes. But from what Draco had seen, the Gryffindors hadn't made any headway in their search for the fragments of the Dark Lord's soul. They had taken turns going in Dumbledore's Pensieve, but after a few weeks of dutiful searching, Potter and Weasley had taken to looking for memories of their parents and old Quidditch games.

He kicked the tea towel he had used as a blanket off of him and stared around Weasley's room. From the light streaming in the window, he could see that it was shockingly orange, clashing magnificently with Weasley's red hair, and cramped. There was hardly room for the second bed. Weasley's feet dangled off his too short bed, just as his would if he had been given the bed and not a nest of old shirts to sleep on. He was viciously amused to see that Potter wasn't too big for his bed, but Potter had always been a runty little thing.

Unexpectedly, Draco's tail lashed as the image of the cupboard under the stairs came to his mind. His lips curled back, revealing his sharp teeth, and he snarled. He wasn't quite sure why he hadn't told Granger and Weasley about it, but just thinking about Potter's cupboard made him want to *Crucio* the Dursleys. It was disgusting, insufferable that Muggles had treated a wizard, even a Half-Blood, as though he were beneath them.

There was a knock at the door, but Potter and Weasley slept through it. Draco tensed in his makeshift bed, his stomach knotting as he remembered how the twins had wanted to use him for animal testing. All night they had been eyeing him with thoughtful looks on their faces. He shuddered, his dark eyes scanning the room quickly for a hiding space.

But it wasn't the twins.

A very handsome man with silver hair stepped into the room with a small present in his hands. Draco watched him carefully, keeping himself very still so as not to attract attention, but the stranger saw him anyway. He raised his eyebrows at Draco, his eyes sparkling, before he walked with catlike grace across the room to Potter's bed. He leaned over, his long hair cascading like a silver waterfall, and did something that made the fur on Draco's body stand.

He kissed Potter.

On the lips.

Helpless to do anything more threatening than snarl and shred Weasley's clothing with his claws, he watched as the stranger brushed back Potter's hair tenderly before setting the present at the foot of the bed and standing up. As he passed Draco he winked, and reached his hand out to pet him.

Draco sank his teeth into the tender flesh between the thumb and forefinger as hard as he could, tasting blood, and the man swore in French. Draco felt a burst of pain in his stomach, and he flinched away from the man, curling in on himself. He looked up in time to see him put his wand away, and still snarling in French, he left the room.

Black spots danced before Draco's eyes as the pain rolled through him, and he struggled to take in breath. As he lay there, trembling from the pain, he berated himself. What on earth had possessed him to attack a wizard when he was wandless, not even human? What did he care if strangers were kissing Potter? It wasn't like Potter wasn't gay. He didn't even *like* Potter.

And yet ...

He didn't regret it.

It was too surreal for him, and he laughed wheezingly. He nearly choked on the blood that rose in his throat, and it was that sound that woke up Weasley.

"Wha ime izzit?" Weasley yawned, his eyes still closed.

Potter grunted and rolled on his side.

"Harry?" asked Ron, his voice still thick from sleep, but Draco saw his eyes were open. When Weasley saw that Potter was still asleep, he looked about the room, squinting at the light streaming through the window. When his eyes rested on Draco they lingered.

"Good morning," he mumbled.

Draco glared at him.

Weasley sat up, scrubbing the sleep out of his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nostrils. "Mum's made sausages," he said. "Excellent. Harry," he said, stretching his long leg out and nudging Potter. "Breakfast ... wake up."

If Draco's body wasn't still rippling in pain, it might have been amusing to see Potter get out of bed. He was even less than a morning person than Weasley, and he seemed to be fighting a losing battle with his tangled sheets. As he kicked his legs free he knocked the present to the floor, and blinked, startled.

"Who's it from?" he wondered, reaching over to pick it up. There was no card.

Weasley shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe Tonks is here."

Harry stared at the expertly wrapped gift. "Don't you think it's a little too ... " he trailed off, gesturing to the package.

"Good?" offered Ron, grinning. "Maybe there's a spell for that sort of thing. Go on," he urged.

But Harry remembered the spell Tonks had used to pack his trunk when she and the Order came to pick him up two summers ago. She couldn't even fold socks.

"Yeah, okay," he said, beginning to tear at the package.

A small white box was underneath the paper, and Harry opened that too. Pale gold tissue crinkled around his fingers as he dug through it. "There's nothing in it," he said.

"What?" said Ron, sounding surprised. "Dump it out."

When the box was upturned, both boys dug through the tissue until they found a small piece of paper with words on it. "It's a spell," said Harry doubtfully.

"Try it!" said Ron, sounding excited.

Harry hesitated. The last time he had tried a spell without knowing what it was he had nearly killed Malfoy in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "Yeah, maybe later. Your mum made sausages?"

Ron didn't say anything more about the spell, and Harry tucked the scrap of paper into the pocket of his pajama trousers, before he reached over to pick up Malfoy.

"You okay?" he asked, frowning and staring at the ferret. Malfoy looked exhausted, and his tail, usually lively (particularly when he was digging his claws deliberately into Harry's skin) was limp.

"Ron, maybe we should turn him back. He looks like he's sick," said Harry.

Draco hissed at him, suddenly extremely angry with him, and Harry's eyebrows rose.

"Seems like his usual cheerful self," quipped Ron. "Bring him or leave him, mate, but Fred and George will have all the sausages if we don't get down there."

If Harry had any ideas about leaving Draco, they were quickly squashed by the look on Malfoy's face, and so the three of them went downstairs for breakfast.

"Ah, Harry dear," said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. "Look who's come to see you!"

Harry looked at the breakfast table and saw, sitting next to George, Navarre.

"Good morning, Harry. And Happy Belated Birthday," said Navarre warmly.

Draco snarled, baring his teeth. Navarre was the stranger who'd kissed Potter!

"Is he yours?" inquired Navarre pleasantly.

"Hi," said Harry, still a little stunned to see Navarre sitting at the Weasley's breakfast table. He felt cheeks flush as Navarre stared at the inch of skin that was revealed between his low-slung pajama pants and the sleeveless shirt that had been Dudley's when he was six.

"Harry got him about a month ago," said Fred, who had just Apparated in from upstairs. Ron quickly hurried to the table, immediately curling his arm around the plate of sausages protectively.

"How nice," said Navarre politely. "Orange juice, Harry?"

"Thanks," said Harry, but he wished Navarre hadn't offered. Now he had to sit across from him. Navarre was staring at him again, and Harry shifted uneasily in his chair. "Want some sausages, Draco?" he asked, pretending not to notice Navarre.

"Did you like your robe, Harry?" asked Navarre, tugging the plate of sausages out of Ron's grip before Ron could do anything about it and holding it across the table for Harry.

"Yeah, um, thanks," said Harry, looking up as he said this. Navarre smiled at him, the plate of sausages held between them. Feeling awkward and reminded all too much of his tea with Cho in Madam Puddifoot's, Harry mumbled another 'thanks' as he served himself some sausages.

"You gave Harry a robe for his birthday?" asked Fred, his eyes gleaming. Navarre nodded as he poured himself another cup of coffee, and Fred winked slyly at Harry.

Harry wanted to die.

He had only figured out he wasn't completely straight not even twenty-four hours ago. How could Navarre and Fred tell? Could other people tell? The one bite of sausage he'd had felt like lead in his stomach as a horrifying thought occurred to him.

Had Malfoy known Harry had been checking him out?

"What color is it?"

Harry blinked. "Sorry, what?"

"The robe, dear," said Mrs. Weasley before slapping Ron's hand with the wooden spoon. "Leave some for the girls," she snapped.

"Black," said Harry. Fred winked at him again, and George raised his eyebrows in a roguish waggle. Harry felt as though he could roast an egg on his face. He focused his entire attention on feeding Draco small bits of sausage from his fingers, and whenever he saw that Navarre was about to say something, Harry began an animated conversation with Ron about Quidditch.

When Hermione and Ginny came downstairs, Harry hurriedly jumped up to offer them his seat.

"There's plenty of space down here," said George breezily. He turned to Navarre. "Our Harry's always such the gentleman."

"Remember when you saved everything in that game when Smith was commenting?" said Harry quickly. "I remember you had that really great save on that shot from Urquhart."

But Ron's mouth was so full of eggs and potatoes that all he could do was nod.

Harry heard Navarre take in breath, and Harry acted upon the first idea that came to mind.

"Draco wants a shower," he blurted, standing up quickly. "Now."

Ron choked.

*"I do?"*

"Thanks for breakfast and all, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry, already halfway to the stairs. When he reached them, he took them two at a time. He all but ran to Ron's room, grabbed his wand, and then locked himself in the bathroom.

*"Finite!"*

Purple smoke bloomed in large clouds, and he hoped no one would notice it billowing out into the hallway underneath the door. Harry hardly waited for Malfoy to be human again before he said, "If you want to shower today, now's your chance."

Draco gritted his teeth, leaning against the sink as he tried not to cry out in pain. Malfoys show no weaknesses.

Potter rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm not going stare at you or ... " he said hotly.

Draco looked furiously at him, two high points of color appearing on his cheeks. Couldn't Potter just be quite for a minute? Just until he gathered the strength to breathe without wanting to Stun himself from the pain?

Slowly, feeling his fingers shake as he did so, Draco gathered the hem of his shirt and pulled it up over his head, allowing himself one brief grimace of pain when the material covered his face.

He heard Potter's sharp intake of breath, and the next moment he felt the Gryffindor's fingers digging into his arm. "What's this from?" Potter asked sharply.

Draco looked down and saw an enormous bruise across his stomach. He wondered what hex Navarre had used on him, or if it had just been because his ferret form was so much weaker.

"Malfoy!" hissed Potter, looking angry.

Draco shook himself out of Potter's grasp. "You wanna go first or shall I?" he drawled, keeping his voice deliberately light. Anyone in Slytherin would have changed the subject after that, but not Potter.

"Malfoy ... "

"Drop it," he growled, stripping. He might not regret attacking Nevarre, but he wasn't about to let Potter know that. Whatever spell Navarre had given Potter, Draco doubted it was dangerous. It was probably something romantic, he thought scoffing.

Potter looked like he was about to explode, and an idea came to Draco.

"I'll tell you after you've rescued my parents," he said coolly, leveling a challenging look at the Gryffindor.



Potter's mouth snapped shut.

Draco smiled bitterly before yanking the shower curtain across, cutting off Potter's view.

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"Did you leave any hot water for the rest of us?" joked Fred when Harry came back downstairs. "Navarre had to go, but he says he'll try to stop by for dinner tonight."

Harry wasn't the only one who looked unhappy. Hermione was glaring with such intensity that Harry raised his eyebrows. There wasn't a moment until later that day, however, for him to ask her about it.

"He uses house-elves in his factories," she hissed, her eyes flashing furiously as she violently peeled the carrots.

That she could have spelled the peels off of the carrots, but hadn't, spoke volumes.

"Do you know where they sleep, Harry?" she asked, her voice taunt with anger. She slashed the peeler across the carrot so viciously the carrot snapped, and Draco had to dodge the flying chunk of carrot. "Underneath their sewing tables. To 'cut expenses.'"

"But how does he get around giving them clothes and not having them be set free?" wondered Harry.

Hermione's face was dark. "It's a public company, which means all of the stockholders are the masters. Every single one of them would need to give a piece of clothing in order for their contract to be broken."

Draco was impressed.

Suddenly, the fireplace roared to life, and Harry and Hermione and Draco all turned to see who had arrived.

It was Tonks.

"He's awake!" she shouted, her hair blindingly bright. The soot clung to her tear-stained cheeks, and hair and clothes, but it was obvious that she didn't even notice this.

"Remus is awake?" said Harry, a grin splitting his face, too.

Tonks crushed him and Hermione in a tight hug. "He says he saw you save him," she said. "He can't wait to see you."

Both Hermione and Harry stiffened in Tonks' embrace, and their eyes met. Hermione's eyes were wide with worry, and Harry knew they were thinking the same thing.

Remus had seen Malfoy.

"Where are the others ... what a cute ferret!" cried Tonks, beaming at Draco, who was frozen on the counter, staring at the cousin he had only seen twice before in his life ... the other time had been at the battle at Hogwarts.

"He doesn't like to be picked ... " Harry trailed off when Draco let Tonks pick him up.

"Madam Pomfrey says we can all go visit him for a little bit," said Tonks. "What's his name?" she asked, putting her face dangerously close to Draco's teeth.

"Draco," said Harry, a pleading look on his face as he stared at Draco, willing him not to swipe his claws across Tonks' face.

But Draco allowed Tonks' to cuddle him for a moment before squirming in her grip, and then Tonks transferred him gently to Harry.

There were three sharp Cracks! before Ron, Fred, and George appeared in the kitchen, carrying laundry baskets.

"Wotcher, Tonks," said Ron. He caught sight of Tonks' hair and looked questioningly at Harry, who nodded.

"How's Remus?" asked Fred.

"Awake!" said Tonks happily.

George and Fred cheered, and Ron grinned. "Can we see him?" he asked.

"Yes! Get everybody and meet me there," said Tonks, throwing her arms around Ron in a brief hug before hurrying back to the fireplace, bumping into the table only twice on the way.

"Hogwarts, Hospital Wing," she cried, throwing a handful of Floo Powder into the flames and disappearing.

"We'll get Ginny and your parents," said Hermione quickly to Fred and George. "You go on ahead."

Fred and George disappeared in the same swirl of green flames as Tonks had, and as soon as they were gone, Harry and Hermione turned to Ron.

"Tonks said Lupin remembers us saving him," said Hermione in a low voice.

Ron's eyes widened and his eyes flickered nervously over to Draco. "Then ... "

Harry's mouth was set in a grim line. "Probably," he said.

Hermione looked thoughtful. "I don't think he's told Tonks, though," she said. "Which means he's waiting for us to get there."

Harry was nervous, and Draco could feel how clammy his hands were when Potter picked him up. Draco was nervous too. What would happen to him if the werewolf *did* remember him?

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sent them on ahead while they notified other members of the Order. Madam Pomfrey flicked a Cleaning Spell at them as soon as they stepped past the grate, and Harry winced at the feeling of being extremely clean.

"Here they are, Remus," said Tonks excitedly, and the twins and Hagrid and Professor McGonagall moved to let Harry, Ron, and Hermione through.

"Hi, Harry, Ron, Hermione," said Lupin softly, and Harry's breath caught as he stared at his former professor.

Lupin was thinner, and paler than Harry could ever remember seeing him. He had thought that the healing coma would have restored Lupin, but instead it seemed to have drained him.

"I was septic," Lupin explained. "The bite from a werewolf is a curse bite even for werewolves if they are in their human form. I had to be purged." A shudder went through Lupin, and Tonks squeezed his hand in support.

"If it weren't for you three," said Professor McGonagall, her Scottish brogue very strong as she blinked her eyes rapidly, "Lupin would not be here today."

Draco let their conversation wash over him, not even hearing what Hagrid and Potter were saying. He was staring resolutely at the foot of Lupin's bed, even though he could feel the man's eyes staring at him.

He didn't know what to think about Lupin not having told anyone yet about seeing him at Greenwood. Did Lupin owe him a life debt? Was that why he'd stayed silent? But it hadn't solely been Draco who had rescued Lupin, and Draco wondered if it might not be for some other reason that Lupin kept his secret.

"Can I please speak with Harry, Ron and Hermione alone?" asked Lupin.

Harry found he couldn't look Tonks in the eye when she passed him on her way out of the Hospital Wing. But Tonks clapped him on the shoulder, and whispered, "Thank you."

Warmth filled Harry, and he knew that even though the situation wasn't ideal, and even though Tonks probably hated being excluded from whatever Lupin was going to say to them, she didn't hold it against them. Harry was reminded suddenly that Tonks, in spite of all of her clumsiness and pink hair, was an Auror.

When Madam Pomfrey had shut the door to her office, Lupin put up a Silencing Charm. "Thank you," he said, smiling at them.

Hermione was the first to speak. "Tonks said you remember us saving you?"

Lupin shook his head, and relief sang through Harry until he heard what Lupin next said.

"I remember Draco Malfoy saving me."

Draco stiffened in Harry's hands, and when Lupin pointed his wand at him, he dug his claws in Harry's skin, fighting against Harry's restraint.

"I'm not going to hurt him," said Lupin mildly, and Harry reluctantly set Draco down on the bed.

Draco's heart pounded madly in his chest when he saw Lupin point his wand at him again, but it was a familiar feeling that washed over him when Lupin's spell hit him.

Lupin wrinkled his nose at the purple smoke, and Hermione Vanished it quickly.

Human now, Draco watched Lupin warily, but Lupin only looked thoughtfully at him before turning to the others. "Voldemort is going to go after the Muggle-borns," he said quietly, his voice rough.

Ron cleared his throat. "He's always gone after the Muggle-borns," he pointed out.

The look Lupin gave him was anything but mild, and Ron reddened.

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione, her voice tight.

Lupin clenched the sheets in his hands and was silent for a moment. "There is a book at the Ministry of Magic and at Hogwarts that keeps a record of all Muggle-borns," he said.

"Voldemort plans to steal one of those books."

Harry felt sick.

"You mean he's going to find them?" asked Hermione, her voice shrill.

"Some were going to be a gift to Greyback," said Lupin. He smiled darkly. "But as he's dead now, I believe that Voldemort will murder all of them."

The others looked horrified, but Draco just felt numb. Who was going to steal the book? Who was going to kill the Mudbloods? Would Snape come looking for him? The Order must know ... they must be prepared to use their copy of the book to counter the Dark Lord's plan. Would his mother be sent out to purge the blood taint?

A warm hand touched his shoulder, and Draco looked up in surprise to see Lupin looking serious at him. "Thank you for saving my life," he said somberly.

Draco could only nod, suddenly wishing he were back in the kitchen, fixing the toaster.

"Why are you telling us this?" asked Hermione.

"Because you're in the Order now," said Lupin. "Formally that is," he added with a wry smile.

Ron's mouth dropped. "Since when?" he demanded.

Lupin waved vaguely. "Professor McGonagall told me before you came. She didn't tell you?" he asked innocently, his eyes twinkling.

"How are we going to keep them safe?" asked Harry, abruptly bringing the conversation back to its serious bent.

Hermione was silent, but Draco noticed that she tensed after Potter spoke. Draco didn't care if it were selfish ... he was furious with Potter for thinking about the Mudbloods when he'd promised he'd rescue his parents.

Lupin opened his mouth to speak when he suddenly cocked his head to the side. "Turn Draco

back into a ferret," he said quickly. "Pomfrey's coming."

Hermione Vanished the smoke before Madam Pomfrey could see it, and she shooed them away, saying Lupin needed to nap.

They said goodbye to Lupin and hurried out into the hallway. As soon as they were out of sight of the Hospital Wing, Draco clawed at Harry until the Gryffindor put him down on the floor.

"What's wrong with you," Harry hissed, dabbing at the blood on his arm.

"I think he wants to be human," said Hermione. "Let's go in here," she said, pushing open the door to a classroom. She flicked her wand at Draco, and he turned back into a human.

"What the hell is your problem?" asked Harry angrily.

Draco's eyes flared. "*You're* my problem, Potter," he spat. "You swore you'd rescue my parents, and you haven't even thought about it, and now you want to go off and rescue some Mudbloods?"

"Watch your mouth!" said Ron angrily.

"He has a point, Harry," said Hermione quietly. Ron and Harry stared at her, but Hermione held her ground. "It's not our job to save the Muggle-borns," she said, her voice wavering slightly.

Harry scoffed. "You don't even believe what you're saying."

"Yes I do!" she said, her eyes flashing. "I know it's horrible what Voldemort is planning to do. Of course I do ... I'm a Muggle-born! But don't you see, Harry? None of it's going to stop until we destroy the Horcruxes."

"So you're saying we should just let Voldemort kill them? They're just kids, Hermione!" said Harry heatedly.

Hermione took in a shaky breath before she looked at Harry directly in the face and said, "Just because you're not saving them doesn't mean they won't be saved."

Harry flinched.

"Oh I see," he said loudly. "You think this is a saving-people thing again."

"Don't be an ass," snapped Draco. "She's right, and you know it. You just don't give a shit about

my parents and would rather go do something that's going to make you feel good rather than doing what you gave your word to do."

Harry glared at him. "Your parents are Death Eaters," he snarled. "These are innocent children."

Draco clenched his teeth. Potter didn't care about his parents, he knew that. He'd always known that. But damn it, Potter had promised! It disgusted him that he was forced to hope that keeping your word meant something to Potter ... promises to anyone that wasn't family had always been empty to Draco. But he didn't have anything else to use against the Gryffindor. If he threatened to run away, Potter and his friends would prevent it. Even if he did manage to escape, where would he go? If he went back to the Manor what would be waiting for him? The Dark Lord would use Legilimency or Veritaserum on him and then kill him to keep him from telling anyone else. Even if somehow he managed to rescue his parents, where would they live? Karkaroff had lasted for a year. How long would the Malfoys last when both sides hunted for them?

He was trapped. There was hardly any difference between Potter and the Dark Lord ... both wanted to use him for their own ends.

If only he had accepted Dumbledore's offer before the other Death Eaters had come in. He could have helped Dumbledore fly to safety, and Dumbledore could have gotten the Order to rescue his parents.

Distantly, he could hear Granger and Potter and Weasley arguing.

Potter didn't value his parents' lives, and Draco desperately needed him to. Potter knew Draco didn't have any options other than the ones he offered him. He had nothing to offer ...

Draco held himself very still, his mind fairly spinning as the possibilities made themselves known to him.

"Potter," he said loudly so as to be heard. "Potter, I know where to find a book on Horcruxes."

Potter's head swiveled in his direction. "What?" he said sharply. "Where?"

Draco licked his lips. "At my home ... in the library. It's how I found out what Horcruxes were."

Weasley snorted. "He's lying," he scoffed.

"I'll show you the memory in a Pensieve," snapped Draco. "We can get into the Manor, get the

book, and be gone in less than an hour. I know all of the secret passageways ... we could go tonight and by morning you could go and save Mud ... Muggle-borns."

Potter's eyes narrowed. "What do you want in return?"

"My mother."



## Chapter 18

"Fine," said Harry coolly. "We'll go tonight. Your mum can have your room and you can sleep on the couch. Then we'll go after the rest of the Horcruxes."

The naked relief on Malfoy's face was unbearable, and Harry turned toward the door, not able to look at him any longer.

"How can you choose a *Death Eater* over innocent children?" demanded Ron, standing in front of Harry's path to the door.

Harry glared back at him. "I'm not," he said heatedly. "I'm going after the Horcruxes, like I have to, and I can't do that without the book."

"You don't even know that the book, if it even exists," said Ron, almost yelling now, "will even tell you anything worth knowing about the Horcruxes."

"It does," interjected Draco coldly. "I couldn't get into it far enough because Father came in ... "

Ron's head snapped in Draco's direction. "You mean your daddy wasn't pleased to see you reading how to become an evil dark lord?" he sneered.

"Ron," snapped Harry. "Just drop it." He ran his hands through his hair, feeling the beginnings of a fierce headache coming on. "He said he'd show us in a Pensieve if we didn't believe him. What more can you ... "

Ron sneered. "You mean because it's him."

This surprised Harry. "What?" he demanded.

"Ron," said Hermione sharply.

"No, go on," said Harry loudly, feeling a coil of anger burn in his stomach. This wasn't the first time this summer that Ron or Hermione had started to say something only to cut themselves off. He had seen those odd glances that they had been casting at him and Malfoy when they thought he wasn't looking. They made him angry just to think of it, and he was primed for a fight. "What do you mean, 'because it's him'?"

Ron suddenly looked uncomfortable, and his eyes flickered behind Harry.

"Forget it," mumbled Ron, not looking at Harry.

Harry curled his fingers into a fist. "Fine," he said shortly, and he stepped past Ron.

"Harry, we need to talk about tonight," Hermione called after him, but Harry pretended that he hadn't heard her as the door swung shut behind him.

"That was really clever, Ron," snapped Hermione. She made a sound like an angry cat and glared at him.

"Well do *you* think it's a good idea?" retorted Ron. "I think it's bloody mental to go walking into the viper's nest for some book on Horcruxes that we're not even sure is there ... " Ron gestured angrily at Malfoy with his hands ... "and then go hunting for Horcruxes when we have no idea where they are, when we could be saving lives."

Draco laughed hollowly. "Sometimes you have to sacrifice the few to save the many," he said cynically. "They're just Mudbloods anyway."

"No, Ron, stop it," said Hermione firmly, fisting the material on the back of Ron's robes. "He's right."

Ron craned over his shoulder, staring at Hermione's determined face with disbelief. Before he could say anything, Hermione continued, her eyes fixed on Draco, who was turned away and staring at the door Harry had just walked through. "If we keep trying to stop Voldemort at every turn instead of destroying the Horcruxes, then we're always going to be trying to stop him."

"Yeah, but ... "

"But if we sacrifice a few," Hermione continued as though she hadn't heard him, "and Harry kills Voldemort, then in the end, we win."

Ron jerked out of her grip. "Would you be saying that if it were me, or Harry, or your parents?" he challenged.

Hermione was quiet, and Ron flinched.

"You do whatever you want, Hermione," he said, his voice rough. "But I'm in the Order." He walked quickly to the door and fumbled with the doorknob for a moment before pulling it open and letting it fall gently behind him.

Hermione bowed her head, her face obscured by her long hair.

Draco swallowed several times before he thought he could speak. Granger didn't move once in the minutes of silence that followed.

"You didn't mean that," he said shrewdly. "About you being willing to sacrifice Potter and the Weasel. Why'd you say it?"

Hermione sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes before turning around. Her face was splotchy and red, and her eyes wet. She smiled weakly at him. "We promised we'd stick with Harry no matter what," she said quietly.

"But to the Weasel they were just words," Draco said, his voice hard.

Hermione shook her head. "No. Ron's been there a lot for Harry." Her eyes flashed. "You've only been his boyfriend for a month. Ron's been his best friend for six years. So don't you start thinking that you know everything about Harry."

Draco forced himself to keep his face blank. He had thought that Potter would have found out when Weasley had claimed that the only reason Potter was agreeing to his bargain was because Draco was his boyfriend. Draco curled his toes in his shoes until he winced. That would have been terrible.

Hermione frowned. "He hasn't even *talked* with us about you," she said.

"Potter's a very private person," said Draco quickly, keeping his voice deliberately light.

Hermione looked suspiciously at him. "Why do you still call him Potter?" she asked.

Faking an air of casualness that he didn't really feel, Draco shrugged. "Do I ask you the details of your love life, Granger?"

-

Harry pushed through a curtain pretending to be a wall with such force that the heavy cloth knocked his glasses askew. His lip curled as he fixed his glasses. "Bloody prat," he snarled as he strode through the secret passageway, the headache he had felt the beginning of in the empty room now a full-blown anvil pounding in his head.

He didn't know who he was angrier with: Ron or Malfoy. His hands balled into fists as he recalled Ron's angry face. Why couldn't Ron understand the larger picture? Did Ron think he

liked the idea of not going with the Order that night to rescue those Muggle-borns? Hot fury soared through Harry. If it hadn't been for him, they'd never have rescued Lupin and they'd never have found out about Voldemort's plan for the Muggle-borns.

Harry's pace quickened, and the staccato of his footsteps in the empty hallway rang through his ears as his thoughts churned in his head. Who was Ron to judge him about his decisions when Ron had no idea what it was like to have a prophecy made about him? The most responsibility Ron'd ever had was not letting the Quaffle past him, he thought bitterly.

Instantly, shame burned through Harry, and he wished he could take the thought back. When they were going for the Philosopher's stone, it had been Ron who had sacrificed himself to let Harry and Hermione go ahead. Ron could be an idiot, like *now*, he thought bitterly, but he was fiercely loyal. Which was what was so infuriating about Ron's not understanding why Harry had to go after the Horcruxes instead of helping the Order ... a thought which made the breakfast Mrs. Weasley had made churn uneasily in his stomach.

Had Dumbledore ever had to make that kind of choice? It was easy enough to sacrifice yourself for others, but to sacrifice innocent children for the greater good? Harry was marginally comforted by the fact that the Order would be launching a counter-attack against the Death Eater's efforts, but he knew there would be casualties, maybe even fatalities among the children. Would his presence make a difference? He had gone against Voldemort six times, and Death Eaters too. If he could save even just one life ...

Not having been paying attention to where he had been going, Harry turned a corner and walked straight into a soft wall that grunted when he hit it. Harry scrambled away, tripping over his feet and falling with a hard *smack* against the floor.

"Harry m'boy!"

"Professor Slughorn?" gasped Harry, stunned to see the Potions professor smoothing his waistcoat of any wrinkles the collision had made. Harry scrambled to his feet, feeling his face flush.

"Hi," he said. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask why Slughorn hadn't left immediately after Dumbledore's funeral, as Harry had expected him to. After all, the only reason Slughorn had agreed to teach Potions was for the protection the school offered, right? "What're you doing here?" he blurted out.

Slughorn looked just as surprised to see Harry as Harry had been to see him. "It's my office," he said, flicking his eyes up at the engraved brass plate on the door. "I've just been to the owlery,

sending a letter to Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the *Daily Prophet*. He wanted to know my opinion on a new layout for the front page." Slughorn bounced on the balls of his feet, looking self-satisfied.

"Oh," said Harry lamely.

"What're you doing here? That's what I should like to know," said Slughorn, flicking his wand at the lock on his door with a complicated flick of his wrist.

Thinking quickly, Harry said, "Oh, I, just came to say hi to Hagrid. Actually, I should probably be g ... "

"You must come in and have a drink!" said Slughorn jovially, forcefully ushering Harry into his office. Cauldrons of different metals and sizes were gently hovering over low flames. "I've been meaning to owl you about a little something I've thought up for the Slug Club. I thought maybe this year it'd be fun to have Sunday brunches together ... "

"What's that, Professor?" interrupted Harry, feigning eager interest in a large bronze cauldron full of what he knew to be a Hiccoughing Solution.

Slughorn barely glanced at the cauldron. "Hiccoughing Solution," he said. "I was thinking that we could have them here in my office. The Great Hall can be very noisy, and while that is attractive in some cases ... "

"You don't have any more Felix Felicis, do you, Professor?" asked Harry, doing his very best to sound casual, but he could feel his hands sweating. If they could use it that night, when they rescued Mrs. Malfoy and the Horcrux book ...

Slughorn's shaggy eyebrows rose in forehead. "Felix Felicis?" He laughed in a booming voice. "Heavens, no, Harry! Gave it all to Dumbledore. That and the Veritaserum." Slughorn's eyes twinkled. "I showed your Drought of Living Death to Dumbledore before I decanted it. He was most impressed."

"Oh ... Sir ... " Harry hesitated, wondering if he would scare Slughorn off with his next question. "Sir, why did you let the Polyjuice Potion stay in the classroom? Why didn't you give that to Dumbledore, too?"

Slughorn looked surprised. "It was a fine potion," he said gruffly. "Best Polyjuice I'd ever made, and it had been several years, mind you."

Harry stared at him, his ears ringing, and he fought the urge to throw the cauldron of Hiccoughing Solution at him. Slughorn had kept the potion out of sentimental reasons? Malfoy had siphoned off who knew how many vials of Polyjuice, forcing Crabbe and Goyle to turn into girls and be lookouts for him while he was in the Room of Requirement. Harry rubbed his head, his headache pounding behind his eyes. He wanted to tell Slughorn what his vanity had cost others, and had opened his mouth when he remembered how pale and shaken Slughorn had been when he'd learned that it was Snape who had killed Dumbledore. Harry couldn't bring himself to tell Slughorn about Malfoy stealing the Polyjuice, and so he shut his mouth.

Slughorn looked at him shrewdly. "Headache?" he asked sympathetically. When Harry nodded, Slughorn said, "I expect you could whip up a Headache Reliever Draft, but I just so happen to have some handy ... "

Slughorn walked behind his desk and pulled open a small drawer. "Always keep some on me. I find that my friends' important jobs are often stressful. They always appreciate a good Headache Reliever Draft. The ones sold in Diagon Alley are of questionable quality," he said smugly.

Harry downed the vial gratefully, and as he was handing Slughorn the empty vial he noticed a small gold-colored cauldron from which spiraling vapors curled in the air. Slughorn saw where he was looking and smiled.

"Ah yes. Amortentia. Something to remind us of better days," said Slughorn. There was a dreamy look on his face as he stared at the spiraling vapors fogging the windowpane.

"But times have changed," said Slughorn abruptly, and he moved away from his desk and towards the window. "I wonder what you'll smell now."

"No, that's okay," said Harry quickly. He wasn't sure what he would smell now that he was g ... not completely straight, he amended quickly in his mind.

"Nonsense my dear boy," chuckled Slughorn as he flicked his wand at the cauldron, nodding in approval when it began to gently float towards them. "Elladora Peverell herself said the seduction of the senses was something to be enjoyed."

"Peverell?" echoed Harry, the name sounding strangely familiar.

Slughorn winked at him fondly. "Ho ho! Nothing less than the best student I've had in years," he said, poking Harry genially in the chest and in the next moment tugging Harry by the shoulder and closer to the cauldron, which was now resting on the desk. "Of course you'd know about

one of the greatest Potion Mistresses in the course of history. You're a bit like her, you know, Harry," he said. "Her grandfather's genes came out in her just as your mother's do in you!"

Not having the foggiest clue who Elladora Peverell was, but unwilling to admit that, Harry nodded. "Yeah," he mumbled. "Listen, Professor, I really should be going ... Hagrid's waiting ..."

Slughorn chuckled. "Alright my boy; a whiff and you're off!"

He looked so expectantly at Harry that Harry had to bend over and inhale the fumes. Immediately, Harry recognized the woody smell of a broomstick handle, treacle tart, and the smell of coconuts. Startled at the last smell, and not able to explain it, Harry quickly straightened.

Slughorn clapped him on the back and said, "Give Hagrid my regards, Harry!"

Wordlessly, Harry nodded and left the office in a daze.

Coconuts? he wondered, hardly noticing where his feet carried him. A horrible thought hit him, and he was rooted to spot. For the briefest of moments, he entertained the hope that somehow Slughorn had brewed the potion incorrectly, but he knew that it was highly unlikely. After all, hadn't he smelled the broomstick and treacle tart? No, he thought, his stomach sinking. There was no other possible conclusion.

He was in love with Sirius.

He couldn't wrap his mind around it, but what else could it be? Sirius had sent him that tropical bird the summer before his fourth year. Hadn't he been delighted to see it? Hadn't he looked forward to Sirius' letters more than Ron and Hermione's? Weren't coconuts tropical? He couldn't remember the scent of coconuts in any of Sirius' letters, but perhaps it was an analogous sort of smell ...

*"Meow."*

Harry started at the sound of Mrs. Norris, who glared malevolently at him in the dusty light of an open doorway.

Quickly, Harry pivoted on his heel and began walking in the opposite direction. Running into Filch was not something he fancied. Filch had hated him passionately ever since he had found Harry standing next to a petrified Mrs. Norris.

"Potter!"

Harry clenched his teeth, wishing he had run not walked as soon as he had seen Mrs. Norris. Forcing his face into a smile, Harry turned around. "Hi, Mr. Filch," he said. Then, feeling that he might as well do it properly, he said, "Having a nice summer?"

Filch spat on the ground. "Not when you brats come here an' muck the castle back up."

"My shoes are clean," said Harry defensively.

Filch sneered. "Your nasty little girlfriend's brought a ferret, though. Think that's hygienic? Having rodents running about the castle?" He spat again and then looked lovingly at Mrs. Norris, who was circling at his feet, rubbing her body against his legs. Filch looked up and his face darkened. "And then she has the bloody nerve to try and kick Mrs. Norris for trying to catch the filthy thing when Mrs. Norris is only doing her job!"

Harry's eyebrows shot forward. Mrs. Norris tried to eat Draco? He was impressed that Hermione had tried to kick Filch's cat, a dear wish treasured by every Hogwarts student. He hurriedly escaped Filch, and as he made his way down to the room where he'd left Ron, Hermione, and Malfoy, he wondered how close Mrs. Norris had come to catching Malfoy. Had one of her claws caught him? How could Hermione have let the cat get so close to Malfoy? Why had Hermione Transfigured Malfoy back into a ferret?

Harry was practically running through the corridors, cursing himself for having wandered so far. He didn't stop to think about the fact that he had utterly forgotten that he was in love with his dead godfather.

Hermione looked askance at his sweaty face and out of breath state when he wrenched the door open.

"Harry?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"Is ... Malfoy okay?" he panted. "Saw Filch ... Mrs. Norris!"

"I'm fine Potter," drawled Malfoy, who was leaning against the wall. To Harry's relief, Malfoy looked as though he had escaped unscathed. "The Weasel's not coming tonight."

"What?" said Harry, and he looked at Hermione.

Hermione bit her lip. "He ... he's going to stay with the Order until the Muggle-borns are all



rescued," she said quietly, not looking him in the face.

Harry's breath caught in his chest, and he stared unseeingly at the wall, not looking at either Hermione or Malfoy. Ron wasn't coming? He felt as though a hole had been punched through his chest, and he remembered angrily Ron's promise to stand by him no matter what.

"Why?" he asked flatly, his voice hard.

"He thinks he's going to do more good rescuing the children," said Hermione softly. She blinked rapidly, her eyes filling with tears, and she looked at him. "Harry, we ... I ... told him that sometimes you have to sacrifice the few to save the many. And ... oh, Harry he asked if I had to choose between you and him or the greater good ... and I didn't say anything, and he thinks I meant the greater good, and ... "

She choked, tears streaming down her face.

Harry shook his head and cut across her. "It doesn't matter," he said dully. He laughed bitterly. "He's probably right anyway."

Draco frowned.

"Harry!" cried Hermione thickly. "Don't say that! We have two Horcruxes ... "

Harry exhaled harshly. "So?" he demanded, his voice loud. "We don't know how to destroy the locket, and I don't know about you, Hermione, but I don't have a clue what the other one is. Who knows if the last one's Nagini? It took Dumbledore years to get the ring; it ... " His voice broke as the fears he hadn't let himself voice forced themselves through his throat.

"What if he's made more?"

His words hung in the air, becoming a cold chain that he could feel strangling him as he waited for their reactions. Surely he couldn't be the only one who had thought about that, not after Greenwood. Voldemort's soul was mutilated, but hadn't Dumbledore made a point of noting that Voldemort's mind and magic were still intact? Someone had to have found out that Greyback was dead ... Voldemort had to have looked after his Horcrux. And if he found that the cup was missing, wouldn't he go looking for the other others?

"But ... but he found out that the diary had been destroyed, hadn't he?" said Draco slowly. Harry and Hermione looked at him. "And he didn't make any more, did he?" Draco shook his head.

"That was because that was an accident," shot Harry. "There were eyewitnesses at Greenwood ... one of them would have told ... "

Draco scoffed. "That's how the Order works, Potter," he said condescendingly. "No one wants to be the messenger." He couldn't quite suppress the shudder that went through him as he remembered what it was like to kneel before the Dark Lord and know you had failed to meet his expectations.

"Voldemort wouldn't give a Horcrux to Greyback without checking up on him," argued Harry.

Draco shrugged. "Then he's sent someone to check it out fairly recently. Greyback always came by after the full moon, and that was only a few nights ago."

He stiffened, and it didn't go unnoticed by Harry. "Snape," Draco said flatly. "He sent Snape to check up on the werewolves."

Hermione gasped, but Harry only nodded wearily. "I really hope your book is going to help," said Harry, looking Draco full in the eyes.

Draco's eyes didn't waver. "It will," he said seriously. "What about Weasley? Will he tell the Order about me?"

"No," said Hermione firmly. "Ron's loyal."

Draco raised an eyebrow and looked to Harry, who finally nodded in agreement. Draco sighed. For all their sakes he hoped the Weasel didn't betray them.

"We should probably go back to the Hospital Wing and tell everyone that ... that we can't be included in the mission," said Hermione carefully.

Harry could just imagine what they were going to say. Ever since he had found out about the Order of the Phoenix he had wanted to be part of it, resenting the many times he was told he was too young. Now, just when he had been inducted, he was going to back out of the most important mission of the summer for reasons he couldn't explain. Matters wouldn't be helped by the fact that Ron would be on the mission. He smiled grimly.

"Better get it over with," he said, trying not to pay attention to the greasy feeling in his stomach.

Draco didn't say anything when Harry pointed his wand at him to turn him into a ferret, but

Harry thought he saw a flash of sympathy in the other boy's eyes before he disappeared behind a cloud of smoke.

Draco was careful to not dig his claws into Potter's skin as they walked to the Hospital Wing. Granger used a spell to charm the redness out of her eyes and the puffiness from her nose, but she still looked a little pale. Potter, however, looked like a statue; his mouth was set in a hard line and he held his body like a tightly coiled snake, ready to strike at any given moment.

Madam Pomfrey admitted them with an agitated expression on her face. "A Hospital Wing is no place for such meetings," she muttered before shutting the door quickly behind them and locking it. She spotted Draco and her eyebrows rose. "Animals ... "

"It's alright, Madame Pomfrey," called Lupin from the bed. The other members of the Order were sitting on stools surrounding Lupin's hospital bed, and Ron looked at him challengingly from his place by his family.

The nurse shut her mouth with an audible click, but she looked sternly at Harry, her displeasure obvious on her face.

"Harry, Hermione, sit down," welcomed Remus, but his voice was somber. Despite being covered in blankets and propped up by pillows, Lupin's eyes looked sharp and alert. "We're just starting."

Hagrid smiled at him as Harry passed by, but Harry couldn't return the smile.

"Now then," said Lupin. "The letters to all of the prospective first years have already been sent out, but so far there have been no reported deaths in either the *Prophet* or the Muggle newspapers."

Dumbledore read the Muggle newspapers, too, Harry remembered. He wondered if Dumbledore had advised Lupin to do the same.

"However, Voldemort ... " there was a collective shudder from everyone but Harry, Ron, and Hermione ... "expected for them to all be changed into werewolves or dead before the first of September."

Grim silence met Lupin's words. Harry darted a look at Ron, who was watching Lupin intently, a determined look on his face.

"Minerva and I both agree that the best course of action is to bring the children to Hogwarts,"

said Lupin quietly. "We need everyone to be ready to ... "

"Hermione and I can't," blurted Harry.

Lupin blinked, startled at the interruption, and the rest of the Order, except for Ron, turned to stare at him in surprise.

"Why not?" asked Professor McGonagall sharply. "You've been wanting to be in the Order ... "

Harry cut across her. "Yeah, I know ... but ... er ... Hermione and I have something to do," he said, hating how feeble his words sounded.

"Can't it wait?" asked Mr. Weasley, hardly managing to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

Harry shook his head. "It can't," he said firmly. He licked his dry lips. "Actually, Hermione and I won't be able to do anything until it's done."

His words were met by silence, although it was clear how agitated, disappointed and angry the others were.

"Does this have something to do with where you and Dumbledore went?" asked McGonagall sharply. Hagrid shifted uneasily in the two seats he was taking up.

Harry nodded.

"Why only you and Hermione?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Why not Ron?"

"Mum," muttered Ron, his face flushing. He looked challengingly at Harry.

"Ron thinks that he's going to be doing the most good by staying with the Order," said Hermione, speaking for the first time.

"But you don't," said Lupin, frowning.

Hermione hesitated. "Ron will be doing good," she said finally. She looked her boyfriend full in the face. "Harry and I are really proud of him," she said, her voice strong.

Ron looked away, and Hermione's shoulders sagged.

Harry clenched his teeth and stood up so abruptly that he nearly dislodged Draco from his arms. If he and Hermione could see where Ron was coming from why couldn't Ron do the same? "Right, then," he said briskly. "See you."

As the door shut quietly behind them, Harry heard Lupin say, "Ron, you and your brothers are going to go to Liverpool tonight and...."

## Chapter 19

Harry bent over his trunk and flipped the lid open, roughly pushing aside books and crumpled papers and candy wrappers. Where was it? He pulled an old Weasley sweater from under his fifth year Transfiguration text and tossed it on the floor. Had Ron even put it back in his trunk after using it to sneak up on Hermione in the shower? He dug his hands further beneath old junk until he felt his knuckles scrape against the wood at the bottom of the trunk. He pushed his hand forward, searching and ...

"*Shit!*" he swore, taking in deep breaths of air and resisting the urge to yank his hand free.

"Potter?"

Harry didn't respond.

Wincing, he very carefully brushed his hand against what had cut him. It was something cold and smooth ... he dragged his finger further along until he found the edge, and the sharp side stung his finger again. He could feel blood running down his hand, but curiosity compelled him to drag the object to where he could see it.

It was a broken piece of a mirror.

Sirius' mirror.

"Potter?"

Harry turned around, his expression caught between shock and rage and something Draco thought might be hurt.

"Potter?" he asked again for the third time. Draco's eyebrows rose when he caught sight of Potter's bleeding hand clutching something that caught the light. "What the hell did you do to your hand?"

"I cut it," said Potter, his voice sounding wooden.

Draco rolled his eyes. "That's obvious," he snapped. "On what?"

Potter hesitated a moment before he uncurled his hand and Draco saw a shard glass ... no, a piece of a mirror, stained with Potter's blood. Potter's expression was unfathomable as he

stared at his hand.

"Where's the Invisibility Cloak?" asked Draco finally.

"I don't know," said Potter, looking up from his hand. "I told Ron to put it back in the trunk after he ... " Potter abruptly stopped, a defensive look on his face. He suddenly noticed that Malfoy was wearing nothing but a towel again, and his hair was dripping. He felt suddenly very warm around the neck and ears, and he couldn't help how his eyes flickered nervously to the angry bruise on Draco's stomach.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "And?" he drawled, a smirk on his lips. "What did Weasley do this time?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Potter, agitated now. "Go help Hermione get ready."

"With pleasure," sneered Draco, and he left Harry holding the broken piece of mirror in his hand, shutting the door firmly behind him.

It hadn't seemed right to tell Malfoy about Ron using the cloak to surprise Hermione, thought Harry as he inspected his cut. Already the blood had dried and he pointed his wand at it, and muttered, "*Tergeo*."

He heard muffled voices from the living room, and he frowned. He had thought Hermione and Malfoy had been getting along better. Malfoy's door slammed shut, and Harry raised his eyebrows. Apparently not.

He caught sight of his face in the broken piece of mirror, and he stiffened.

He had refused to think about his godfather since they'd left Hogwarts. It had been hard enough when he had died. Wrestling with the paradox of why he hadn't smelled coconuts the first time he'd breathed in the fumes of Amortentia was too much for him. It just didn't add up ...

Suddenly, the door to his room opened, and Ron stepped in.

"Hi."

"What are you doing here?" asked Harry, genuinely surprised. Just after Hogwarts, Hermione, Malfoy and he had gone to the Weasley's and packed. They had set up their tent on the Hogwarts' grounds by the lake. For a moment he hoped that Ron had changed his mind, but when he saw Ron's face he knew that that wasn't the reason Ron had come.

"I came for the rest of my things," said Ron stiffly. "Won't be but a moment," he said, stepping into the room and striding towards his bed.

Harry watched him silently for a moment before asking, "What are you going to be doing in Liverpool tonight?"

"Saving Amanda Greensburg's life," said Ron in a challenging tone, his posture defensive.

"Oh, get off your high horse," snapped Harry. "I'm not judging you, you prat."

"Whatever," said Ron, his shoulders hunched.

"Where'd you put my Invisibility Cloak?" asked Harry after several moments of silence.

"I didn't steal it if that's what you're asking," said Ron harshly, his face flooding with color.

"*I know that*," said Harry tightly through clenched teeth. "I can't find it in my trunk."

"That's because I didn't put it back in your trunk," snapped Ron. "It's in your top drawer. Just where you told me to put it."

Ron's vehemence took Harry aback. "Oh," he said.

Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair. This was going very badly. "Look," he said. "I'm not saying that going into Malfoy Manor is a smart idea, and I'm not saying that going after the Horcruxes is better than saving those Muggle-borns' lives ... "

Ron snorted.

"I'm not!" insisted Harry hotly. "I'm just saying that this is what I have to do, okay?"

Ron was quiet as he folded his socks. "How can you trust him?" he asked quietly. "After everything he's done, how can you trust him?"

Harry didn't know what to say. This conversation echoed the numerous ones he'd had with Dumbledore about Snape. No answer Dumbledore had given ever convinced Harry of Snape's loyalty, and Harry doubted that anything he could say would convince Ron.

Ron seemed to take his silence as an answer, although what answer Harry couldn't tell. "Look out for Hermione," said Ron before Shrinking his trunk.



"And you look after yourself," returned Harry with a ghost of a smile.

Ron nodded, and for several awkward moments neither of them moved. Finally, Ron said, "Mum's making a huge breakfast for the Order tomorrow. You can come if you like."

"Wouldn't miss it," said Harry immediately. "See you then?"

"Yeah," said Ron smiling slightly. "Good luck tonight."

"You too," said Harry, and he watched Ron leave the room. He wasn't quite sure where he and Ron stood, but at least they were still friends.

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"Where are you going tonight?" asked Lockhart curiously as he watched Draco get ready.

"I told you to close your eyes when I'm changing," snarled Draco as he pulled his trainers on.

"What's got your knickers in a twist?" asked Lockhart coolly.

Draco ignored him as he did up his trousers ... the trousers he had been wearing underneath his school robes so many weeks ago. It galled a little that he was going to be returning to the Manor in the same trousers, but he refused to wear Potter's too short pajama bottoms. He cast a nervous look to his room, for what must have been the ninth time, before going to get a shirt.

It was clean ... clean and neat, but it was bare. It looked like little more than a prison cell.

"It looks like Weasley's hovel," he sneered, gripping his wand in agitation and flicking it at his wardrobe. The top drawer shot open with a loud *Bang!*

His mother would hate it. She'd hate it more than living under the Dark Lord's thumb. There, at least, she lived in luxuries. And he refused, utterly refused, to ask Granger to make the room less barren. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

"Oh I don't know," said Lockhart lightly. "I think it looks rather more like a broom cupboard."

Draco clenched his teeth before smoothing his features. "Being celibate obviously isn't improving your mood," he said sweetly as he rummaged through Potter's old shirts.

Lockhart stiffened and narrowed his eyes. "That's a bit rich coming from you, Draco," he said

coolly.

Draco feigned surprise. "Oh didn't you know? Harry and I are lovers." He smiled cruelly when he watched Lockhart's face pale. "Yes, Harry is quite in love with me. I wonder what he'll do when I tell him how *rude* you've been to his boyfriend."

Lockhart licked his lips. "Boyfriend? Really?" he asked, his voice having taken on a squeak.

"Mmm," said Draco, surveying the room with a critical eye. "Yes, Harry will do anything to make me happy."

"Ah."

Draco smiled to himself. Being Potter's boyfriend had such perks. He would miss the power it gave him when Potter found out about his little game. He smirked. He'd especially miss scandalizing Granger with the lascivious looks he'd give Potter when he wasn't looking.

"Malfoy," said Lockhart, his voice much more respectful now. "Remember how I helped you out when I went to the Ministry and found your grandfather?"

Draco made a noncommittal sound, but the wheels in his head were turning. Granger had insisted that they couldn't alert his mother in any way that they were coming for her.

*"If Voldemort decided to use Legilimency on her, it could get us all killed!"*

But why would the Dark Lord be interested in his mother? He doubted that the Dark Lord was even at the Manor. He was only ever there to call meetings, and Draco hadn't felt the Mark burn even once, although it was still a harsh black against his skin; the Dark Lord was still alive and plotting. Maybe he should tell Potter about how his mother sent them the flowers and the note about Greenwood. That's make Potter trust her, wouldn't it? If it involved saving the werewolf?

"That really helped you out, didn't it?" said Lockhart eagerly.

Draco shrugged his shoulders.

Wouldn't telling his mother improve their chances of getting her out of there alive? They could arrange a room in the Manor where they could meet. The secret passageways were connected to every room, after all. Wouldn't it be easier? Safer?

"Actually, Lockhart," he began, but he was cut off by Potter pushing through the door.

"Malfoy, are you ready to go?" he asked, stopping abruptly when he saw that Draco was still getting dressed. Once again, he could feel his face flush.

Draco nearly jumped away from Lockhart's portrait but forced himself into stillness. "Nearly," he snapped before roughly pulling a shirt over his head. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you're supposed to knock before entering?"

Harry shrugged. "We're having breakfast at the Weasley's tomorrow, but you don't have to come if you don't want to."

Draco nodded curtly, not sure how he felt about Potter's assumption that there would be another tomorrow for them, let alone breakfast at the Weasleys. "I'll stay with my mother," he said shortly.

Potter looked around the room. "There's only one bed," he said, frowning. "Where are you going to sleep?"

"On the couch," said Draco shortly.

"Hermione can probably Transfi ... "

"No," said Draco firmly. Seeing Potter's knowing look, he said, "My mother will want her own room."

"Oh," said Potter, and he looked around the room again. "Why don't you sleep in Ron's bed?" he asked, the words out of his mouth before he could even think about what that meant.

Lockhart made a choking sound, and Malfoy stared at Harry as though he had grown a Chinese Chomping Cabbage where his head used to be. Harry flushed, but he didn't say anything. That would make it sound weird ... like he had been trying to seduce Malfoy or something. Did Malfoy think ... Harry's collar seemed to constrict around his throat.

"I'm not sleeping with the Weasel," Malfoy said flatly, looking not a little repulsed.

"He's moved out," said Harry quickly, relief flooding him. It was one thing to think Malfoy had a nice body. It was quite another thing for Malfoy to know he thought he had a nice body.

"That's convenient," muttered Lockhart, and Draco threw him a slashing look.

"What?" said Harry, frowning.

"Never mind. Are we going or not?" said Draco, changing the subject.

"Yeah," said Harry, still looking curiously at Lockhart. "Do you know how to cast a Disillusionment Charm?"

"Yes," said Draco testily, and his throat convulsed as he swallowed nervously. This was it then, he thought, as he followed Potter out of the room. He only hoped that the Dark Lord hadn't found the book on Horcruxes and confiscated it from the library. Draco didn't want to imagine what Potter would think if they didn't get the book.

Draco licked his lips, unwilling to think about Potter's reaction. Because Potter would rescue his mother even if they didn't get the book ... Potter was a Gryffindor.

*Gryffindors use Unforgivables?* Draco shuddered as he remembered the not entirely sane and enraged twisted look on Potter's face right before he used the Imperius Curse on Borgin. It was the darker side to Potter, a viciousness that he'd never seen before, not even when Potter had nearly killed him in the bathroom. When it came to the Horcruxes, Potter was driven with a single-minded intensity that reminded him eerily of Snape's loyalty to the Dark Lord. He had been a fool for thinking that Potter would choose Narcissa over the book on Horcruxes if it came down to it, and that made Draco more than a little uneasy.

When had Potter become so ... Slytherin?

"Malfoy?"

A breeze that carried the scent of freshly cut grass swept across his face, and Draco stared out of the front door and at the Quidditch Pitch and the castle in the distance with not a little surprise. "I'm going like this?" he asked, turning back to Potter.

Potter shook his head and looked hesitant. "No, but ... ," Potter's throat convulsed as he swallowed. "I thought that if we didn't make it, you'd like to see Hogwarts again ... " his voice trailed off.

Draco snorted. "Stop being so sentimental, Potter," he sneered.

Potter stiffened. "Fine," he said coolly, and he left Draco at the front door.

When Draco was sure Potter was out of sight, Draco bent down and touched his hand to the ground. It *wouldn't* be the last time, he thought fiercely. He'd come too far; lost too much to have it all end back where it started ... at home. He was with Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived

... surely the luck that had saved him all those years ago would save them again. And loathe as he was to admit it, Granger was probably the most brilliant student at Hogwarts. In her first year she had managed to solve a logic problem Snape had designed ... or so rumor had it.

Dirt was underneath his fingernails now, but he didn't notice. He might have only just discovered Potter's dark side, but his own was no stranger to him. Hadn't he learned from Severus Snape how to use the Cruciatus and the Imperius? Hadn't he unleashed Death Eaters on a school filled with children without even flinching?

*"Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe."*

Dumbledore's words echoed in his head until they seemed to swim around in every tightening circles, cutting him off from any other thoughts. When it had come down to it, he hadn't been able to kill the old man.

Why?

For weeks now, he had been grappling with that question. It made no sense why he couldn't ... didn't ... kill the blood traitor, Mudblood loving old man. It wasn't because he was innocent. And it wasn't because he couldn't. He *could*. He just ... hadn't wanted to.

Draco blinked and stared unseeingly at the ground.

He hadn't wanted to. He had needed to, there was no disputing that, but ... he hadn't wanted to kill Dumbledore. Desperation, fury, and what he'd only recently come to think of as love was driving him that entire year to fix the Vanishing Cabinet and think of ways to kill Dumbledore. Failure hadn't been a negotiable option for him, and he thought that maybe he would've gone through with it if only Dumbledore hadn't been so damn understanding.

That was then, he thought firmly. He had options now. Potter knew how to destroy the Dark Lord completely this time, and the Dark Lord had no idea. Snape hadn't found a werewolf yet or he would have come hunting for them, thought Draco grimly. If there was one thing Snape hated more than Potter it was learning that Potter had one-upped him. If Snape even suspected Draco had helped Potter ...

He suppressed a shiver of fear that had begun crawling up his spine as he thought about how furious Snape would be. He had options now. He wasn't so goddamned helpless anymore. After tonight, no one could hold anything over him; no one could force him to do anything he didn't want to do. He would no longer be a pawn in the Dark Lord's or Potter's machinations.

Draco's smile was harsh and cutting as cold rage swelled within him, and he stood up. He hated the Dark Lord. Oh yes he feared him, but hate had tipped the scale. He didn't care about the Order of the Phoenix's Mudblood saving plans or Potter's noble ideas; but he wanted the Dark Lord dead, and after that, he wanted a life.

Potter could give him that.

"I'll kill you ... Voldemort," he said softly, hating how his heart beat faster at the sound of Voldemort's name.

"No."

Startled, Draco whirled around to stare at Potter, whose face was a blank mask.

"What?"

"You can't kill him," said Potter in a matter of fact yet terribly world-weary tone.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I'm not giving him a life-sentence in Azkaban," he said, his voice rough with anger. How could Potter even think ...

"No," said Potter, shaking his head. "You *can't* kill him. I'm the only one who can," said Potter, staring Draco straight in the eye.

"Forgive me for doubting your magical prowess, Potter, but can't even produce a proper *Crucio*," taunted Draco, his sneer firmly in place.

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was absurd. The entire Wizarding World saw him as their savior, and yet Draco Malfoy was convinced it was all *Daily Prophet* hogwash. Harry sputtered, not even knowing where to begin but desperately wanting to slug the smug look off of Malfoy's face. It was strangely bizarre to want to take ownership over the title of Voldemort's Destroyer.

"Your Imperius with Borgin was your first, wasn't it?" continued Malfoy. He smirked. "Yes, well, impressive as it was for getting it right the first time round, you held it for what? Ten seconds?" Malfoy's smirk widened.

Harry balled his hands into fists, his blood rushing in his ears. "There's a fucking prophecy Malfoy! He marked me as his equal!" he shouted. He pushed back his bang and ground his finger against the lightening bolt scar on his forehead. "See?" he demanded.

Malfoy only sneered.

Harry was speechless ... too angry and too surprised to think of anything to say. Anyone else in the Wizarding World would have waited with bated breath, hanging on his every word to hear about the prophecy; everyone but Malfoy.

"Y-your father was sent to the Ministry to get the prophecy!"

"It broke," said Draco, anger tightening his face as he remembered exactly why his father was in Azkaban. "The prophecy ... "

"THAT WASN'T THE ONLY RECORD!" bellowed Harry, and his shout reverberated across the pitch.

Breathing harshly, he glared at Draco who stared, frozen in place. An echo of an old conversation he had nearly forgotten about replayed in his mind. Right after Narcissa had sent the flowers, and Potter and his friends had been debating about going to Greenwood, hadn't Granger said that Potter was the only one?

Potter's harsh breathing seemed muffled past the roar of blood in his veins. Potter was the Chosen One? Suddenly, it all made sense. Why else had Potter been with Dumbledore that night in June? Why else had Dumbledore passed the mission on to Potter?

A flash of pity for Potter caught him off-guard, and he stared warily at the other boy as though he suspected him of cursing him with Gryffindor sentiments.

"What?" said Harry defensively, suddenly feeling awkward now that Malfoy knew.

Draco shook his head. "Let's just go," he muttered.

Harry's mouth dropped. "That's it? 'Let's just go' is all you have to say?" he demanded. Draco didn't have any questions? Didn't want to know the exact words of the prophecy?

Draco shrugged. "Every moment we waste here is a moment for Snape to catch a werewolf and wring the truth out of him," he said grimly. He still couldn't believe that a seventeen-year-old boy was the Dark Lord's equal.

The next few minutes seemed to pass in a blur for Draco. He numbly cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself while Potter and Granger talked in low voices. He blended in perfectly with the paisley wallpaper. He hardly noticed the nervous glances Granger kept flicking his way while

Potter spoke. He didn't care if she was worried that he knew about the prophecy; he had bigger things on his mind to worry about.

It had been a long time since his father had taken him through the Manor's secret passageways, and he wondered if the Dark Lord had discovered any of them. The thought settled uneasily in his stomach. Would there be Death Eaters in the passageways? Had Narcissa told Bellatrix about them? The question that bothered him most, though, was whether the Dark Lord could sense when Potter was near.

"Malfoy?"

Startled, he turned to see Harry looking curiously at him. He scowled. "Are you finally done talking, then?" he said sharply. His stomach seemed to drop to his feet when he saw the firm nods from both Harry and Hermione. "Alright," he said roughly, his mouth suddenly dry. "We can't Apparate on school grounds ... "

"We're going to Floo back to the Burrow," said Harry seriously. "Everyone's here at Hogwarts, but just to be safe, you're going to be a ferret again."

Draco could only nod.

*BANG!*

*"Shit fuck, Potter! I wasn't ready!"*

But of course this only came out as a long sequence of angry squeaks. He made sure to drag his claw over the tender flesh of Harry's palm.

Hermione disappeared in a whirl of green flames, and when Harry threw the powder into the grate, Draco found himself digging his claws, the fur on his body standing up. Harry cradled him against his chest before stepping into the grate.

Heat and wind pushed and pulled at Draco's body, whipping him about in the loose cradle of Harry's arms. Just when he thought he would die or go mad, the sensation stopped and Potter stumbled out of the grate, soot darkened and panting.

Hermione pulled him to his feet and dusted some of the soot from him.

"Thanks," gasped Harry, still wheezing slightly as he wiped his glasses clean. He looked down at the quiet Malfoy and asked, "You okay?"

Draco snarled at him.



"He's fine," said Hermione, her voice anxious. "Come on, let's *go*."

Her nervousness seemed to seep through Harry's skin like cold water. He had done a lot of dangerous things in his life, but never for a book. *Or someone's mum*, he thought.

He set Draco down gently on the floor before pointing his wand at him. Malfoy grew at an alarming rate from his ferret form in to his human one, and he teetered on his feet for a moment before catching his balance.

Both Harry and Hermione gripped his arms, and he jumped. They were going to Apparate. He was going to Apparate them to the Manor. A funny tingling jumped in his arm when Harry tightened his grip and said, "It's okay. You got Lupin back in one piece, remember?"

He could feel the soot on Harry's skin rubbing against him, like gritty powder.

Was it just his imagination, or did Potter's voice sound husky?

"Okay," he said, sounding more confident than he really felt. "Ready?"

Hermione squeezed his arm tighter. He wasn't sure if she was trying to be reassuring or if it was just nerves.

Draco took a deep breath and concentrated on the woods just beyond the Manor.

An enormous tension crushed and stretched him. All the breath from his body escaped him, and as he struggled to draw in breath he could feel his head being compressed into a fine thread of silk until, quite suddenly, it was all over.

He could hear Harry and Hermione gasp for air above his own pants, and a deep, rich and clean scent filled his nostrils as he sucked in breaths of air.

"Where are we?" asked Hermione sharply, and Draco could see the flicker of mistrust in her eyes.

"Just outside of the Manor's grounds," he said coolly. "We're going to go through that wall over there," he said, pointing to a dilapidated wall a little ways away from them.

Hermione looked at it critically. "What do you mean we're going to go through the wall?" she asked.

His nerves were already frayed, and her distrustful questions were only splintering them

further. "Just what I said," he snapped. "Through the wall. Shut your blood mouth for one second and just follow me!"

She narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing.

Malfoy began walking quickly toward the wall, and Harry and Hermione exchanged a look before following him. Harry sped up when he started to hear Draco muttering.

"What are we going to do at the wall?" he asked, forcing his voice to sound neutral.

"Follow it into the grounds," said Draco lowly.

"*Into* the grounds?" asked Hermione sharply.

Annoyance flared in Draco's eyes before he nodded.

"What are we going to do from there?" she asked.

"Get into the Manor, you stupid girl," said Draco angrily.

Hermione bristled, and when Harry didn't say anything in her defense, her mouth settled in a hard line. "Where's the book?" she asked coolly.

But Draco didn't respond. They were at the wall now, and Malfoy was staring at the old bricks with such intensity that Hermione didn't ask again. Sweat rolled down Malfoy's cheek as his eyes flickered from brick to brick. Harry shifted his weight on his feet, trying to stay as silent as he could.

Suddenly, Draco drew his wand and tapped the several bricks the wall in seemingly random patterns. The bricks he had touched with his wand jumped before settling back into place.

"It didn't work ... " Hermione's voice trailed off when the bricks spun apart, creating a small archway.

Draco sighed with relief. "Ladies first," he said, smiling archly at her.

"That's just like ... " began Harry, but Draco cut across him.

"Diagon Alley? It should be. The entrance to Diagon Alley from the Leaky Cauldron was based on this wall." Draco wrinkled his nose. "Not that I've ever been in that squalor of an inn."

"The Leaky Cauldron's great," said Harry loyally.

"I've read a History of Diagon Alley," said Hermione, frowning. "No Malfoy was ever credited with the building of that entryway."

"Yes well, he wouldn't be, would he?" said Draco. "He was blasted from the Malfoy line."

"For what?" asked Harry curiously.

"For a questionable relationship with a centaur," said Draco stiffly.

Hermione's eyes popped.

There was a moment of awkward silence before Draco said, "Let me see your Invisibility Cloak, Potter."

Wordlessly, Harry handed it to him. Draco unfolded the material looked at it critically. "There's no way we'll all fit under this," he said.

"That's why you have the Disillusionment Charm on you," pointed out Hermione.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "So I'm supposed to go in there with nothing but a Disillusionment Charm for protection?" he asked incredulously. "No, I don't think so, Granger."

Before the Gryffindors could react, Draco drew his wand and cast two quick spells in rapid succession.

Harry was too startled to move when he saw Draco bending down, his hand outstretched toward him. Harry's nose tingled as he breathed, and scents he had never noticed before slipped into his awareness. He could smell the different kinds of trees in the area, the richness of the dark earth, and something he had smelled just earlier that day ... something that he was sure if he were just a little bit closer, if the wind were to just shift a little ways ...

Furious squeaking startled him, and he turned his head to see a mottled brown ferret hissing and swearing rather colorfully at Draco.

"*You cold-blooded lying Death Eater!*" she raged, her tail lashing at the ground and her body in a fighting stance.

Hermione was a ferret? He could understand her ...

Harry looked down. Light grey fur with patches of white stared back at him before long, pale fingers scooped him up from the ground.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," said Draco mildly. "You'll be human again once we're inside the secret passageways in the house."

*"Don't worry, Harry! I'll get Ron. We should NEVER have trusted Malfoy!"*

Draco sighed and pointed his wand at Hermione before saying, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Hermione stiffened and fell to the ground, her eyes staring at Harry in horror.

Harry began to struggle against Draco until the Slytherin squeezed him tightly and brought him to eye level. "You're going to trust me, Potter," he said harshly.

Harry stilled, his nose twitching as he caught a faint whisper of something clean and heady underneath the soot on Malfoy's hair.

Draco mistook Harry's sudden stillness for understanding and he lowered Harry to his waist.

The scent was gone now. Harry was frustrated. It was like trying to put a face to a name of someone you used to know a long time ago.

Draco bent down and picked up Hermione's frozen form. "You too, Granger," he said. "I can't trust you not to try and Apparate back to the ... Burrow," he said, the nickname for the Weasley's house rolling strangely smoothly off his tongue. "I'll turn you back once we're inside the passageway."

Harry had a feeling that if Hermione could move, she would have taken a viscous swipe at Draco's face. Draco cradled both of them awkwardly in his left arm before putting on the Invisibility Cloak and stepping through the archway.

Draco walked quickly across the lawn, fear of being discovered hurrying his footsteps. It didn't matter that he was wearing an Invisibility Cloak. Some people, and some things, weren't fooled by them; they could see right through. Vampires. Werewolves. Dementors. The Dark Lord.

He was running now, a full spring towards the far south wall where his mother's gardens were. It felt surreal to be returning to where he had been only weeks before. Fear gripped him. Why had the Dark Lord given orders for them to Apparate to Narcissa's gardens? What if the Dark Lord were there again?

Relief flooded him when he burst into the gardens and saw that they were empty. Of course, there was always the possibility that someone was wearing an Invisibility Cloak, but he didn't think anyone was.

Harry stared around him in amazement. He'd always known that the Malfoys were rich, but as he absorbed the elegant grounds of Malfoy Manor, the statues, the gardens and fountains he was reminded suddenly of postcards of the Versailles Palace.

He could see it now: the fountain in the wall. A sheet of water poured from a wide opening and splashed into a half-circle pool connecting to the wall. Of all the magnificent things in the garden, this one seemed humble in comparison. In fact, it was hidden from view by a large hedge.

He ran for several minutes before he found an opening in the hedge, and he made a sharp left, retracing his steps on the other side of the hedge until he stood in front of the fountain.

His chest heaving, and his left arm cramped from holding Harry and Hermione, he slowly poked his wand through the opening in the cloak.

"*Appapedrum*," he whispered.

The air above the water seemed to shimmer for a moment to Harry's eyes, but when he looked closely he could tell no difference. Malfoy, however, sighed in relief and took several steps away from the fountain before taking a running leap into the pool of the water.

They never landed.

Draco swayed, his legs wobbling before he seemed to get his footing. Harry looked down but saw nothing underneath the Slytherin's feet except the water in the fountain.

Draco walked slowly, in measured steps, toward the streaming water until he was scant centimeters from it. Harry could see the wall on the other side of the thin sheet of water.

Hardly breathing, his brow furrowed in concentration, Draco pushed his hand out of the cloak and underneath the falling water but not through it. The weight of the water pushed his hand down for a moment before he pressed back against the water, searching for something.

His finger brushed against something cold and dry, and he knew he'd found it. He looked over his shoulder once before he twisted his hand around the object and stepped through the water.

Harry tensed his body, preparing to be drenched in cold water, but nothing hit him. He stared in

amazement when they walked through the wall and into a dark and narrow passageway.

"*Lumos*," said Malfoy, and he tugged the Cloak off of him and tucked it under his arm.

Just as he promised, Draco turned them back into humans but he hadn't lifted the full Body-Bind from Hermione. Harry withdrew his wand, but Draco stopped him.

"No, wait," he said, and he bent down to Hermione. Her eyes flickered from Harry to Draco.

"There are people in this house who kill Mudbloods and Muggles as weekend sport, Granger," he said lowly. Her eyes flashed. "If you scream or throw a hex at me ... they're gonna hear it. It doesn't take that much to blast through a wall."

He lifted the curse from her, and Harry helped her to her feet.

"Why did you have to cast Appedrum?" were the first words out of her mouth.

"You can't unlock the door in the waterfall unless you've walked on water," he said lowly.

"What would happen if you ran straight through the waterfall and into the wall?" asked Harry curiously.

Draco looked at him dryly. "You'd break your face," he said.

"Oh."

"Let's go," said Draco. "We need to go to the South East wing to the library first," he said.

"And *be quiet*."

For several minutes they traveled in silence. As they walked, Draco touched the walls every few feet and turned sharply and without warning. More than once Hermione had bumped into Harry, and Draco turned around to glare at them when she mumbled a low apology.

Suddenly, Draco stopped.

"Light your wands," he said so softly that Harry wasn't sure he hadn't imagined Malfoy had spoken. "Non-verbally," he added.

*Lumos*, thought Harry, and the tip of his wand glowed.

"Is anyone or anything in the library?" asked Draco gently.

Baffled Harry said, "How should I ... " but he trailed off when he saw that Malfoy was talking to a portrait. Hermione gasped, covering her mouth with her hands, and Harry raised his wand forward and saw the portrait was a little boy no older than five or six dangling from a noose.

Harry felt sick.

The boy slid from his frame, disappearing into what Harry had no doubt was a portrait in the next room.

"W-who was that?" he asked.

"An uncle of mine who was hung and then burned at the stake by Muggles during their Witch Hunts," said Draco roughly, his eyes glittering with hatred.

The little boy came back, and Draco's face smoothed. "Is anyone there?" he asked again. The boy shook his head, causing him to sway from his noose.

Draco sighed with relief. "Thank you," he said. "May we go through?"

"Password?" asked the portrait in a voice so chillingly cold that Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

Draco leaned forward and whispered something too low for Harry to hear, but he saw Hermione flinch. Harry had an idea what the password was.

Draco pushed through the portrait quickly, and hurried to the bookshelves, his eyes scanning the covers for the green leather binding and the gold leaves that seemed to have burned into his mind.

He told Harry and Hermione what they were looking for, warning that if they heard anyone coming they should jump through the portrait hole again. Each of them took a different wall, and Harry could sometimes hear the disgusted sounds Hermione was making as she scanned the titles.

"Where is it?" muttered Harry to himself as he scoured the shelves.

"Where is what?" asked a gravelly voice.

Harry spun around, his wand drawn, and a hex on the tip of his tongue when he saw that it had been a portrait that had spoken. Harry stared at the old man in the portrait who was staring expectantly at him.

Harry licked his lips and said, "The book on Horcruxes."

The portrait narrowed his eyes. "Who are you?" he asked.

"H ... Harold," said Harry.

The portrait looked at him intensely. "You're not named after my oaf of a grandson, are you?" he asked severely.

"Ah, no, sir," said Harry quickly, suddenly strongly reminded of Phineas Black and Snape rolled into one.

"Good," grumbled the man. "You don't look like a Malfoy."

"Ah ... I'm part Black," said Harry. "Pure-blood, of course."

"Oh," said the portrait. "It's on the fourteenth shelf of the West wall."

"Thanks, sir," said Harry, smiling in relief. "I'd uh, appreciate it if you didn't mention that you saw us here to anyone, sir."

The portrait grunted, and Harry hurried to Malfoy. "It's on the West wall, fourteenth shelf," he said excitedly. "The portrait told me."

Draco looked up, and saw it. "Accio," he said, and the book flew down from the shelf, and Harry caught it. "Let's go get my mother."

"You don't even know where she is," pointed out Hermione, who had joined them when she'd seen that Harry had the book. "Have a portrait find out which room she's in first before we go looking for her."

Draco glared at her. "Don't order me in my own house, Granger," he hissed.

"Fine," she said coldly. "Go get yourself killed."

"*Fine*," growled Draco, and he turned on his heel to another portrait and had a whispered conversation with it.

Hermione tapped the book with her wand and it shrank quickly until it was no bigger than a thimble, and Harry pushed it into his jeans pocket, his fingers trembling with excitement.



Dumbledore had known how to destroy the locket, but he'd been gone for so long, and there were still two other Horcruxes he had to destroy and no idea what they were.

"Harry?" asked Hermione in a low voice. "Harry what if Voldemort never found something of Ravenclaw's?"

Harry looked at her curiously. "But he wanted something from all the Founders," he said slowly.

She shook her head. "Yes, but, what if he couldn't find something? The Ravenclaws died out centuries ago."

Harry shrugged. "Well, maybe he found something of Gryffindor's," he said.

"No, he couldn't have," argued Hermione. "Dumbledore said that the sword was the only remaining relic."

"Dumbledore also said Snape could be trusted," he said in a hard voice.

Hermione was quiet for a moment. "Harry ... what if Voldemort found more Slytherin relics?"

Harry frowned. "He already had three proving he was Slytherin's heir, Hermione. And if Nagini is one, too, then that's four, because of the whole Parslemouth thing."

"I found a book," said Hermione. "Greatest Slytherins in History. I just think, if we're here ... we might as well take anything that can help us." She leaned her head in closer. "I mean ... the Malfoys have one of the greatest libraries in all of Europe."

She looked firm. "I'm going to get it," she said, and she hurried off to another wall, Summoning books and then Shrinking them. Harry had his suspicions that not all of them had to do with Slytherins.

The portrait Draco had sent to find his mother came back and said, "She's in her dressing room."

His fingers tingled. "Thank you," he said. "Does she know I'm here?"

The portrait shook his head, and Draco nodded. They would have to hurry then before she left for another room.

"Potter. Granger," he hissed. Granger looked mournfully at the shelf she had been depleting

but hurried through the portrait hole when she saw his impatient glare.

"Where is she?" asked Harry lowly as he followed Draco, who was nearly running through the passageway.

"Her dressing room," he whispered. The passageway echoed slightly from the sound of footsteps and Granger's panting as she struggled to keep up. He wondered just how many books she'd Shrank.

He stretched his hand out and felt along the wall. Any minute now, he should feel the smooth canvas of another portrait ...

His finger caught the edge of the canvas and he stopped, bracing himself just in time when Potter careened into him.

"Merlin, Potter, look where you're going," he snapped.

Harry was quiet though. He had thought, in that moment when he'd been pressed against Draco, that he had smelled that elusive scent again, but his nose wasn't as sharp as it had been when he was a ferret. He had smelled something but it had been buried under the stale air of the passageway and the sweat and soot on Malfoy's skin.

Draco turned to the portrait, which this time was a beautiful woman who looked curiously at them.

"Druella," he said quickly, and the portrait swung open.

A jet of red light raced towards him, and it was Harry's hand on his head shoving him underneath the hex that saved him.

"Mother!" he cried, struggling against Harry's grip.

Narcissa's face drained of color as she stared at him, not seeming to see Harry or Hermione.

"Draco," she said, her voice cracking and her eyes filling with tears.

Harry stared at the woman whom he hadn't seen since last summer. The pink satin bathrobe she was wearing clung to her tiny frame. The frailty of her body, deep shadows under her eyes and a grayish tinge to her skin reminded him strongly of how Draco had looked in the beginning of the summer.

"Potter get off!" Draco snarled, and reluctantly, Harry let him go.

Draco shimmied through the portrait hole and Narcissa helped him to his feet. It was then she noticed Harry and Hermione, who had followed Draco. Her face froze when she saw them, and she turned to her son.

"We're here to rescue you, mother," he said in a low but eager voice. He began pulling robes off of their hangers with little regard to what he was taking, and he bundled them into his arms.

"We have a safe place ... "

Narcissa didn't move though; she seemed to be in shock, Harry noticed.

"The room's not much, smaller than your closet actually," continued Draco, his arms bulging with robes and shoes, perfume bottles and jewelry. Harry didn't know where Draco thought Narcissa was going to be wearing diamond chokers at, or why she would need three dress robes, but he didn't say anything.

He felt like an intruder. Woodenly, he followed Hermione's example and began shrinking some of Mrs. Malfoy's things and putting them in his pockets.

"Your key," said Mrs. Malfoy finally, her voice rough. "It's in my bedroom ... and the Malfoy heirlooms ... "

Draco shook his head roughly. "That's not important, Mother," he said. "We don't have time for that."

His words seemed to shake Narcissa out of her shocked stillness, and she said, "My wedding ring's on my nightstand."

There was such a desperate edge to her voice that Harry looked at Draco, hardly able to see the boy's face over the bundle in his arms. Draco looked uneasy, but finally he nodded.

Narcissa hurried to the door, her pink robe fluttering behind her like a frightened bird.

*"EXPelliarmus!"*

Harry watched in horror as their wands soared into the air and into Bellatrix Lestrange's hand.

"Bella," gasped Narcissa.

"Blood traitor," hissed Bellatrix, her eyes burning with hatred.

A cool look washed over Narcissa's face. "Actually, Bella, I was just coming to fetch you," she said in a too gentle voice, and she smiled with such cold sincerity that Draco felt horror swamp him.

He had thought that Narcissa would never betray him because he was all she had left. Her only flesh and blood. He had forgotten about Bellatrix. She chose her sister over him. The knowledge choked him, making it hard to breathe.

They could still Apparate, he thought with a detached kind of hope.

Bellatrix stared at her sister for a moment before handing Narcissa her wand back. "Together?" she asked, her voice trembling with excitement. She looked at her sister, a wild and brutal joy lighting her face. "I told you, you should have married Rodolphus' brother."

"I should have told you they were planning to rescue me from the start, Bella," Narcissa said. She looked coldly at her son and then at the robes in his arms. "Now I'll have to have those ironed."

Draco flinched.

Bellatrix flicked a malicious glance in Harry's direction, and instantly he began blocking out any thought of Horcruxes, the prophecy and the Order's rescue mission from his mind. He wouldn't stand a chance if they brought him to Voldemort.

"You've waited so patiently to kill the boy, Bella," crooned Narcissa.

Bellatrix's face twisted. "Yes," she breathed, longing in her voice. She raised her wand at Harry, and he knew there was no chance she could miss.

Hermione was crying quietly somewhere to his left, and just as the first syllable of the Killing Curse left Bellatrix's mouth he remembered that they could still Apparate.

But it was too late.

"... *Kedavra!*" cried Bellatrix, just as Narcissa shoved her into the doorframe.

It was the instant Harry needed to throw himself to the floor. The emerald jet of light exploded into the wall behind him, and he scrambled to his feet, shouting, "*ACCIO WAND!*"

Amazingly, his wand flew to his hand. "*EXPELLIARMUS!*" he bellowed, pointing his wand at Bellatrix, and she was thrown off of her feet and into Narcissa, knocking both women over. Her

wand flew out of her hands and out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw that Hermione caught it.

"*Stupefy!*" he cried, but Bellatrix rolled out of the hex's way, and it burned a black hole into the carpet.

"*Mother!*" yelled Draco, dropping everything out of his arms as he hurried toward the two women.

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*"

Again, the spells missed.

Bellatrix was bending his mother's wrist back, trying to break her grip on her wand while she screamed in inarticulate rage. Draco slipped on a satin robe, and he fell sprawling across the carpet before scrambling to his feet. He heard the crunch of the diamond choker underneath his shoes.

"*TRAITOR!*" shrieked Bellatrix, punching Narcissa in the face. Blood spurted from Narcissa's nose, and she cried out in pain.

Bellatrix succeeded in wresting the wand out of Narcissa's grasp, a triumphant look on her face.

Draco threw himself at her, the blood roaring in his ears. There was a loud BANG and he was knocked aside, his head striking the open closet door. The room swam before his eyes, and he distantly heard Harry and Hermione's Disarming Spells being deflected almost effortlessly by Bellatrix. He struggled to his knees, his movements sluggish, and he thought he might throw up; his head hurt so much ...

There was a blinding flash of light like lightening and black spots danced before Harry's eyes before he heard Bellatrix scream the Killing Curse.

He threw himself to the floor once again, but he needn't have bothered.

The Killing Curse wasn't aimed at him.

"*MOTHER!*" screamed Draco, his eyes wide with terror as the green jet of light caught Narcissa in the chest. *No no no no no no.*

The dressing room mirror exploded, showering the room in shards of sharp triangles of mirror.

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*" bellowed Harry, not even registering the pain as a fragment of the mirror slashed across his arm. "*SECTUMSEMPRA! SECTUMSEMPRA!*" he roared again, Sirius' face flashing to the forefront of his mind.

Blood spurted from Bellatrix's face and chest in an arch, and she gasped wetly, scrabbling uselessly at the wounds on her chest. Draco threw himself on top of her, roaring inarticulately as tears splashed down his face, spilling onto her blood stained chest.

"I HATE YOU!" he yelled, ripping the wand out of her grip. The blood making it slippery in his hands. "*Crucio!*" he cried.

But she didn't cry out.

She didn't even flinch.

She was dead.

"*Crucio!*" he sobbed, sitting on her chest now and gripping the wand in his two shaking hands. He felt Harry's hands pulling him off of her, and tugging the wand out of his grip.

"Malfoy!" grunted Harry, hauling the other boy to his feet. "Draco, we have to go ... "

Harry guided him to Narcissa, and Draco sank to his knees at her side. He bit his lip until the coppery taste of blood touched his tongue. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to think. He stared at her, and gently stretched his hand out pushed her disheveled hair from her face. Blood smeared across her pale forehead, and once again the room spun before his eyes.

"I've got her ring," said Hermione. She opened the hand he had hadn't known he'd curled into a fist and pushed it against his palm before closing it for him.

"Hermione! Hogwarts, *now!*" shouted Harry, hauling Draco to a half-standing position. Hermione looked frightened, but Disapparated with a sharp *CRACK*. Harry pressed Draco close to him, and the other boy's head sagged against Harry's shoulder.

There was no mistaking the smell now. He could smell it, even under the blood, sweat, and soot.

Coconuts.

There wasn't anytime to think about it, though, and he Disapparated both of them just outside the gates of Hogwarts. Draco's knees buckled, and Harry wrapped his arms around him,

crushing their chests together to keep the other boy upright. For once, they were the same height, their faces scant inches apart.

Neither noticed Hermione.

"Potter ... " whispered Draco, his voice cracking. Something swam in Draco's eyes, and Harry blinked behind his glasses.

"I killed your aunt," whispered Harry.

"Good," sighed Draco, and he did the only thing that made sense to him.

He kissed Harry.

And when Harry tentatively pushed his tongue in his mouth, that made sense too.

## Chapter 20

Harry panted harshly when they broke apart, and Draco was alarmed by the glint in the other boy's eye.

"I killed her," Harry whispered, and Draco could feel Harry's chest hitch under his fingertips.

"I know," said Draco, Narcissa's and Bellatrix's faces becoming oddly blurred in his mind. Everything had gone horribly wrong, and all for that stupid ring. If only he hadn't let her get it ... if he had just grabbed her and Disapparated ... He squeezed his mother's ring tightly in his left hand, the diamond band cutting into the flesh of his palm.

Someone would have to tell Lucius.

He didn't want to think about that.

He slipped the ring onto his smallest finger and held it out in front of him. The beginning of a spectacular sunset winked across the diamonds, and Harry winced, blinking behind his glasses as a prism of colors danced across his face.

"Goblin made," said Draco absently. "Father had it commissioned for her after she couldn't find anything at the jewelers."

"Oh," said Harry, his head feeling light. "It's, uh, beautiful."

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Hermione, speaking for the first time.

Draco shrugged. "Maybe toss it in the lake," he said.

"Don't," said Harry. "It was your mum's."

Draco's nostrils flared as he glared at Harry. "It's what got her killed!" he said angrily.

And suddenly Harry was angry too. Everything had gone wrong. All he wanted to do was to go back in time and make it right, only he couldn't because he had broken the Ministry's supply of Time-Turners two years ago.

"It's all you have left of her!" he said harshly. "The ring didn't kill her ... "



"YOU DID!" screamed Draco, and he threw himself at Harry, his fist connecting with the side of Harry's face so hard that Harry saw stars. He heard Hermione shrieking at them, but Draco drowned her out. "NONE OF YOUR SPELLS LANDED! YOU COULD HAVE SAVED HER!"

*"Malfoy, stop it!"* Hermione shrieked.

Harry could taste blood in his mouth, but he didn't fight back. Hadn't Snape said the same thing, only weeks ago and a few feet from where they were now, when he had deflected every single one of the spells Harry had been flinging at him?

*"Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!"*

Only now the words sounded accusing in his head. It was his fault ... his fault that Draco's mum was dead ... that Sirius was dead.

Draco pinned him to the ground, his fist driving into Harry's side, and it hurt to breath. Quite suddenly, Draco stopped hitting him. In fact, he stopped doing anything at all. For a moment, Harry thought that Hermione had Stupefied him.

"Malfoy?" he asked hesitantly, staring up at him through his cracked glasses.

"I ... I ... " Draco struggled to speak, but there was something in his throat that choked the words.

It was worse than Apparating. The pressure in his chest ... and the hole that felt as though it had been punched through it ... he started to shake.

Harry's ribs protested with a sharp pain as he struggled to sit up, but he clenched his teeth and pressed his lips together, muffling the hiss of pain. Draco didn't seem to notice, however. He was staring at the grass with bright eyes.

"Hey," Harry said softly, and Draco flinched when Harry touched him.

Undeterred, Harry wrapped his fingers around Draco's arms and stared until Draco looked at him.

And even though his mouth hurt, and he was fairly sure Draco had split his lip, Harry pressed his lips softly against Draco's. Draco tensed, and Harry closed his eyes, not wanting to see it, wanting to believe that Draco wanted him like he did.

Harry felt something splash against his cheek, but he didn't open his eyes, affording Draco what privacy he could. He wondered if Hermione was looking, what she was thinking, and found that he didn't really care. Draco's lips moved against his, and all thoughts of Hermione flew from Harry's mind.

Draco could feel Harry's lips form words against his mouth, and he tasted tears. Whether they were his or Harry's, he couldn't tell. Harry fisted Draco's shirt in his hands, dragging him closer until their chests were pressed together. Draco's hands somehow found the back of Harry's neck, and somehow their legs got tangled together, their bodies pressed so closely together that Draco could feel how fast Harry's heart was beating under his thin shirt.

The cold metal of Harry's frames pressed against Draco's skin, and he snatched them roughly off of Harry's face and flung them into the grass.

Harry pulled away slightly, his eyes open. "My glasses ... " he panted.

Draco's hold on the back of his neck tightened, and what he would have done next, Harry never knew because Hermione spoke up then.

"We need to go," she said, her voice higher than usual.

Harry flushed, suddenly intensely aware of how tightly pressed together he and Draco were. Awkwardly, Harry untangled himself from Draco, and Draco handed him his glasses.

Hermione didn't look him in the eye as they walked across the grounds, but in the moonlight he could see how flushed her face was.

Draco didn't speak on the way back, and Harry wondered if he was worried about someone seeing them. His Invisibility Cloak was balled under his arm, but he didn't suggest that Draco wear it, not wanting to be the first to speak. He touched his finger to his lip, and winced at the sting.

When they arrived at the tent, they were surprised to find the tent flap open and Ron standing in the doorway. When he saw Harry and Draco's bloodstained clothes his face bleached of color, and he met them halfway to the door.

"Where is ... " he began, but Draco cut him off.

"Dead," he said shortly, and he stepped past Ron and into the tent. A few moments later, they heard the door to his room shut, and the three of them stared at one another.

Hermione lead the way into the sitting room and collapsed into one of the chairs, looking exhausted. Ron sat next to her, looking as though he wanted to sit closer. Harry, however, stood by the fireplace, too nervous to sit down.

"How?" asked Ron finally.

Harry let Hermione tell the story, letting her words wash over him as he stared at the empty grate. Only an hour ago they had Flooed to the Burrow from here. An hour ago Narcissa had still been alive.

An hour ago his soul had been in one piece.

Hermione sniffled loudly, her eyes very red, and Ron took her hand in his and squeezed it. Harry looked away.

An hour ago, he hadn't known that Draco Malfoy was the person he was attracted to most. He still didn't know how Draco felt about him, though. Had Draco kissed him because he was there, or did he feel anything?

Harry pushed his hands into his pockets and his fingers brushed against Draco's mum's shrunken things. He had shrunk the first things his hands had touched, not really paying attention to what he was grabbing because he was too fascinated with Draco and Narcissa. He pulled them out of his pocket and stared at them in the palm of his hand.

Perfume bottles, a music box, and a teacup.

His chest burned, and he swallowed thickly. He didn't know what Hermione had taken, but there had only been a few moments in which they had to get Narcissa's possessions. He wished he had taken some of the photographs that had been on her vanity.

"But you got the book," said Ron, bringing Harry back to the present.

Hermione nodded heavily, her face somber. "Yes," she said quietly. "We have the book."

Ron shifted in his seat but didn't say anything.

"How did it go with the Order?" asked Harry, feeling that he needed to say something. He dropped his Invisibility Cloak over the arm of the chair, and clasped his sweaty hands together.

Ron straightened up. "It went really well," he said excitedly, but Harry could not muster up the energy to smile back. "Everyone from Liverpool was evacuated without a problem," he said

proudly, a touch of swagger to his voice.

"That's great," said Harry, but his voice sounded flat even to his ears. Why couldn't Narcissa have lived?

It sounded flat to Ron's as well because he didn't say anymore about the rescue mission.

"How ... How do you feel, Harry?" asked Hermione in a tremulous voice.

"How am I supposed to feel?" he said bitterly. He was a murderer. Draco hated him. Draco kissed him. He was attracted most to the person who blamed him for his mother's death.

Hermione's and Ron's eyes widened.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Hermione, her face drawn in a worried frown.

"No," said Harry firmly. He walked quickly passed them, not looking at either of them. He could feel their eyes trained on the back of his head as he left the room.

--

"Where is she?" were the first words out of Lockhart's mouth when Draco stepped into his room.

Something shattered and was reborn inside of Draco when he said, "Dead."

Lockhart's eyes widened. "What happened?" he gasped, and Draco began to speak.

"You shouldn't have let her try and get the ring," interrupted Lockhart, nodding as though had he only been there he would have prevented this.

Draco clenched his teeth, wishing he hadn't told Lockhart anything. It was as though he had been compelled to speak, to recount in detail everything that had transpired.

"I *know*," he said, but even as he said it he could picture Narcissa's dressing gown billowing behind her as she hurried toward the door, how her long, limp blonde hair fell down her back.

"And then what happened?" prompted Lockhart, a starved look on his face.

"My Aunt Bellatrix was outside the door, in Mother's room. I think she had been listening at the

keyhole or something. And she Disarmed Mother and took our wands ... "

"You just *gave* them to her?" but there was more excitement than condemnation in his voice.

"She *took* them. And she ... Mother acted as though she was on Bellatrix's side." Draco tried to swallow, but something was choking his words. He had thought that his mother had chosen her sister over him.

*She was lying*, whispered a voice in his head.

*That's what got her killed*, he wanted to rage, but Lockhart spoke again.

"Then?"

"She cast the Killing Curse at Potter," he snarled.

Here, Lockhart showed the first signs of concern, and something inside of Draco snapped.

"No, it didn't kill him," he said angrily. And the words rushed out of his mouth, thrumming with violence and rage. "MY MOTHER SAVED HIM AND HE DIDN'T SAVE HER!" he bellowed.

Lockhart looked alarmed. "Draco ... "

"SHUT UP!" he roared, and he drew his wand. "SHE'S DEAD AND ... "

"It's my fault."

Draco whirled around, and Harry was standing in the doorway, an agonized look on his face.

"Yes," he hissed, hurling all of the loathing he could muster into the word.

"I'm so sorry," Harry rasped. "I tried ... " Draco snorted, and Harry's voice faltered.

It just made Draco angrier. "Well you didn't try hard enough," he said coldly.

Harry flinched. "Draco ... "

"DON'T!" screamed Draco, dark red sparks shooting out of his wand. Harry's face blurred in Draco's vision, and he blinked rapidly. "You ... you didn't even try," he said, his voice hitching, and it hurt to breathe so much ... He squeezed his wand. "Was she ... was she just a book to

you?" he asked.

"NO!"

Harry's scream of denial was followed by a heavy, dangerous silence in which he and Draco stared at one another. Draco noticed that Harry hadn't repaired his glasses yet, that his lip was split and had started to bleed again.

"She was inside my mind," he said, his voice so soft that Draco stopped breathing.

Harry swallowed with difficulty. "I was never any good at Occlumency. I was trying to keep her from discovering ... " he glanced at Lockhart, who was flicking nervous glances between him and Draco. "And ... "

But Draco had gone cold. "So you sacrificed my mother," he said, his voice flat and hard, unforgiving.

Harry shook his head emphatically. "No," he said urgently. "I just never learned how to keep people out of my mind, and she was in there ... she could tell what spells I was going to use."

But Draco didn't believe him. Harry Potter not learn Occlumency? When he was the Light's only hope for defeating the Dark Lord?

There was one way to find out.

"*Legilimens!*" he cried.

Harry cried out, and tried to erect a barrier, but Draco had slammed into his mind with such force, with no subtlety or warning, that he found himself reliving memories in such detail it was as though he had fallen into a Pensive.

Draco was hunting. He was looking for memories of the last hour ... memories that would prove Harry was lying to him. Aunt Bellatrix had shown him enough to know how to detect signs of memory tampering, and because he had been there with Harry, there was no way Harry could hide ...

Harry saw Bellatrix's skeletal frame, her dark looks and gleaming eyes as she fought Narcissa, trying to wrestle the wand away from her sister. He felt again the desperation he had felt when each of his spells had missed her, when she had deflected his spells before he could even cast them ... and he knew Draco was feeling it too.

Draco staggered out of his mind, breathing heavily and his stomach rolling. He sank to his knees, trembling. He heard footsteps thudding through the hallway, and he flicked a glance at Lockhart's frame only to find he had gone.

He had told Hermione and Ron.

"Harry!" cried Hermione, her footsteps right outside his door.

Draco pointed his wand at the door and cast the strongest locking spell he knew just before the doorknob jiggled as the other two tried to get in.

"Stand back!" commanded Hermione, her voice muffled, but Draco wasn't worried that she would get in. She was too noble to ever learn Dark spells.

Harry's head felt as though someone had hit two Bludgers on either side of it, and he didn't try to rise from his crumpled position on the floor. Hermione's and Ron's angry, and distressed calls to him warbled through his mind, and he grunted in pain.

"Satisfied?" he croaked, and to his horror, he began to feel his eyes burn. He curled into a tighter ball, willing his emotions to obey.

It wasn't guilt that Draco felt as he stared at Harry, but something made him drag himself over to Harry and wrap his arms around him when Harry started to shake. He wasn't sure why he was kissing Harry's tears as they fell, or whispering words into Harry's hair that he wouldn't remember, but it made sense to him, and it felt good when Harry turned towards him, his face pressed against Draco's shoulder.

Draco heard Lockhart stumble into his frame, but thankfully the foppish fool didn't say anything before he slid out of his frame again, undoubtedly to report to Harry's friends.

He stroked Harry's head, marveling in how soft it was as he swirled it between his fingers. As Harry sobbed, Draco thought about what he had seen and felt inside Harry's mind. Knowing that Harry hadn't been lying forced Draco to admit that he couldn't blame Harry, but that didn't negate his need to blame *someone*.

He didn't understand why he had kissed Harry, or why Harry had kissed him back. Where they stood was a matter he didn't want to think about. He smiled wryly. If Weasley and Granger only knew.

Harry couldn't remember the last time someone had ever held him while he cried. The Dursleys certainly hadn't. Every time he had cried they had thrown him in his cupboard.

He could hear Hermione and Ron's furiously whispered conversation outside of the door, and he gently disengaged himself from Draco, wiping his face on his sleeve and sniffing loudly. "What, uh, spell did you use?" he asked.

"Dark Arts," said Draco, looking completely unapologetic.

"Oh," said Harry.

Draco was quiet for a moment, struggling to realign his emotions as they somersaulted inside of him, and there was a long minute of silence. He sat up and tilted his head against the bed, sighing quietly. Harry thought he looked older when he did that.

Harry pushed his hand into his pocket and then held a closed fist in front of Draco. "Here ... " he cleared his throat. "Some of your mum's stuff," he muttered. "Hermione has the rest."

Wordlessly, Draco held his hand underneath Harry, and Harry gently placed Narcissa's things in Draco's hand. Their hands brushed, and Harry's hand lingered for a moment longer than was necessary before he pulled it back.

Draco stared at them for a long time before he drew his wand and tapped it over the perfume bottles, music box, and teacup. They grew rapidly, and Draco hesitated for a moment before he flipped open the lid to the music box.

Delicate music filled the room, and Draco abruptly snapped the box closed, his breathing ragged and his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

"Please leave," he said huskily, his face turned away from Harry's.

Harry hesitated for a moment before he stood up. He paused just outside of the doorway. "Will you teach me Occlumency?" he asked.

It was as though Harry had twisted the knife lodged between his ribs. "Yes," said Draco softly.

Harry nodded and left.

"Harry?"

"Harry!"

Ron's face looked like thunder. "What did he do to you?" he growled.



"Nothing."

"Don't bullshit me, Harry!" said Ron angrily. "Hermione told me he punched you ... that he blames you ... It's not your fault!"

"Isn't it?" Harry said bitterly. "If I had only learned Occlumency with Snape then I never would have fallen for Voldemort's trick ... Sirius would still be alive ... Lucius wouldn't have failed Voldemort, and Draco wouldn't have had to fight to keep his family alive. He wouldn't have had to pick a side. She would still be alive!" He was shouting now, but he didn't seem to be able to stop.

"I'm a murderer," he said loudly. "My soul's in two ... I've committed an act of supreme evil ..."

*SLAP!*

"*Shut up!*" shrilled Hermione, her eyes bright with angry tears and her hand still suspended in the air. "Don't talk like that!"

Harry was too stunned to say anything, and he didn't think that it would have mattered because Hermione showed no sign of stopping.

"All summer you've pushed us away," she said angrily. "You haven't even talked with us about how you feel about Draco."

Harry felt his eyes widen. Had he been that obvious?

"And you act as though it was only your spells that were deflected by that horrible woman. I was there too, Harry!"

"I ... I'm not saying that you weren't," said Harry, who was still quite stunned.

"Well you're sure acting like I wasn't," she said sternly. Her eyes softened. "We're your best friends, Harry. We don't care that your gay, or even that it's Malfoy you fancy."

She elbowed Ron, who blinked before he said, "Yeah, Harry. Charlie's gay, too, remember?" He took a deep breath. "He's an arse sometimes, and I don't really see ..." he grunted when Hermione elbowed him again. "If he's what you want, Harry, then ..." he shrugged. "Okay."

Harry flushed.

Abruptly, the door to Draco's room opened, and they all had only a moment to duck before Lockhart's portrait sailed right where their heads had been. Hermione screamed, and Harry whirled around in time to see a look of rage on Draco's face before the door slammed shut with such force that the walls trembled.

"Lockhart?" asked Ron, nudging the portrait with his foot. The painting was empty however, and so they hurried to Harry's room where the other portrait was.

"A madman!" raged Lockhart, his hair disheveled. The other Lockhart nodded emphatically. He looked wildly at Harry and said, "I'm never going back in there!"

Harry shrugged and looked at Hermione, who looked flustered. "We could put him in the living room," she suggested.

"No," said Harry and Ron both.

Eventually, it was decided that Lockhart would go in the hallway, and there was a moment of awkwardness when Hermione left the room for the loo and Harry and Ron were left alone.

"So ... you don't mind that I fancy Malfoy?" blurted Harry.

Ron snorted. "It's not like I haven't known for a while, Harry," he said bluntly.

"Oh," said Harry, at a loss for what to say to that. Why was he always the last to know these things?

Ron grinned. "So, who's the girl?"

Harry squawked.

--

Hours later, Harry couldn't sleep. He, Ron, and Hermione had talked at lengths about the Order's rescue mission that night, and even a little bit about Draco. But then Ron had left with Hermione, and Harry had been left alone in the room with his thoughts.

He had tried to sleep, but after tossing and turning for hours he finally gave up. Maybe Hermione was still up and they could go over the book to see how to destroy the locket.

He pushed his arms through the sleeves of the bathrobe Navarre had given him and left his room. Lockhart was snoring in his portrait and didn't wake up when Harry passed him. It felt

oddly like wondering throughout the halls of Hogwarts at night, and he half expected to see the glowing eyes of Mrs. Norris.

*Stop it*, he told himself firmly. *You're in your own house.*

Still, though, it felt almost like breaking the rules to be up this late at night.

Halfway between Draco's and Hermione's rooms, he paused. Was Draco still up?

Low moaning made him tense, and he frowned. Was someone in pain? A high keening note made him start forward, the blood in his veins thrumming with adrenaline. Had Voldemort or Death Eaters found them? For a moment, Harry was furious that they hadn't charmed the roof of the tent to reflect the sky outside; he could have seen if the Dark Mark was looming in the sky.

"Oh yes ... " moaned Hermione, and Harry almost fell over his own feet.

That did not sound like someone in pain but rather ...

*"Unh ... uuuuhhn."*

He'd bet his life that was Ron.

His face flaming, Harry pivoted on his heel and hurried back to his room as fast as he could.

The book could wait until tomorrow.

--

In the unlit living room, Draco traced the faded pattern on couch with his finger, feeling rather than seeing where the lines dipped and curved. The broken, fire-spitting toaster was sitting in his lap, tamed by a Stunning Spell, but he couldn't find the will to fix it.

He wondered if his mother and aunt had been found by the servants yet. That would be a nasty shock for them: Potter's *Sectumsempra* had sent Bellatrix's blood all over the room. He could picture it, when he closed his eyes, the dark stain on the carpet and the strangely smooth and unwrinkled sleeve of his mother's robe.

She would never have a funeral.

He'd never said he loved her.

"Oh God," he whispered, shuddering and covering his face with shaking hands. The diamond band scraped along his face, and he ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh God ... *Mother*, I am so sorry."

For how long he sat there with his head in his hands, her ring digging into his skin, he didn't know. In the darkness of the room and nothing to hold onto but himself, time became slippery.

Someone had to tell Lucius.

Then Draco saw it. There, draped over the arm of the chair, was Harry's Invisibility Cloak. He stopped breathing as he stared at its outline. He didn't remember getting up from the couch or stretching his arm out in front of him, but as his hand hovered above the cloak he hesitated.

Hadn't the cloak been Harry's father's?

He'd return it. He promised. Nothing would happen to it; it'd be back just as soon as he had done what he had to do. He needed it more than Harry did, and he'd be back, maybe even before Harry got up.

Harry would never have to know.

He tugged Narcissa's wedding ring off of his finger and set it carefully on the arm of the chair where the cloak had been.

"I promise," he whispered, and he swept the cloak over him and left for Azkaban.

## Chapter 21

Sweat beaded and rolled down his shoulder blades as he ran across the grounds, willing his legs to go faster. He passed Hagrid's hut, and a grey Hippogriff looked up, its yellow eyes flashing like jewels in the moonlight.

He tried to control his breathing as he sucked in air, a burning ache in his side, but a shrill cry above him made him gasp and look up, letting the hood of the Invisibility Cloak fall back. If anybody had been watching they would have seen a floating head.

His heart pounded in his chest, only to feel his face flush when he saw a small, ruffled looking owl glaring down at him from the top of the gates. Draco stared at it for a moment, locking eyes with the owl's bright, jewel toned ones before lifting the hood to the Invisibility Cloak back over his head. The owl had unnerved him. Perhaps only because it had seen him, but still ... he felt better to know he was invisible again.

Wanting to leave as quickly as he could, he pushed his wand through the folds of the cloak and slashed the air with it. The gates crashed open and banged into the walls, the angry clash of iron against stone ringing across the grounds.

Only weeks ago he had been in this very spot. Only an hour ago he'd been here, brawling with Potter and then kissing him ... he clenched his hand around his wand, using the pain like a noose around suddenly erratic emotions welling up inside of him.

"Concentrate," he muttered to himself. He had to concentrate or he'd end up Splinching himself. He closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing.

*SCREEEECH!*

He jumped, so startled that he dropped his wand. He looked up again, the hood once more falling back, and saw the same owl staring reproachfully at him from the swinging gate.

He dearly hoped that something in the Forbidden Forest made a meal out of the bird.

His hands were trembling as he picked up his wand, and he refused to look at it any longer. Not caring that his head was wasn't covered by the Invisibility Cloak, Draco turned on the spot and Disapparated.

It was strange. Just as he felt as though his body was being squeezed into a tight tube, he heard

the echo of his own sharp *CRACK*, something he had never heard before.

A moment later, he appeared in knee-deep cold water. Ocean spray splashed at him, seeping through Potter's Invisibility Cloak, and he cursed himself for forgetting about high tide as he sloshed out of the water and onto the dry, if rocky, beach. A crab scuttled away from him as he passed it, snapping its claws at him.

"Stupid bugger," muttered Draco, hating all animals at the moment. He clutched the cloak tighter around himself, wincing at how the wind stung his wet skin.

It was just as he had remembered it from the last time Lucius had taken him to see Azkaban: the rocky beach being cut off abruptly by a tall cliff that he knew if he climbed would afford him a clear view of Azkaban Island. At the top of the cliff, he knew, although he couldn't see them from the beach, were three trees that looked as though they had been carved from the twisting of the wind.

It was a cold, abandoned place, just like the prison set way out at sea, and Draco did not linger long on the cold beach. He trudged through the sand to the cliff, his wet trousers chaffing across his skin.

He wished he had planned this a little better; he would have remembered to bring Potter's Firebolt. Not planning had always been, as father had said, his second greatest fault. His first was the public and humiliating spectacle he made of himself when he competed against Harry Potter and lost every time.

Even now he could feel his face start to flush as he remembered the sneer on his father's face. And then he felt like an idiot. He wasn't twelve anymore; he knew how to Apparate.

Again there was that unpleasant sensation of having all of the air crushed from his body, but it had become less agonizing with time. This time, he didn't hear the echo of his own Apparation.

The wind was colder and harsher on the top of the cliff than it had been on the beach. Shivering violently, his hair whipping across his face, he wished that he had a jar or a bowl in which he could conjure Witch Fire to keep him warm while he formulated a plan. The Invisibility Cloak billowed behind him, but he didn't care: no one was on the cliff but him.

Standing next to the three tall and gnarled trees, Draco felt as dwarfed by them as he did by the sheer proportions of what he was setting out to do: breaking into Azkaban.

Draco licked his lips as he stared at the flickering lights on the small island far out at sea.

Wards that were surpassed only by Hogwarts prevented anyone from Apparating or Disapparating in Azkaban. Now that the Dementors were gone, the Ministry had dispatched Aurors to stand guard over the prisoners.

His father was in there.

But instead of feeling determined, Draco took half a step backwards.

Maybe if he asked Potter very nicely, he would throw his weight around at the Ministry and see that Lucius was told about Narcissa. That Potter loathed Lucius as much as Lucius loathed Potter seemed inconsequential to Draco as he stared at the prison.

He took another step backwards, a bigger one this time.

Or if Potter wouldn't do it, maybe the werewolf would. He'd saved Lupin after all. Shouldn't he be rewarded for changing sides?

He was practically jogging backwards now.

And if neither of them would do it, he could ask Snape to do it the next time he saw him. Snape and his father had been friends, and Snape *had* agreed to make the Unbreakable Vow to his mother.

He pivoted and crashed into something.

The something had hands that ripped the Invisibility Cloak off of him and had flashing black eyes and a long, hooked nose.

"Professor!" gasped Draco, every muscle in his body clenching in fear as he stared up at a face pale with rage and mouth twisted in a snarl.

"Why," said Snape harshly, his black eyes glittering with something that made Draco instinctively flinch, "are you wearing Potter's Invisibility Cloak?"

He yanked the rest of the cloak off of Draco, nearly choking him as he wrenched at it. Snape balled the cloak in his fingers, wringing the material.

Draco opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"*Where's POTTER?*" roared Snape, surging towards him, and Draco jumped away, tripped over his feet, and fell to the ground.

Snape loomed over him, looking more terrifying than Draco could ever remember, his eyes slightly wild.

Wild like Bellatrix's.

And then, without warning, he felt Snape slam into his mind.

Panic unlike Draco had ever known before seized him, and he feebly and uselessly tried to erect mental barriers. But this wasn't like the time at Slughorn's party when Snape was using Legilimency on him. Snape had been gentle then, trying to slip past Draco's barriers without him being aware, trying to find out how to steal his secrets to steal his glory without him knowing.

Now was nothing like that.

Snape was ripping through his memories too fast for Draco to even get more than flashes of what he knew Snape was seeing. It was like spinning in the Floo. What he did see, however, filled him with cold dread.

The haunted face of his young ancestor swaying from a noose, dark eyes hallow and forboding.

*No*, thought Draco. *He can't see ...*

But the image was gone, replaced with another.

Harry groaning as Draco drove his fist into his side, and him wildly furious and terrified at the same time.

Draco heard a ringing in his ears and nearly succumbed to the creeping edges of darkness across his vision when he suddenly felt it.

A fracture. An imperfection across a smooth plane.

It was a splinter in Snape's vice of concentration. Something was distracting Snape from concentrating completely on Draco's memories. Draco didn't know what it was and didn't care. He only had a second to do this before Snape moved on and the opportunity passed.

Feeling as though he were shattering something inside of himself, Draco pushed his mind at the crack.

As fast as a boggart changes, Draco was pulled from his memories and slammed into something



he had never seen before. He almost pulled out, recoiling at the sudden onslaught of darkness and the unfamiliarity of Snape's mind, but was frozen in place when his father's voice filled his head.

"No."

His father's voice was rough; it wasn't the polished calm with the hint of sneer that Draco knew so well.

And then his father's voice was no longer disembodied anymore. Wandlight illuminated his face.

Draco stared, trying to digest what he was seeing. Never before had he seen his father look so desperate, so filthy. Lucius' long, white blonde hair was matted and the color of gutter water and whisked across his hollow cheeks and he shook his head, rocking back and forth as though he couldn't contain something within him.

"No," whispered Lucius again, his voice cracking. There was a keening in his voice that Draco had never heard before.

"Yes," said Snape coldly.

*But that wasn't Snape's voice,* thought Draco, and he tore his eyes away from his father to look at who had spoken.

A tall black man with an earring in his ear stood in the doorway, his wand outstretched before him. He was dressed in Auror robes, and yet ... Draco knew it was Snape.

"Goodbye Lucius."

There was a note of finality in the other man's voice, and Draco saw him raise the wand a little higher, letting the light reveal to Draco more of his father's emaciated form.

Before he could fully see, though, the picture in his mind started to waiver and flicker, and he saw a blurred image of the rocky cliff he was on.

Snape was throwing him off.

*Not yet,* thought Draco, fighting what he knew to be a losing battle against Snape's Occlumency skills.

Snape's memory once more came back into focus, and Draco concentrated, eager to see his father once more.

Green light blinded Draco, and he heard a rough, weak gasp echo in his mind, burning his skin with how very mortal it sounded.

He didn't, couldn't fight back when Snape finally pushed him out of his mind. He was too much in shock.

Snape's breaths came in sharp pants, and Draco could feel the other man's long fingers clutching his shoulders as though Draco was all that was keeping him from collapsing.

Snape was trying to say something, or maybe he was just growling.

But everything was muted to Draco, and he blinked quickly against the burn in his eyes.

Snape had killed Lucius. Snape, his father's best friend, the best man at his parents' wedding, his godfather ... murdered his father. Had he just come from Azkaban? Had Draco been only just too late to save his father?

"Draco," said Snape roughly, and Draco turned his face blindly towards his father's murderer.

He wanted to scream, wanted to shove his wand underneath Snape's chin and press the tip against his throat so that there would be no chance he could miss.

"Draco ... "

"Expelliarmus!" gasped Draco, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He didn't see where Snape landed ... only heard the thud of Snape hitting the ground and his grunt of pain.

He heard the clatter of Snape's wand behind him, and his eyes flew open of their own accord.

Ten feet in front of him, Snape was struggling to his feet.

"DON'T!" screamed Draco, thrusting his arm out in front of him.

His eyes burned and he squinted at Snape who was an old man with all too understanding blue eyes and a long white beard.

"What?" croaked Draco. He blinked, and Snape was Snape again.

"Draco ... " croaked Snape, his face pale.

Rage burned away memories, and Draco's grip on his wand was tighter. "Stop fucking with my mind," he said coldly.

"I'm not ... "

"LIAR!" screamed Draco, and his wand jumped in his hand. "How could you?" he demanded, tears streaming down his face now. "We trusted you!"

But there was no we anymore. There was only him and a music box and wedding band.

"Draco, I swear to you ... " began Snape, on his feet now.

Draco's laugh was cold and harsh, cutting at his lungs. "You make all kinds of vows," he said bitterly.

Snape's eyes widened, and Draco thought he saw something spasm in Snape's throat before the other man's face became a smooth mask.

Before his former professor could do anything else, Draco Disappeared.

--

A moment later, he felt a familiar crunch of terra cotta under his feet and the humid air that smelled of orchids. His legs were shaking so badly that he slid to the floor before he had even properly caught his breath. He leaned his head against a bag of soil and closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of orchids, soil, and clay.

It hurt to breathe.

It hurt to sit there among the shards of yet another one of Petunia Dursley's orchid pots and try to breathe when he knew that his father wasn't.

Snape had killed him.

"Oh ... God," he whispered harshly, his voice catching. He drew his knees to his chest and pressed his face against his knees.

He felt sick. He wanted to die. He wanted to kill Snape.

He wanted to go home.

That thought drew a hallow laugh from him. Did he even have a home anymore? That Petunia's greenhouse had been the first safe place he had thought of made him laugh harder. His heaving, piercing bursts of laughter cut at the stillness of the air in the greenhouse, but he found that he couldn't stop.

And then, without warning, he was crying harder than he had ever cried in his life. Not even the despair he had felt when he had been crying in front of Moaning Myrtle and Potter had come in was as acute as his crying now.

Everything that mattered had gone horribly wrong.

He didn't even have anything of his father's to remember him by. Everything they had brought back from his mother's dressing room had been hers ... even if they had been gifts from Lucius. There was nothing he had that he could touch that was his father's.

He wanted the brandy glasses, the wine collection, the coin collection, his father's smoking jacket ...

He stood up quickly, the Invisibility Cloak clenched tightly in his hand. He would go get it. How many times had he snuck into his father's study before? Hundreds? Thousands? Even if the house-elves had told the other Death Eaters and they were searching the passageways, he knew of ones that even his father had forgotten about. He would go in a different way ... he'd be more careful.

He took a few jerky steps forward.

It wasn't like he had anything to lose.

He wanted a turkey sandwich.

The thought was so out of place that he stopped moving, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. He wanted one of the turkey sandwiches and glasses of juice Potter used to bring up to his room and eat with him.

"What?" Draco demanded of the air, furious with himself for confusing sandwiches with his father.

But he did, he realized. He wanted a turkey sandwich with mustard, lettuce and cheeses and a

tall glass of Muggle juice.

Not knowing what to do, Draco stood there in the greenhouse for several moments. The sun was beginning to rise, and with every second that passed he found himself worrying that Hermione would wake up and find that the Invisibility Cloak was missing. She would tell Harry of course, and Harry would ...

Harry would never forgive him.

That this mattered surprised Draco. *Besides, he told himself, it's not like you would want to be in the Manor once everyone finds out mother and Bellatrix are dead.*

He should be worried that Snape would be waiting for him outside of the Hogwarts gates, but he wasn't.

Dawn was stretching across the grounds, and Draco, although he was wearing the Invisibility Cloak, hurriedly opened the gates.

He tried to be careful about not letting his feet show as he ran across the grounds, but with every second he became more and more convinced that Hermione would wake up and see his mother's wedding ring where the cloak had been and put two and two together. At least he was back on the grounds, he told himself.

Wishing he knew a spell for speed, Draco pushed himself harder.

Finally, he saw the tent.

He was suddenly angry that it wasn't a house, but he couldn't think too much about that because his side hurt. It suddenly occurred to Draco that he could just pretend that he had borrowed Harry's cloak to go outside, but that filled his mouth with a sour taste.

He had to get inside before anyone woke up.

When he reached the tent flap, he pressed his ear against it, trying to tell if anyone was awake yet. To his immense relief, he heard nothing.

Stepping inside was like lifting a weight off his shoulders, and he quickly took the cloak off and hurried to the chair where he had left the ring.

The ring was gone, and panic lanced through Draco like poison.

He heard something to his right, and he tensed.

"*Mroaaw*."

"Crookshanks," breathed Draco, watching the kneazle bat a paw at the ring.

He draped the cloak over the arm of the chair and took the ring from Crookshanks, who hissed at him when he did.

He slipped the ring over his finger and flexed his hand as he walked into the kitchen.

Just as he entered the kitchen he heard a familiar shuffle of feet against the floor, and when he looked up, Harry was blinking blearily at him from behind his glasses.

"Draco?" yawned Harry. "Why are you up?"

"Just wanted a turkey sandwich," said Draco lightly.

Crookshanks hissed, and Draco wondered what it was with animals hating him.

Harry's gaze sharpened, and Draco was reminded that Harry had killed his aunt. He watched silently when Harry walked over to his Invisibility Cloak and picked it up. Harry pressed the material to his face, and Draco tensed.

He should have Scourgified it.

"It smells like the ocean," said Harry flatly, pinning Draco to the spot with a look that was heartbreakingly more accusing than curious. "Why?"

Draco wanted to say that it wasn't fair. That he had gotten the cloak back on time and that Harry wasn't supposed to smell cloaks. Couldn't they just forget it? No harm no foul?

"I went to tell my father that mother's dead," said Draco.

Harry's face betrayed nothing, and Draco was unsteadily reminded of Dumbledore's blue eyes.

"But I didn't go to Azkaban," said Draco. He licked his lips. "I ran into Snape ... "

"Snape," said Harry, his voice silky.

"Yes. And he used Legilimency on me, and ... "

Harry crossed the distance between them in what seemed like only a few strides, and gripped his arms painfully.

"Don't touch me, Potter," sneered Draco, jerking out of Harry's grip. "I don't think he knows about the Horcruxes."

"You don't think," repeated Harry, his voice mocking. "I thought you knew Occlumency."

"I do," said Draco coldly. "But he fucking raped my mind, Potter. You'll excuse me if I wasn't exactly able to throw him off right away."

"What did he see?" demanded Harry, stepping into Draco's personal space and tipping his face up slightly.

"A portrait and our fight," said Draco tightly. "From tonight. I only saw flashes of it, but I think that the most he knows is that we were involved in tonight."

"Involved." Harry drew the word out and Draco nodded. He looked at Draco questioningly, and Draco suddenly felt his face heat a little bit. He hadn't thought about Snape seeing him and Harry kiss.

"I meant with my mother ... but maybe that too."

"Why didn't you go to Azkaban?" asked Harry after a pause.

"Lucius is dead. Snape killed him."

Harry blinked, his eyes no longer narrow but wide and surprised. "Killed him?" he repeated dumbly.

"Yes," snapped Draco. "As in murdered, eighty-sixed, offed."

"How do you know?" asked Harry.

"I fucking saw it, didn't I," sneered Draco. "Got in Snape's head and had a looksee."

He didn't mention that for one brilliant moment he hoped that his father had become a ghost. Lucius despised ghosts.

"Then what?" asked Harry.

And even though Draco hadn't been planning on telling Harry about the Dursley's, he did.

"It was the only safe place," said Draco quietly, leaning against the counter and letting Harry make of that what he would.

But Harry didn't seem surprised at the thought of the Dursley's been a safe haven. Harry was quiet for a long time, and Draco closed his eyes, exhaustion overcoming him.

"Still want that turkey sandwich?" asked Harry awkwardly, stepping skittishly away from him.

Draco opened his eyes and saw Harry's flushed face.

"Mustard on one side," he reminded.

—

Snape was sitting in front of the unlit fireplace, a book splayed open on the table in front of him. Every few moments he would glance at it, but the rest of the time he stared at the grate.

What he had seen in Draco's memories had been ambiguous and tangled. Draco's mind was unlike any he had ever tried to get inside before. Not as secretive as the Dark Lords, or as disarmingly open and yet hidden as Dumbledore's, Draco's mind was different. Intensely detailed scenes faded away to subconscious thoughts about something else, and Snape had to struggle to hold the pieces together.

Damn Bellatrix.

Whatever she had taught him about Occlumency was different from anything he had ever known. That Draco had been able to tell that Snape was in his mind at all at Slughorn's Christmas party had unnerved him, and yet Draco's mind had been easier to open on the cliff than Potter's had been.

Yet ...

All he had seen had been ambiguous. He had seen Draco and Potter fighting, and yet, although there seemed as though there were undertones of something else at work, Snape couldn't tell what they were.

And Draco had managed to see into his mind, just as Potter had. While reversing the



concentration wasn't uncommon with a Shield Charm or Reversing Hex, a skilled Occlumens could anticipate and shield against the reversed concentration. But Draco hadn't used a charm or a hex. He had used Snape's concentration against him in a way reminiscent of a smaller man using his larger opponent's strength against him.

Draco had seen him as Kingsley Shacklebolt, and so Draco might not know it was him.

But he might.

He flicked his eyes to the book.

"We have a problem," he said quietly.

## Chapter 22

Harry was woken up by a very insistent knocking on his bedroom door. He groped for his glasses at his bedside table, his hand fumbling with the chains of the locket and the pocket watch the Weasleys had given him, and he said in a huge yawn, "Come in."

"Harry? Harry, it's me," called Hermione.

"Come in, Hermione," said Harry, not quite keeping the exasperation out of his voice.

Every morning since the failed rescue mission of Draco's mother, Hermione had taken to waking Harry up whenever she thought it was time to search the dozens of books she had taken from Malfoy Manor. He wouldn't have minded this if it weren't for the *way* she did it.

The doorknob turned, and she pushed the door open slowly.

"I'm coming in, Harry," she said, and the door hesitated slightly.

Harry didn't say anything, not wanting to risk saying something that would have her sending canary missiles at him.

"Hi, Harry," said Hermione, looking closely at the rumbled blankets as though she expected something to emerge.

"Do you think Malfoy's in the bed or under it?" he asked, keeping his voice casual.

"In," she muttered, and then her face burned scarlet. "Ah ... that is to say, it's rather early for him to be up, isn't it?" Her voice was higher than normal, although Harry caught her sweeping gaze underneath the bed.

She cleared her throat, and although still very red in the face, asked, "Did you find anything about destroying Horcruxes in the book last night?"

"Not yet," said Harry dryly. This wasn't strictly a lie because he hadn't read more than a paragraph before Draco decided he wanted to go flying. Draco had been so moody all week, locking himself in his room and shouting at anyone who so much as knocked on his door, that Harry had said yes. He hoped it was a sign that Draco was coming out of his mourning for his parents.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

Hermione looked as though she had been waiting for him to ask. "Salazar Slytherin had only daughters!" she said triumphantly.

This failed to have the impact she would have liked.

"So?" said Harry.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "His daughters married into other Pureblood families, the Peverells, Gaunts, Voldemort's mother's side, and the Clavenhorts."

"But what does that have to do with the Horcruxes?" asked Harry.

Hermione continued as though he hadn't spoken. She had a habit of doing that. "Slytherin's oldest daughter Sarah married into the Peverells, the second daughter Mafalda married into the Gaunts, and Araminta, his third daughter, married into the Clavenhorts."

"That's all very interesting, Hermione ..." began Harry, who did not find it interesting at all.

"So! Voldemort might not have made another Horcrux from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor; he might have found more family heirlooms," said Hermione, and she looked at him expectantly, obviously waiting to be congratulated and perhaps flattered for her theory.

But Harry was nonplussed. "Dumbledore said that he was going to try and get Horcruxes from all of the Founders."

"But maybe he didn't," argued Hermione.

"But he probably did," pointed out Harry. "Dumbledore said that ..."

"Dumbledore might have been wrong," said Hermione.

"I think Dumbledore knew a bit more about this than you do, Hermione," said Harry stiffly.

There was an awkward pause in which Harry knew Hermione was struggling not to yell at him, only he wished she would because he wanted to yell too.

"When's breakfast?" asked a new voice from the doorway.

Draco was staring at them both expectantly, and Hermione sighed. "I'm going to go read," she said, and she left.

"What did you do now, Potter?"

"I didn't do anything," said Harry shortly. "She thinks she knows more about Horcruxes than Dumbledore did."

Draco shrugged. "Whatever, Potter. I want two eggs and sausages," he said as he turned to walk down the hallway.

"We haven't got any sausage," said Harry sourly.

Draco looked over his shoulder. "Well you'd better get some then."

"Sod off," said Harry angrily.

"And toast, Potter. I want two triangles of toast, too," called Draco, his voice fading as he left the hallway.

Someone laughed from behind Harry, and he turned to stare at the portrait on the closet.

"That's some boyfriend you've got, Harry," said the Lockhart who had been banished from Draco's room. The other Lockhart, who had taken to sleeping in the phone booth, was sniggering.

"He's not my boyfriend," muttered Harry as he tugged his night shirt off.

"Then why do you call his name when you're ... "

"Say another word and I'll burn you," threatened Harry, brandishing his sock at the portrait.

Lockhart chuckled before sliding out of view in the painting and into his portrait in the hallway.

"Bloody bugging hell," sighed Harry. He would have to put the paintings somewhere else in the tent, somewhere where they couldn't ... hear things. He wished he had a cupboard under the stairs to stow them away in.

He didn't have too much time to think about where he was going to put the portraits because Draco came back and reminded him that he would also like some Muggle juice to go with his

breakfast, and Ron and Hermione both wanted coffee.

"You can get your own damn breakfasts," grouched Harry, striding into the sitting room where Ron and Hermione had spread the books over the breakfast table. "I'm not your house-elf."

Hermione looked at him icily over the top of *The Bluebloods of Purebloods*. "I wouldn't dream of comparing you to a house-elf, Harry," she said coolly.

"Good," said Harry shortly.

"They work much harder."

Draco snorted.

"I'll go with you, mate," said Ron quickly, standing up from his place next to Hermione and looking eager to abandon the dusty tome he was reading.

"No you won't," said Hermione sharply. "You're reading." She said this with such icy authority that Ron smiled weakly at Harry and sat down.

"And I'm lounging Potter, so be quick about it," drawled Draco from his place on the couch. "And I want marmalade too."

Making as much noise as he could, and muttering loudly about *some* people thinking they're *entitled* to things, even though they *weren't*, Harry left the tent and headed up to the school to get breakfast from the house-elves. He wondered why he was the one fetching breakfast for everyone, especially Draco, when he and Draco weren't even officially together.

They had kissed a few times, like last night in mid-air. Covered by the Invisibility Cloak, they had to fumble to kiss without dropping the cloak back to reveal Draco. Matters were further complicated by the rambunctious broom they had taken from the school broomshed, which liked to buck Draco about. Harry wondered if their few kisses cancelled out all the times they had got into shouting matches that week, or if their fights cancelled out the kisses.

The August heat beat down on Harry, distracting him from thinking too heavily on what exactly he and Draco were. He kicked a stone idly as he trudged up the grassy slopes leading up to the castle. He had never been at Hogwarts during August and he paused to watch a group of niffles drink from the lake only to run squealing into the Forbidden Forest when the giant squid reached out a giant tentacle towards them.

The entrance hall was empty when he arrived, and it wasn't until he had gone down the flight

of stone steps and into in to the hallway filled with paintings of food that he met anyone else.

A group of lost looking kids in Muggle clothing stopped walking when they saw him, and more than one looked as though they might try and run away.

"W-we're purebloods," lied one of the girls boldly. She looked at him haughtily, and for a moment, Harry was charmingly reminded on Draco.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek as he imagined what Draco would say if he were in Harry's shoes. "It's okay," he said. "I'm not a Death Eater."

"How do we know you're not lying?" asked another one of the kids, his voice shrill. He was the one who looked like he might bolt at any second.

Not knowing what else to say to convince them, Harry pulled back his bangs and showed his scar. "I'm Harry Potter."

"Who?" whispered one of the kids.

"Harry Potter!" hissed the other children in a chorus, but the boy was not enlightened. Harry thought it was rather nice.

"Oh," said the first girl who had spoken. She smiled widely at him, revealing a missing front tooth. "I'm Amanda Greensburg. I know Ron," she said proudly.

"Yeah? Ron's my best mate," said Harry, although he wasn't feeling very happy with his friend at the moment.

"We wanna see Dobby," said Amanda bossily.

"You know Dobby?" asked Harry, surprised, falling in step with the group of children as they walked down the hall.

"Dobby's cool!"

"Mister Jacob Woolsey, sir!" squeaked a skinny black boy before dissolving in laughter.

Part of Harry didn't want to tell them how to get in the kitchens. Discovering that you had to tickle the pear in the painting of a gigantic bowl of fruit was sort of a rite of passage to the Hogwarts experience. But they were staring up at him expectantly, and he had to get breakfast before Draco decided that he was no longer in the mood for breakfast and wanted lunch.

"Yeah," he said, and he walked up to the painting. "Close your eyes," he ordered gruffly. It would be rather like scaring Dudley with nonsensical words the summer before second year, pretending he was casting spells.

"Why?" demanded Jacob.

"Just do it," said Harry shortly, reminded of why he had always avoided first years in the past. Ron was right. They *were* titchy. He waited until he saw their eyes tightly scrunched, and he waved his dramatically in front of the painting.

"Uh ... Mimbulus Draconus Lumos ... Mugwump Amora!," he cried saying the first words that came to him. He darted his hand forward to tickle the pear, which bounced and chuckled before turning into a large door handle. Harry grasped it and pulled the door open.

He was sure someone had peeked ... after all, it was what he would have done. But at least he knew he tried to preserve tradition. He heard impressed oohs and awws from behind him as he strode into the kitchen. His stomach growled as he inhaled the appetizing smells of coffee cake, waffles, omelets and large pitchers of pumpkin juice.

Dozens of enormous green eyes blinked at him as he led the way into the kitchen, they bowed, smiled, and curtsied, to him.

There was a cry of joy from somewhere behind the broiler, and Dobby, came barreling at him in a black streak. "Harry Potter, sir!" he cried, launching himself at Harry.

"Hi, Dobby. What're you all in black for?" asked Harry, staring at the odd assortment of black clothing Dobby was wearing. He was wearing one of Hermione's black knitted caps, a black sweater over which he wore a black tie that hung down to his knees, black soccer shorts, and black stockings that bunched at his ankles.

"Dobby is in mourning, sir!" said Dobby tearfully. The other house-elves looked suddenly somber, and there was a distinct droop to their large ears.

"Mourning? What ... oh," said Harry. "Dumbledore."

At this, tears leaked down Dobby's face, and Harry patted the elf awkwardly on the back. "How's, er, Winky getting along then?" he asked, changing the subject.

Dobby sniffed loudly. "Dobby will show Harry Potter," he said, taking Harry by the hand and leading him over to the brick fireplace.

Winky wasn't alone, though. Kreacher sat next to her, and they stared indolently into the fire. Kreacher's loincloth, which Harry had Scourgified only weeks ago, was possible even filthier than it had been when Harry met him. Winky's blue blouse had accumulated more burn stains, and there was a strong smell of butterbeer lingering from underneath her cot.

"She hasn't gotten any better?" asked Harry lowly to Dobby.

"No," said Dobby sadly. He fixed his enormous eyes at Kreacher and glared at the other elf. "But Dobby is thinking that maybe Winky would be getting better if she is not with Kreacher so much."

"Winky hangs around with Kreacher?" asked Harry, surprised. "Doesn't he help out with the cooking?"

Dobby shook his head emphatically. "He is always spilling and burning the food, Kreacher is!" he said angrily. "And Kreacher is, Kreacher is a bad elf! He is telling Winky bad things!"

"Right," said Harry grimly. "Kreacher, wake up!" he commanded.

Kreacher's eyes flew open, and when he saw Harry he got to his feet and bowed lowly. "Master," he said, and then under his breath, "Kreacher is ashamed to have to call the half-blood, Master. Oh his poor Mistress, if she only knew what filth ... "

"Kreacher," said Harry sharply, cutting Kreacher off. "I told you to work in the kitchens."

"Kreacher has worked in the kitchens, Master," croaked Kreacher. "Because Kreacher has to obey him, yes, but Kreacher doesn't want to obey the nasty half-blood ... "

"You is not to insult Harry Potter!" cried Dobby, balling his long fingers into fists.

The noise had woken up Winky, who blinked blearily at them from her small cot. "Ha-rry Potter?" she squeaked, hiccupping.

Just as before, the rest of the house-elves looked embarrassed about Winky, and several of them tried to distract the children with ... eclairs and tea.

"I really miss my mum's biscuits," said one boy wistfully as he helped himself to three biscuits proffered by a house-elf.

Harry turned his attention back to Kreacher, who was staring at the kids feasting on the snacks



as though they were nasty insects. Kreacher caught his eye and glared malevolently at him before sinking into a low bow while muttering hatefully under his breath.

Harry sighed. "Has he done anything really bad, Dobby?" he asked.

"Kreacher did not put away the bowls last night, sir!" confided Dobby in a hushed tone, trembling at the thought of doing something so wicked.

Harry sighed again. Not putting away bowls was not exactly what he thought of as really bad. He turned to Kreacher. "Kreacher, give me a list of things you've done wrong since you've started working here in order from worst to not so bad."

"Master is trying to catch Kreacher, oh yes, because he is worried," muttered Kreacher very fast before saying, "Kreacher has broken a salad bowl. Kreacher has lost a spoon. Kreacher has ... "

"Have you tried to help the Death Eaters or Voldemort in any way?" cut in Harry, and the elves cowered at the name, and most of the children looked terrified that Voldemort was going to burst into the kitchen doors at any moment. One boy actually choked on the pumpkin juice he was guzzling.

Kreacher looked sullenly at Harry before shaking his head, his floppy ears swinging.

Relieved, Harry let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Good. Because you're forbidden to," he said. He turned to Winky. "How're you doing?" he asked, hoping he was imitating Hermione's kind voice.

"Winky is missing her Master," she said, sniffing. Tears dribbling down her face and onto her stained blouse.

"What happened to him?" asked Amanda curiously, staring at Winky, who had begun howling.

"He died," said Harry shortly. He left Winky and Kreacher to themselves, and turned to Dobby. "I need some breakfast for four, please."

Joyfully, Dobby exclaimed, "Yes, Harry Potter, sir! What can Dobby get for Harry Potter?"

"The usual, Dobby," said Harry. "And toast and marmalade and coffee, please."

Dobby and the other house-elves returned a few moments later with a large picnic basket, and Dobby lifted the lid to reveal its contents. "Sausages and eggs, Harry Potter, sir!" he said, pointing to two trays. "And toast and a thermos of coffee and special Muggle juice. We is

putting a warming spell on them to keep them hot for you, and miss, and your Wheezy, and ...  
"

"Yes, Dobby, thanks," said Harry hastily, not wanting Dobby to say Draco's name. "You lot gonna be okay?"

"Fine," the others chorused back, looking very content as house-elves offered more tea and buns.

"You're in charge, Dobby," said Harry, and Dobby beamed at him.

Harry left the kitchens, and, not encountering any more rescued muggle-borns, he was on the grounds in minutes. The smell of sausages and coffee wafted up to his nostrils as he hurried across the long grass that brushed his ankles as he walked. He wondered what Hermione and Ron had found in the books. Hopefully it was something useful about how to destroy the locket rather than the oddities of the Slytherin line.

They had gone twice now to see if Dumbledore was there, both times exasperating Professor McGonagall, but Dumbledore had once more disappeared from his frame.

"Maybe he wants you to do this on your own," suggested Ron the second time they had gone.

Harry wondered the same thing. Even when he was alive, Dumbledore hadn't told him how he destroyed the ring that had he had sacrificed his hand for. But Dumbledore had meant to tell him. He would have told him, Harry was sure, after they had gotten the fake Horcrux. Only everything had gone terribly wrong that night ...

A piercing, terrified scream jolted Harry out of his thoughts, and he plunged his hand into his robe for his wand and stared around him. The scream had come from over by the tent.

"HERMIONE?" yelled Harry, sprinting towards the tent, the basket bumping awkwardly along his leg. He was almost there ... he ran up the grassy slope, ignoring the burn in his thighs.

"Hermione!" shouted Ron.

Harry cleared the incline and was lurching forward when he saw Hermione being supported not by Ron, who was running towards her, but by Draco, who was half carrying her back into the tent.

Harry spun around, looking to see if anyone was behind him, but the grounds were empty.

Harry burst into the tent, breathing harshly, and stared at Draco and Hermione, who looked both looked pale. Hermione was shaking in Ron's arms, and Harry looked to Draco for an explanation.

"We saw Thestrals," he said quietly.

"Oh," said Harry. He licked his lips, not knowing what to say.

"Did you remember the marmalade?" asked Draco severely, his voice so harsh that Hermione looked up from Ron's shoulder.

"Yes," said Harry, taken aback.

"Good," said Draco, standing up and walking into the kitchen.

Harry stared at Draco, at a complete loss for what to say about Draco's abrupt conversation change.

"I'm not hungry," said Hermione, staring at the food Harry was pulling out of the picnic basket.

"You should eat," said Ron. "I'll make some tea ... that'll help."

Alone with Hermione, Harry turned to her. "Was it ... really bad?" he asked.

"It was ... it was just so startling," said Hermione, a bit of color already in her cheeks. "I'd only ever seen drawings of them. Did you know that if you take a photograph of a Thestral not everyone can see it? Only those who have seen death?"

"Oh," said Harry. "That's interesting."

"They're revolting," said Draco succinctly, returning with plates.

Hermione shuddered, gratefully taking the cup of tea Ron proffered. "I mean, I know I've ridden one, but it's just different," she said. "I was standing there, sending a letter to my parents, when it came out of nowhere and just ... it just stared at me."

"Why do you think it was there?" asked Ron. "It's not like you were bleeding or anything, Hermione."

"Maybe it was coming for the lake?" suggested Harry, remembering the nifflers he had seen

earlier.

"Maybe," said Hermione, but she sounded doubtful. "Aren't there other water sources in the forest?"

Harry shrugged. " 'Dunno."

"I wonder if there's a map of the forest in the library," said Hermione, and Ron exchanged a look with Harry.

Hermione had obviously recovered if she was thinking about the Hogwarts Library.

"I met Amanda Greensburg by the kitchens," said Harry, suddenly remembering the rescued children.

"By the kitchens?" repeated Ron, frowning.

"They wanted to meet Dobby," explained Harry.

"Dobby?" asked Draco.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Your ... "

"Old house-elf," finished Draco, spreading marmalade across his toast.

Harry tensed, waiting for some mention of Malfoy senior or Voldemort's diary to come up from either Draco or Ron, but the only sound in the room was of Draco biting into his toast.

"When they met me, they told me that they were purebloods," said Harry, filling in the silence.

Hermione paused in drinking her tea. "Purebloods?" she repeated, frowning.

"Yeah," said Ron, his ears turning red. "I told them to tell that to anyone they didn't know."

Hermione looked exasperated. "That's not doing much to promote the idea that blood doesn't matter, Ron."

Ron shrugged, spearing a sausage. "Maybe not, but it might keep them alive."

Hermione shook her head before pulling one of the books towards her. "We learned a lot while you were gone, Harry. We found out in this book that the Slytherins used to be one of the

wealthiest families in all of Europe."

"They made my mansion in Wiltshire look like a boot locker," commented Draco dryly.

Malfoy Manor came into Harry's mind, and he had a hard time believing anything to be grander than Malfoy's house except for maybe Hogwarts. But nothing was grander than Hogwarts.

"What made them so rich?" asked Harry.

"Land," said Ron.

"Taxes," said Hermione.

"Ancestry," said Draco.

"All of it," said Hermione. "But his daughters didn't always marry the wealthiest families."

"Why not?"

"Because Slytherin wanted heirs of good blood ... he was rich enough to support his daughters and their families. What he wanted were grandchildren that were going to do the line credit and going to produce great-grandchildren that were going to carry on the Slytherin traditions," said Draco.

"He arranged all of his daughters' marriages," said Hermione, looking reproachful.

"But it backfired on him," said Ron gleefully, pulling a book out and undoing the pages to reveal an enormous family tree. He pointed to Salazar's daughter Sarah, who married Alexander Peverell. "They had a daughter named Eladora and a son named Taberus."

Struggling to appear interested, Harry nodded. He didn't see where they were going with this, but he looked at the family tree. Eladora never married or had children, while Taberus had a whopping nine children from nine different women. He thought they must be mistresses because they were all alive at the same time.

"Eladora didn't speak Parseltongue, and according to legend, she was blonde ... an oddity, in other words," continued Draco. "A spinster, she was an embarrassment to her grandfather and the family in all respects except for Potions."

"She invented Amortentia," said Harry suddenly, just remembering his last visit to Slughorn's

office.

"You know the story?" asked Hermione, looking somewhat disappointed.

Harry shook his head. "No, it's just that Slughorn told me that when I saw him last week. What else about her?"

"That's it," said Ron simply. "She was good at Potions and nothing else. Not exactly marriable material."

"At least in those times," said Hermione, looking at Ron disapprovingly.

"Her brother Taberus was Slytherin's favorite," interjected Draco, who, having finished his breakfast was reclining on the couch like a satisfied cat. "Had eight sons, one daughter: a respectable amount."

"Then why do you always make fun of how many kids my parents have?" asked Ron testily.

Draco arched a pale eyebrow. "You're parents can't afford them," he said.

Ron's neck and ears burned and he got quickly to his feet.

"Not *now*, Ron," said Hermione, looking at Draco eagerly. "Malfoy," she said carefully, "Malfoy, do you know where the Peverell mansion is?"

"No," said Draco, and Hermione deflated.

"Why'd you want to know where it is?" asked Harry, having a feeling he knew why.

"Because I think Voldemort would have looked for it," said Hermione. She pointed to Taberus on the family tree. "If he was Slytherin's favorite, then he must have received gifts or family heirlooms from Slytherin. Voldemort would have wanted to find them, and if he did he would have made Horcruxes out of them."

Harry opened his mouth to soundly disagree with her, but Ron cut him off.

"Wouldn't Dumbledore have already checked?" he asked.

"Thank you, Ron," said Harry. "Exactly. If we could find out about the Slytherin family tree, then so could have Dumbledore ... "

"Well maybe he just didn't think about it," said Hermione hotly.

"I don't think so," said Harry firmly, feeling a headache come on like a bubble rising to the surface.

"Yes, well, you also thought that Prince was just a brilliant Potions master," said Hermione, her voice very loud and her face very red.

A surge of anger burned through Harry, and he wasn't quite sure just when he had stood up, but he found himself storming out of the room and slamming the door behind him as hard as he could.

"Hi, Harry Potter!"

"Hi, Harry!"

Three eleven-year-olds he had never seen before beamed at him, standing at the lake shore. They waved at him as he passed, and he waved back half-heartedly. They shrieked in delight when the giant squid surfaced, and Harry watched them for a moment before taking off his shoes and walking along the bank to join them.

"Hi," he said, staring out at the great squid.

"Hello," said one of the boys. His pants were rolled up to his knees and he was in the lake, skipping rocks.

"You'll want to be careful of Grindylows," warned Harry.

"What?"

"They're water demons," explained Harry, drawing a crude picture of them in the sand. "They grab you and try to drown you."

The boy came hurriedly out of the water, and Harry frowned. "Don't you lot have wands yet?"

They shook their heads.

"When are you going to get them?" he asked, struggling to imagine being in Hogwarts without a wand.

The boy who'd been in the lake shrugged. "Professor Slughorn says they're bringing someone

in," he said, not looking very disconcerted.

"Ollivander?" asked Harry excitedly, wondering if he had been found.

"No," said another boy who had been staring at Harry. "Somebody else. Can I see your scar?"

"No," said Harry shortly, who wasn't feeling up to being on display. The boy looked disappointed and wandered down farther towards the water. "Mind you don't get too far in," he warned, and he left them.

He hadn't visited Hagrid in a while, and he decided to go up to his cabin. He hadn't gone more than halfway when he heard the sound of hoof beats. It was Firenze the centaur, galloping towards him.

"Hello," said Harry.

Firenze looked soberly at him. "Hello, Harry Potter," he said. He stared out across the lake at the boys splashing one another.

There was a long period of silence, and Harry shielded his eyes and fidgeted uncomfortably as his shirt stuck to his sweaty back. He wanted to go inside Hagrid's shaded hut, but how did one walk away from a centaur?

"Nice summer?" he asked.

Firenze shrugged gracefully and flicked his tail. "It has been very warm," he said, and he stared up at the sun. He didn't wince, although the sun was glaring, and Harry wondered if centaurs' eyes were stronger than humans. "Very warm," he repeated softly.

Harry wondered if Firenze was about to reveal something the planets had told him as he had done in the Forbidden Forest in his first year, and Harry grew excited.

After what seemed like an eternity, Firenze turned to him, looking at Harry quietly, and Harry held himself very still.

"Mars has been very bright since the first night we met," said Firenze softly.

"What does that mean?" asked Harry, although he had an idea what Firenze meant.

"We are in a war," said Firenze simply.



Harry forced himself to bite his tongue to keep from saying anything flippant, and Firenze looked at him thoughtfully.

"I have not been able to talk to the other centaurs in the forest," said Firenze, flicking a glance at the forest behind Hagrid's cabin, "but I am sure that they would agree with me when I say that the war is far from over."

Harry swallowed. Did that mean he had years to go before he would find all of the other Horcruxes? Maybe Hermione was right in wanting to find the rest of the Horcruxes rather than concentrating on how to destroy the locket.

"Is that the future?" asked Harry, his stomach clenching as he waited for Firenze to speak.

Firenze's face was serious when he said, "The centaurs have been wrong before. For your sake, Harry, I hope we are."

He looked as though he was about to leave, but Harry had one more question. "Dumbledore told me there are lots of unfulfilled prophecies ... do the centaurs know that?"

Firenze kicked the dirt, and Harry had the impression that he had just insulted him.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "I just meant ... " he trailed off, not knowing how to word what tied his stomach into knots.

"Centaurians are not concerned with trifles of individual prophecies," he said gravely.

"Your prophecy ... " Harry started.

"Yes, Harry, I know all about your prophecy. Centaurs do not have to wait for human seers to make their predictions. Your prophecy is larger than you and him."

"Oh," said Harry. "But still, Dumbledore's told me I could walk away from it at any time but that I won't because ... " he felt his face flush. "Because I can love. But it has to take place in our lifetimes. So when you say the war is far from over, you mean until I've fulfilled the prophecy, don't you?"

Firenze's face was terribly gentle. "It wasn't over last time when most thought he was gone."

"But it was better," insisted Harry. "People weren't living in fear. And after Voldemort's really gone, then it should be even better."

And suddenly Harry knew that Firenze thought he was going to die and that Voldemort was going to win. "I'm not going to die," he said fiercely.

Firenze didn't say anything.

"I'm going to win!" said Harry loudly, his hands tightly clenched at his side as he glared up at Firenze.

"Win what?"

Harry turned around and Hagrid's inquisitive face looked down at him. "Whahd're you shoutin' 'bout 'arry?"

"Nothing," said Harry harshly, but Hagrid only looked at him mildly, not in the least offended.

" 'Lo, Firenze."

"Hello, Hagrid. Thank you for coming," said Firenze.

"No problem," said Hagrid affably, standing next to Harry and watching as Firenze galloped back to the castle.

"You okay, 'arry?" asked Hagrid.

"Yeah," said Harry, running his hand through hair. "Are you watching them?" he asked, gesturing to the boys down by the lake.

Hagrid nodded. "Not quite the same as coming in on the boats off the train, but at least they're all getting along, even the Slytherins and Gryffindors."

"They've been Sorted?" asked Harry, temporarily forgetting that Firenze thought he didn't stand a chance.

"No," said Hagrid, shaking his great head. His enormous hands stretched out in front of him and he pointed at each of the boys.

"That one on the right, he's a Hufflepuff. Made friends with everyone right away. And the one on the left, a sure Ravenclaw. And the other boy's a Slytherin, just like Theodore Nott in your year: tall and quiet. They're all living in the Slytherin dorm together.

"Why're they living down there?" asked Harry, remembering how dark and unwelcoming the

Slytherin common room was from his brief time there in his second year.

"They chose it," said Hagrid, shrugging. "Thought it'd be in'ereesting. Next term will sure be in'ereesting."

"Oh," said Harry, looking back at the boys appraisingly. "Who's coming to size them up for their wands?"

"Some bloke Professor Slughorn knows is coming this weekend," said Hagrid. "Not as good as Ollivander's, but not bad. Better than that fool Chester in Diagon Alley."

Hagrid sighed heavily. "Poor Ollivander," he said, his face unusually grave.

"What happened to him?" asked Harry curiously. "Anyone ever find out?"

"Nah," said Hagrid. "Just disappeared. Left his wands though."

This startled Harry. "I thought they said the shop was empty."

Hagrid shook his head. "That's what the Ministry had the Prophet print."

"Then why don't people use his wands?" asked Harry, his own experience in Ollivander's shop coming vividly back to him. "They might not work for everybody, but some might. My wand was waiting in the shop for over fifty years!"

"Ministry's got them." Hagrid spat into the dirt. "And Scrimgeour won't let us have 'em."

Harry, who had had several unpleasant experiences with the Scrimgeour, wondered if it had anything to do with him not becoming the Ministry's poster boy.

"He knows the Order got all of them, doesn't he?" asked Harry.

Hagrid nodded and looked thoughtfully at Harry. "Say 'arry, why didn't you go on that rescue mission. Blimey, we could've used you. You'd have been dead useful what with having grown up with them Dursleys and all."

Harry licked his lips but said lightly, "I'm doing something for Dumbledore. Can't tell you, Hagrid."

Hagrid grunted. "Best not to if it's go' ta be a secret," he rumbled. "Can't keep 'em for the life o' me."

"So why won't Scrimgeour let us have the wands?" asked Harry, eager to change the subject away from memories of that night.

"He's still sore about Professor McGonagall hexing 'im," said Hagrid, and both he and Harry smiled at one another, remembering the furious look on Scrimgeour's face and the smell of burning carpet when he passed them.

"Right," said Harry, having made up his mind.

"What?"

"I'm going to send Hedwig to the Ministry to get the wands back," said Harry matter of factly, and he turned back towards the castle.

"Hedwig?" asked Hagrid, looking surprised.

Harry paused. "You're right. Umbridge might try and hurt her again." Hagrid grunted at the mention of Umbridge, who had done her best to get him sacked two years ago. "Better use one of the school owls."

" 'Arry, I don't really think Scrimgeour is going to listen to you," said Hagrid doubtfully.

Harry smiled grimly. "I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse."

"What?"

"Me," said Harry flatly, and he left Hagrid to think what he would about that as he headed up to the castle.

Rage burned inside of him, quickening his pace as he crossed the grounds passed the castle. He took the stairs leading up to the Owlery two at a time, the anger he felt towards Firenze and Scrimgeour singing at the burn in his thighs as he ran up the stairs. He was going to win. He was going to kill Voldemort, and he was going to make things *right*.

That Firenze didn't believe in him angered more than hurt him. Hadn't he done more to stand up to evil than most wizards ever did in their life? Dumbledore believed in him. Ron and Hermione and he thought Draco too believed he was going to win.

At the last step Harry faltered.

*Dumbledore trusted Snape.*

This had been and always would be the problem. How could he trust Dumbledore's estimation of his worth when he'd been so wrong about Snape? He'd been wrong about the locket, too.

He'd been wrong about Wormtail ... about Sirius.

Harry swallowed with difficulty and sat down on the last step, staring for a very long time at his feet as he thought.

He was the only chance the Wizarding world had at defeating Voldemort, wasn't he? The prophecy said that he was the one with the power to defeat Voldemort. He was the one who had been marked as Voldemort's equal. If he failed would the Wizarding world be forced to endure Voldemort forever? Would he create so many Horcruxes that he would be unstoppable?

The breakfast in his stomach churned uneasily as thought about this.

But would he fail? Dumbledore didn't think so. Again, though, doubt niggled at his mind like a worm until finally he couldn't take it anymore and he stood up and entered the Owlery.

The room was filled with dusty light and the smell of feathers and the soft hoots of owls calling to one another.

Knowing he needed to explain to Hedwig why he couldn't use her, he called to her softly and watched in admiration as her snowy body circled in the dappled light above him. She perched on the stand and stared at him expectantly.

"I can't use you, Hedwig," he said apologetically, reaching out to stroke her feathers.

She snapped her beak at his fingers and hooted, offended.

"Not because I don't want to, but because I don't want Umbridge trying to hurt you again."

Hedwig opened one eye and stared at him disdainfully as though to disabuse him of the notion that she'd let herself get caught twice. Thinking quickly, Harry said, "But I need you to take a letter to the Daily Prophet. Unless you're not up to it ... "

She glared at him, puffing her body up until her feathers swelled underneath Harry's fingers.

"Good girl," said Harry, smiling, and he went to the parchment and ink box kept in the Owlery for students to use. He thought briefly for a moment before writing down his note. It read:

*Dear Rita,*

*How would you like to do another exclusive interview?*

*H.J.P.*

*p.s. same as last time ... don't bring the quill.*

"There you go," said Harry, blowing on the parchment to dry the ink before rolling it up. Hedwig clutched it in her talons.

"Straight to Rita Skeeter ... not to anyone else, got it?" said Harry, running his hand down her white feathers once more.

She hooted softly before jumping away from the perch and out of the window.

Harry took another sheet of parchment and the words flowed quickly from quill to parchment.

*Dear Minister,*

*I have an upcoming interview with Rita Skeeter about how I feel about current Ministry actions.*

*If you have any of old Ollivander wands, I know some people who could use them.*

*H.J.P.*

Harry looked at the note critically. It was blunt, presumptuous, and would get Scrimgeour's goat within six seconds. Perfect.

There was already a small, ruffled, but determined looking owl waiting on the perch by the time Harry had rolled the parchment.

"Take this to Scrimgeour ... no, wait, take this to Kingsley Shacklebolt. He'll take this to the Minister," said Harry to the owl. "And don't let anyone but Shacklebolt read it."

The owl fixed him with a fierce glare before all but grabbing the rolled up parchment from Harry's hands and flying out the window.

Not two hours later, when Harry was back in the tent with Ron, Hermione and Draco, studying

the book on Horcruxes, there was a staccato of pecking on the tent door.

"What on earth?" wondered Hermione, looking up from her book.

"That must be from the Minister and Rita Skeeter," said Harry, getting to his feet, excited.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

"That Skeeter cow?" said Ron incredulously. "Why's she owling you?"

"The Minister?" echoed Draco tensely, his hands suddenly clenching his trousers.

"It's fine. It's about the new first year Muggle-borns," said Harry, opening the front door, and Hedwig and the school owl flew into the room. Hedwig cut the other owl off to settle on the perch in the living room, leaving the other owl to rest on one of the large tomes on the breakfast table and looking very out of place.

"What about them?" wondered Ron.

Draco stared very hard at the owl, which kept its back to Draco and was instead fixing its attention on Crookshanks in Hermione's lap.

*"Mroow."*

The owl hooted and flapped its wings, never letting its eyes off Crookshanks.

"Hush Crookshanks," said Hermione, tightening her hold on kneazle. "What about the new first years, Harry?" she asked.

Harry paused in ripping the letters open to explain. "The Ministry took all of Ollivanders' wands that he left in his store, and they won't let anybody have them. Some bloke Slughorn knows is coming this weekend to measure all of the new students for their wands, but he's not as good as Ollivander."

"So you're going to Rita with what you think about that," surmised Hermione, looking surprised that she hadn't thought of the idea herself.

"No," corrected Harry, smiling slightly as he pictured in his mind's eye Scrimgeour's reaction to the letter he had sent him. "I'm giving Scrimgeour the chance to make the Ministry look good for actually doing something good."

"Crookshanks, *no*," said Hermione firmly as Crookshanks tried to wriggle out of her arms. "Open it, Harry."

"Scrimgeour's first," said Ron.

Harry tore open the rest of the letter and pulled out a piece of parchment with the Ministry seal at the top. " 'Dear Harry', " he read aloud. " 'I'm delighted to inform you that we have just concluded that the wands in our possession have not been tampered with, and that we plan on presenting them to Hogwarts this Thursday.' "

Ron snorted. "What a slick bastard," he said.

"That's not all," said Harry, who was grinning. He adopted an oily cheerful voice and said, " 'See you at the ceremony!' "

"Ceremony?" said Draco, looking unhappy. "That means there's going to be Aurors everywhere."

Hedwig hooted sharply, extending her leg for Harry to untie the letter. "Thanks, Hedwig," he said, feeding her some cold sausage. He turned back to the owl on the table "Thanks," he said, and it took off quickly.

Crookshanks flicked his tail, and stared hungrily after the owl.

Harry opened Rita's letter, which was considerably longer than Scrimgeour's and splattered with inkblots. Clearly, Rita had been in a hurry.

"Huh," he said, scanning the letter.

"Read it aloud, Potter," ordered Draco tensely.

"She wants to put it in the *Prophet* this time," said Harry mildly, flicking his eyes over the parchment at Draco. "And she wants her photographer there."

"What for?" asked Ron, reaching for the letter.

"To make herself look better," said Hermione. She made a face. "What are you going to do, Harry?"

He shrugged and folded the letter up. " 'Dunno. Do it, I guess, but maybe for the Quibbler.' " He scratched his head. "Should have asked Luna's dad."



Hermione looked strained at the mention of the Quibbler. She had mixed feelings about the publication, and Harry knew the Quibbler's blatant disregard for established magical facts irritated her to no end.

"It says she wants to put it on the front page of the next day's paper," said Ron, looking up from the letter.

Hermione frowned. "That won't give us much time to look over it," she said.

Harry shrugged, not really caring anymore what people thought of him. All of that had seemed not to matter anymore after Dumbledore died. "As long as the kids get their wands I don't really care what she says."

"I do."

Harry looked at Draco in surprise. "Say what?" he asked, feeling his face begin to warm and butterflies jumping in his stomach.

"If people think you're a raving lunatic again ... "

"Which you were largely responsible for," said Ron, but Draco pretended he didn't hear him.

" ... then it'll be rather hard to get me cleared after all of this is done," continued Draco.

Harry stared, not sure what to say. Only two hours ago, Firenze had told him he was doomed to die, and now Draco Malfoy of all people was convinced that he would win. The butterflies began jumping in his stomach, and he suddenly wished Hermione and Ron could go find something interesting outside of the tent.

He tried to speak, but all that came out was a sound reminiscent of a choking Mooncalf.

"Besides, I'd rather like to reclaim the Manor from the Ministry," said Draco, who didn't give any sign of noticing Harry's flushed face.

"Oh," was all Harry could think of saying.

Draco didn't say anything but returned to reading, and after a moment or two of staring dumbly at him, Harry did the same.

For an hour the four of them read in silence. Harry struggled with the archaic language of the

book on Horcruxes, getting through one page in the time it took Hermione to breeze through seven. He had stopped insisting that finding out how to destroy the Horcruxes was more important than discovering where Voldemort had hidden them. His conversation with Firenze had imparted a frenzied sense of urgency to collect the remaining fragments of Voldemort's soul and worry about how to destroy them later.

The book however, had so far made no mention of how to destroy a Horcrux but only how to find the fragment of your soul. Unconsciously, Harry found himself following the book's instructions to steady his breathing and concentrate on being intensely aware of himself.

It was rather like the dreams about the Department of Mystery that Voldemort used to plant in his mind. He felt himself draw closer and closer to something he had no idea what it was, curiosity fueling his search, but his concentration kept slipping.

He took a shallow breath and retreated within himself again. It was like inching his way into an icy pool, almost too painful to bear at first until it retreats into sort of a numbed state. He closed his eyes and traveled in his mind's eye down a damp tunnel, not able to see more than a few inches in front of him until he saw in the corner of his eye of bluish light.

"Harry!"

*Not yet.*

He struggled to stay as he was, turning with great resistance to get a better look at the light, but it always stayed in the corner of his eye. Someone was shaking him, and he felt his concentration slide dangerously while he struggled to keep it under his control.

A sharp, stinging pain across his face brought him back to reality with a jerk, and he stared up at Draco's very pale face. Draco's eyes looked pewter, Harry realized distantly, and though he saw Draco open his mouth and say something, it sounded muted, as though it was coming from behind a wall. Hermione was clutching his arm, and he registered as though he was watching someone else that her fingernails were digging into his arm painfully. Ron stood next to Draco, looking as though he had seen a particularly large and hairy acromantula.

He blinked, thinking about Draco's nice eyes, and the muffled sound started to come into sharper focus.

"Are you listening to me Potter?" snarled Draco, snatching the book out of Harry's hands and hauling Harry by the shirt to his feet.

"Stop it," said Harry, pushing Draco's hands away, and Ron clapped his hand on Draco's

shoulder, who shrugged it off. "I'm fine."

"Harry what was that?" demanded Hermione, her voice shaking.

"It's the book," said Harry, gesturing to it in Draco's right hand. "I'm just concentrating. What are you doing?" he asked, for Draco was flipping through the pages.

"You, Potter, are an idiot," said Draco, coldly.

"Hey!"

"That's out of order, Malfoy," said Ron sharply.

Draco gave them both withering looks and turned to Hermione. "He was trying to pull out a bit of his soul," he said, his eyes flashing.

"I was not!" not said Harry hotly.

Hermione's eyes widened and she grabbed the book out of Draco's hands, her eyes running over the lines of the page. "Yes you were, Harry," she said, her fingers convulsing around the corners of the book. She looked up at him. "You were in a trance," she said worriedly. "That's the third step of pulling a fragment of your soul out."

Harry uneasily remembered the bluish white light he had seen. "I wasn't trying to," he said honestly.

"It would make sense," said Draco quietly, and the three of them stared at him. "The Dark Lord would never suspect you of making your own ... "

"No," snarled Harry vehemently, every fiber of his being repulses by the idea. "No, Malfoy, just ... don't even think about it."

Ron looked faintly ill, but Draco shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said coolly.

"I will."

"Fine."

"Yeah."

Harry and Draco stared at each other, neither wanting to be the first to look away. A rapping on the front door startled Draco, however, and he looked over Harry's shoulder. Harry saw Draco's hand drift by his side to where he kept his wand.

"Who's that?" asked Ron, frowning.

"Maybe it's Amanda," whispered Hermione, but she too looked worried.

Ron shook his head. "No, they're having lunch right now."

They stared uneasily at one another, and the knock on the door came again.

"I'll go," said Ron finally. "Maybe it's Hagrid," he said hopefully.

Harry, Hermione, and Draco stared at Ron, who's shoulders slumped. The idea of Hagrid's trash can lid sized hands knocking so politely and softly was laughable to say the least.

"I'll go with you," said Harry quickly.

Hedwig hooted sharply and flew from her perch to the front door.

"It can't be that bad if Hedwig's okay with it," said Harry. He turned to Draco. "Just in case ... " he began awkwardly. Draco hadn't been a ferret in over a week.

Draco sighed. "Just do it, Potter."

There was a loud bang, which Harry hoped whoever was outside didn't hear, and Hermione picked Draco up as they left the living room and handed him to Harry.

It was Lupin at the door, who smiled at them a bit too knowingly when he saw Draco.

"Professor Lupin," said Hermione.

"Remus, please," he said cheerfully. "Hello Hermione, Harry, Ron, and of course, Draco."

He stared at them expectantly, and Hermione flushed. "Won't you come in Pro ... Remus?" she stammered.

"Thank you," said Lupin. He followed them into the living room, where Draco dug his claws into Harry's hands sharply, letting him know that it was time to turn him back.

The room filled with purple smoke, which Lupin vanished without a word, and Draco sat down next to Harry. If he sat closer than he normally would have, Harry wasn't about to complain. A familiar monster in his chest purred in contentment when Draco's thigh brushed against his.

Lupin reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a familiar roll of parchment bearing the Ministry's crest.

"Professor McGonagall has just shown me this very interesting letter from the Minister that came to her about an hour ago. It seems he has changed his mind about letting the first years try Ollivander's wands to see if they work," he said mildly, but his eyes were sharp. "You four wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?"

"No," lied Draco immediately.

"Yes," countered Hermione.

Lupin raised an eyebrow, and Draco glared at his knees.

"Harry owed the Minister, Remus," explained Ron, resting his elbows on his knees. Unlike Hermione, he had no difficulty calling his former professor by his first name. "And he owed Rita Skeeter, too."

"Ah," said Remus, his eyes twinkling. "And I take it that Harry will be giving an interview at some point in the near future."

"Unfortunately," said Harry wryly.

Remus nodded slowly and then turned to Draco, fixing his entire attention upon him. "I'm sorry about your mother, Draco," he said gravely.

Draco glared at him, for some reason inexplicably angry at Lupin. "She saved your life, you know," he said harshly.

Lupin's eyes widened, and he looked genuinely surprised. "What?"

"She sent the flowers and the note telling us where you were," said Draco loudly, and suddenly he was on his feet. "If it weren't for her you'd be dead."

"Draco," said Harry sharply, not liking where he thought this was going.

Draco sat down again but didn't speak, staring unblinkingly at the coffee table. Hermione licked

her lips, looking awkward, and Ron looked furious that Draco had yelled at Remus.

"Draco," said Lupin softly. "I am truly sorry she's dead. I lost my mother when I was your age too."

"You did?" asked Harry, surprised. Lupin had never talked about his mother before.

Lupin nodded but didn't say anything else. Draco didn't say anything either.

"Would you like some tea, Remus?" asked Hermione, getting to her feet.

Lupin got to his feet as well. "No, thank you. My shift to watch fourteen eleven year olds eat lunch is about to begin," he said ruefully.

"Is everyone at Hogwarts taking a shift then?" asked Harry.

Lupin nodded. "By the way, Harry," he said, his eyes twinkling slyly. "I understand I have you to thank for sufficiently terrifying Jack, Shawn, and Nathan from wading in past their knees in the lake."

"What'd he do?" asked Ron.

"He told them that grindelows would grab them and drown them if they ventured too far in," said Lupin, and Ron hooted with laughter.

"Has McGonagall found a new Defense Against The Dark Arts Professor?" asked Harry.

"Actually, yes," said Remus.

"Who?" demanded Ron quickly. "Who would be mad enough ... " here Hermione elbowed Ron sharply in the ribs ... "I mean, who?" he finished, massaging his ribs.

"A Frenchman," said Remus. "Cousin of Bill's wife, actually, Ron, so you might know him."

"Who?" asked Harry, although he had a good idea who it was.

"Alexander Navarre."

Draco made a sound in the back of his throat that was a cross between a squawk and growl.

Harry liked to think that it was more of a growl.

"A fashion designer?" spat Draco, crossing his arms in front of him angrily.

"That pretty boy?" demanded Ron.

Here Hermione elbowed Ron again. "Fleur was Beauxbaton's champion," she said severely. "Beauty and brains can go together."

"Well, yeah, I know ... but, oh come on Hermione, you don't like him either," said Ron.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Remus.

Draco opened his mouth immediately and then shut it with a snap, not looking anyone in the eye.

"I mean, is he incompetent?" suggest Remus.

"I don't know," said Hermione slowly. "I mean, he's built his own multi-million Galleon corporation, so he must not be incompetent, but ... " she trailed off.

"He wants into Harry's pants," said Ron bluntly.

It was interesting to see the transformation these words wrought in Lupin thought Draco. Gone was the mild-mannered, professional and polite former professor and leader of the Order of the Phoenix. Lupin was on his feet in an instant, his body tight with barely suppressed energy.

"What?" he demanded flatly, his eyes hard and they pinned Harry to the couch. "Is this true, Harry?" asked Lupin. "Is Navarre making sexual advances on you?"

"N-no."

"Yes," countered Draco, and Lupin swung his attention round to him. "He kissed Harry when Harry was sleeping once," he said darkly.

"He did?" gasped Harry and Hermione and Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry. "Is he the one that gave you that big bruise on your stomach?"

Draco nodded, deliberately failing to add that he had bit the other man first.

"But has he done anything else?" insisted Lupin.

Reluctantly, Draco shook his head, although he was sorely tempted to make up some lie in order to see how Lupin would react. He wistfully fantasized about Lupin chasing Navarre around in his werewolf form.

"Even Malfoy's better than Navarre," said Ron grudgingly.

Lupin repeated Ron's words silently and then his eyes widened. He looked from Harry to Draco and back to Harry, his eyes growing rounder and rounder.

"You two are dating?"

Harry was sure someone could fry an egg on his face. "Uhh ... "

"Yeah," said Draco. He looked at Harry, and for once there was nothing calculating, nothing plotting about the way he looked at him when they were in front of other people. "Yeah, Harry's my boyfriend."



## Chapter 23

The only person who looked more surprised than Lupin was Harry, who was having trouble breathing properly.

"*Boyfriend?*" repeated Lupin, his eyes darting between Draco and Harry as though he were looking at them for the first time. "Well this is a surprise. Not that love hasn't conquered unlikely pairs before ... "

Harry smiled weakly, very glad he was sitting down.

Boyfriend.

The monster in his chest arched, stirring something in Harry that made his breath come a little shorter than he was used to, as butterflies fluttered in his stomach.

"Since when?" asked Lupin, all thoughts of lunchtime duty gone from his head, and he sat back down again.

Harry opened his mouth, but it was Ron who answered.

"Since Bill's wedding, I think," he said, grinning slyly. "We came home and found them ... in a questionable position on the couch."

"Ron ... " moaned Harry, his face burning. Remus had been his *professor*, for crying out loud. How could Ron talk about nearly snogging someone on the couch to his professor?

"Drunk," added Hermione lightly, stunning Harry. He noticed that she looked very happy, and Harry hoped that this would mean that she would stop searching for Draco in his room in the morning.

Harry frowned. Surely there was a distinction between being about to kiss someone and being his boyfriend. He opened his mouth to say so when he felt Draco's long, smooth fingers brush against his bare arm and linger there for a moment before it was gone.

Harry licked his lips, the words sticking in his throat. He wondered if anyone had seen, but no one had. His arm was hidden by the couch's pillow.

"Well I think it's great," said Lupin, grinning broadly. He twirled his wand in his hands and

beamed at them. "Albus would have been really proud of you both."

Hermione was smiling too. In fact, she was still smiling even after she shut the door behind Lupin and returned to the sitting room.

"Well, I think we could use a break, don't you?" she said sunnily.

Ron brightened and he turned to Harry. "Yeah. Wanna go flying, Harry?"

Draco very briefly dragged his finger against Harry's arm again, which he had not moved since the last time Draco touched him, hoping that Draco would do it again.

Not trusting his voice, Harry shook his head.

Ron looked disappointed, but Hermione took her boyfriend's arm and said, "I'd like to go to Hogsmeade," she said. "I need to find something for my mother for her birthday."

"And we can go to Honeydukes," said Ron, looking excited.

Draco was rubbing a circle with the tip of his finger on the inside of Harry's arm, and he said, "I think I'll stay here."

"Me too," said Harry quickly, holding his arm very still while Draco continued to rub those little circles against the sensitive skin.

Ron looked surprised. "What? What are you going to do here?" he demanded, looking appalled that anyone would turn down the opportunity to go to Hogsmeade.

Hermione smiled very brightly when she asked, "You sure, Harry?"

For the briefest of moments, Draco let his knuckles brush against Harry's ribs before falling to rest against Harry's side.

"Quite sure," said Harry, his voice rising half an octave as liquid heat pooled in his stomach.

"Have fun," said Draco casually, not looking at all flustered.

"You too," said Hermione, just as casually. She caught Harry's eye before she left, and the knowing look she gave him made his face heat.

Neither Draco nor Harry moved until they heard the door click shut, and then Draco turned to

Harry, letting his body deliberately rub against him as he said, "So ... "

"So ... " repeated Harry, feeling quite at a loss.

Draco looked thoughtfully at him and then asked, "What do you know about ice dispensers?"

"What?" croaked Harry.

"Ice dispensers," repeated Draco briskly as he stood up and strode into the kitchen. "Ours isn't really working. Watch," he ordered, and he pressed the button for ice.

The refrigerator grumbled and groaned before hail fired out of the dispenser in gusts of wind that blew about Draco's head. Harry could hear the patter of hail hitting the toaster and counter in sharp *plonk* sounds before it rattled to the floor.

"See?" said Draco, not bothering to vanish the mess.

Disappointment constricted in Harry's chest. He had thought that Draco had wanted to stay home to do something else.

Something that involved Harry and not household appliances.

"Yeah," said Harry dully, wondering if he shouldn't try and catch up with Ron and Hermione.

But if Draco noticed Harry's tone he didn't mention it.

"Whoever designed this tent was really fucked up," he said cheerfully as he opened the freezer door and inspected the ice dispenser.

Harry didn't say anything.

Had Draco said that they were together so that he would have an escape route when the war was over? Was he just Draco's means to an end?

The thought burned in his throat.

The refrigerator groaned again, and Harry heard Draco swear.

"Come here, Potter," said Draco, his voice echoing inside the freezer.

*He's using you.*

*Stop being so god damned pessimistic.*

*You're just his ticket to freedom.*

Harry ruthlessly pushed these thoughts from his head as he walked over to Draco and stood next to him, staring dully at the freezer.

Draco didn't seem to notice that Harry looked less than thrilled that they were spending their free time on an ice dispenser.

"Keep the ice from getting in my face," said Draco.

Harry looked around for a towel, and Draco made an impatient sound before yanking his shirt over his head and handing it to Harry.

"It's wet anyway," he said, and he twisted around, putting his head in the freezer as he inspected the dispenser.

Harry felt his mouth go dry as stared at Draco's body. Draco's skin was smooth and pale and his stomach muscles shifted as he twisted, trying to get a better angle as he muttered spells and swore in the same breath as he prodded at the dispenser. The pajama bottoms Harry had lent him were knotted loosely across his hips, and Harry's eyes followed their trail as they fell centimeters lower.

Harry yelped when ice flew in his face, stinging his skin, and he raised his hands to fend it off.

"Bugger," muttered Draco, but that was the only sign he gave of being aware that he had just shot ice at his boyfriend.

Grimacing, Harry took off his glasses and cleaned them on Draco's shirt, blinking water out of his eyes.

Hands caught his wrists before he could put his glasses back on, and Harry blinked, feeling his eyelashes stick together from the melted ice.

Draco's face was blurry, but Harry didn't move, hardly breathed, feeling terribly exposed. He turned his face away, a sudden tightening in his chest that he did not want Draco to see.

Draco took the shirt and Harry's glasses from Harry's hand and put them inside the freezer,

where Harry's metal frames made a slight clinking sound. He tugged Harry's wrists, bringing the slightly smaller boy closer to him until their legs were pressed against one another, but still Harry didn't look at him.

Harry's heart was thumping wildly in his chest and he swallowed, feeling the cold air from the freezer blow past Draco's shoulders and onto his face.

"Potter."

Draco's voice was soft but it rang in Harry's head, and he felt his breathing hitch as he struggled to remain calm.

Draco let Harry's wrists fall from his grip, and for a moment Harry's hands hung suspended before they settled very lightly on Draco's hips. Harry couldn't help but rub his fingers against the smooth skin as Draco had done to him on the couch, marveling at the softness.

Draco let Harry explore, his hands at his sides, watching Harry touch him.

Harry traced his fingers across Draco's hips and over the muscles of his stomach as though he were mapping Draco's body with his hands. He hesitated for a moment before he brought his right hand to Draco's chest.

All this time, Harry had avoided staring Draco in the face. He felt vulnerable without his glasses on, and he didn't want to meet the other boy's eyes, even though he could see Draco's face clearly now that they were only inches apart.

He felt Draco's heartbeat and the swell and fall of his chest as he inhaled and exhaled.

His hand shook as he grazed Draco's nipple.

Draco hissed through clenched teeth, and he pressed himself against Harry, pushing his leg between Harry's thighs.

Harry shuddered, his body arching against Draco's, his lips parted. Draco snaked his hand through Harry's wild black hair, and crushed his mouth against Harry's in a bruising kiss.

Harry moaned into Draco's mouth, his eyes fluttering shut as Draco pushed his tongue passed Harry's lips and into his mouth. Harry's mouth was supplicant to Draco's stabbing tongue, and he arched into Draco's touch, straining to be as close to the other boy as possible.

Draco rolled his hips against Harry's, and Harry's breath escaped in sharp pants against Draco's

mouth.

"Dr-Draco," he stuttered, his eyes pressed tightly shut as his hips thrust forward, grinding against Draco's.

Draco spun them around so that Harry was pressed against the refrigerator. The blasts of cold air from the open freezer blowing Harry's neck made him shiver.

"Jeans," growled Draco, already working on Harry's button down shirt.

Harry fumbled with his button and zipper, his hands shaking as he felt Draco's fingers graze against his chest as his fingers tugged at the buttons. He tugged them down his hips and they pooled at his feet, leaving him only in his boxers and a half buttoned shirt.

A small part of him wondered if they were going too fast, where they were going next, when Ron and Hermione would be returning, but these thoughts burned away when Draco pressed their bare chests together. Draco murmured something in French against Harry's lips, one hand still in Harry's hair while the other snaked underneath Harry's open shirt and pressed the smaller boy against him tighter.

The feel of Draco's cold fingers against his bare skin made Harry hiss, but he didn't pull his mouth away. Draco laughed against Harry's mouth and reached behind Harry, shutting the freezer door before slamming them against it, rolling his hips against Harry and scraping his teeth against Harry's lower lip.

He felt something hot and heady bubble up inside him when Draco's hot breath panted against his ear. He could hear his own breathing in ragged pants laced with whimpers when Draco began sliding his hand over Harry's arse.

"F-fuck," moaned Harry, arching, his head slamming backwards against the freezer door.

Freezing blasts of air thick with hail and crushed ice showered their bare necks and chests, sending cold shockwaves through their bodies that had them leaping apart, swearing.

The room was a swirl of blurred colors to Harry, and he struggled to keep from falling over as he slipped on melting ice on the damp floor. Draco flung an arm out, keeping Harry steady.

"Careful Potter!" said Draco sharply.

"Harry."

"What?" said Draco, tugging his pajamas over his knees and knotting them at his hips.

Harry felt his face heat, but he was determined nonetheless. "You're my boyfriend, but you still call me Potter." Like how you did when we were enemies, but he didn't say that aloud.

Draco didn't say anything, didn't even move, and Harry bit his lip.

He felt like a fool.

Humiliation burned and licked at his insides in sharp scrapes as he waited for Draco to say his name, to show that this was all more than a means to an end.

"Forget it, Malfoy," he said shortly, turning back to the freezer to get his glasses. He had been an idiot, a fool, a gullible little boy to think that he had meant anything more to Draco than a character witness at his trial when the war was over.

He felt like he was dying, that the hole in his chest that was torn open when Sirius had died and had ripped inches more when Dumbledore died, was tearing in slow, deep gashes as the horrible truth settled in his bones: Draco Malfoy was the person he was most attracted to, but Draco didn't feel the same way about him.

A hard lump rose in his throat that he couldn't swallow past, and he blinked very quickly, digging his nails into his palms. He refused to cry.

"Harry."

Twin sparks of happiness and frustration leapt in Harry's stomach.

"Why do you even want to be with me anyway?" he demanded, turning to face Draco.

Why had anyone wanted to be with him? he wondered bitterly. To Cho, he had been her link to Cedric, to Ginny, he had been her hero, and to everyone else, he had been The Boy Who Lived or the Chosen One as they now called him.

*That's not fair. Ginny was in love with you for who you were, not because of some hero fetish she has.*

*Not in the beginning,* he argued stubbornly.

*She was eleven!*

"You're hot," said Draco simply, his words cutting across Harry's mental argument. He crossed the room quickly and yanked open the freezer door and pushed Harry's glasses into his hands.

Harry quickly shoved them on his face, barely noticing the chilled metal.

"That's it?" he demanded, staring hotly at Draco while the other boy tugged his shirt over his head. "You like me because I'm fit?"

"Bloody hell, Potter!" snapped Draco, standing so close to him that Harry had to tilt his head slightly back to stare the other boy in the eye. "What the fuck do you want to know? What do you want from me?"

Harry was taken aback by Draco's vehemence. Draco didn't turn red when he was angry like Ron did, instead his face went white. Draco's eyes flashed dark silver, and he sneered slightly.

"I like you. You like me. Merlin, if I wanted to talk about my feelings I'd date a girl," he said coldly.

"How do I know you're not just using me to avoid going to Azkaban?" insisted Harry, refusing to be the first to step away.

A muscle twitched in Draco's jaw. "You don't."

Harry clenched his hands.

"But I'm not," said Draco firmly. He scowled and his hands darted forward, quickly and efficiently doing up the buttons to Harry's shirt, something possessive about the way he moved his hands.

"I said you were my boyfriend because I don't know what else this is," he said after a moment of silence. "I'm attracted to you, that's pretty bloody obvious. It doesn't hurt that you killed my mother's murderess," he said lightly, as though it were a common quality one looked for in a partner.

"You don't owe me anything for that," muttered Harry, but he was pleased.

"I know," said Draco quietly, looking him full in the face. "I'm attracted to you, Harry," he said, his eyes very serious.

"O-okay," said Harry, feeling a sudden lightness begin to soar from the pit of his stomach until a warmth began to creep into his chest. Draco Malfoy was attracted to him, and Harry knew the



boy meant more than physically.

"I ... I'm attracted to you, too," he said, almost shyly, knowing that Draco wouldn't know just how true those words were for a long, long time. Not until Harry told him about Amortentia.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I know that, you prat," he said, and he dipped his head and kissed him.

Harry's eyes fluttered closed as he breathed in coconuts. He would buy a lifetime supply of that shampoo.

Draco was attracted to him. It would have to be enough for now.

"I'm going to shower," he said against Draco's mouth, his mind very briefly entertaining the fantasy of washing Draco's hair.

"Okay," said Draco, pulling back slightly. "I'm going to fix this damn thing. I think I was doing the right thing before with the switch back there."

"Okay," said Harry, wondering if there ever would be a chance for Mr. Weasley and Draco to spend some time together. He bet Mr. Weasley missed being head of the Department of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, and one day, maybe, Draco and Mr. Weasley could build another flying car.

As he hung his clothes on the peg in the bathroom, he looked at his reflection in the mirror. Feeling a little foolish, he cleared his throat.

"Are you ... uh, here?" he asked, peering closely at his reflection to see if it did anything different.

His reflection rolled its eyes. "I'm always here."

"Right. Sorry," said Harry quickly. He licked his lips and braced himself against the counter.

"How can I make Draco ... fallinlovewithme?" he asked lowly and very quickly, feeling his face flush.

"So you've decided your gay," said his reflection, a smirk on his lips. "'Bout time. What was wrong with the other bloke, Navarre? Too tall?"

"Yes," said Harry, not liking his reflection very much at the moment. "I mean, I'm attracted to

Draco Malfoy the most, out of everyone else in the world ... "

"How do you know that?" asked the mirror, eyebrows raised and looking not a little scathing.

"Amortentia," said Harry. "I smelled coconuts, and Draco ... "

"Uses coconut shampoo," finished the mirror. "But how do you know you're not just enamored with coconuts? What if it has nothing to do with Draco's shampoo?"

"I've already thought about that," said Harry, wincing as he remembered the brief time he thought he was in love with Sirius. "I just know. Besides, I really do like him, whatever the potion says."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," said Harry, feeling defensive. "He's really good looking ... "

"Oh I know," purred his reflection, a knowing, superior glint in his eye.

Harry glowered, reminded that the mirror had seen Draco naked.

"Yes," he growled. "And he's clever, and loyal ... "

"Ah, yes, that is an interesting tattoo he has, isn't it?" the mirror drawled.

"He didn't have a choice," snarled Harry, his blood roaring in his ears.

"Of course he had a choice. He chose himself ... over everyone else. Including you," said the mirror quietly.

"We weren't friends, *boyfriends*, then," said Harry harshly.

"And his other friends?"

"They were all in the same boat!" cried Harry, fury boiling inside him. "He wasn't betraying them ... the mission wasn't to kill them!"

"Oh?" said the mirror innocently. "Who was he supposed to kill?"

Harry opened his mouth angrily, but no sound came out.

*Dumbledore.*

His mentor, his strongest supporter, the man who had been more a father to him than he had ever known.

He felt as though he had swallowed an ice cube and it was going very slowly and painfully down his chest, burning him as it slipped inch by inch. A memory he had not thought of in years came to the forefront of his mind in intense detail.

*"You don't understand! He would have killed me, Sirius!"*

*"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED! DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"*

His abrupt quietness did not go unnoticed by his reflection.

"Oh? Rethinking the coconut theory now, are we?"

"No," said Harry, his voice strong. "I was there. He didn't do it."

"But he came so close, didn't he."

"Well if we're going to be judgmental about murderers, let's look at me before we look at *almost* murderers," snarled Harry.

This threw his reflection off.

"You mean you don't know?" mocked Harry with exaggerated surprise. "What, didn't you get the memo? How can you be my reflection and not know about *that*?" he demanded.

His reflection was quiet, and suddenly it all made sense to Harry.

"You play the devil's advocate," he said flatly.

His reflection arched an eyebrow. "Yes, well, what would be the point of talking to yourself if you were only going to get one point of view?"

"The guy who made this thing was really fucked up," said Harry, shaking his head.

"Yes," said the mirror quietly.

Harry turned back to the mirror, but he saw only himself looking startled and intrigued. Just as before, his magical reflection had disappeared.

He hadn't gotten the answer he had been looking for when he asked the mirror, but now that he knew what the mirror really was, he wasn't that disappointed. Knowing that his magical reflection was still there in the room, hiding in the mirror somewhere, Harry made sure he didn't voice any of his thoughts aloud, although he had much to think about.

Dumbledore had appreciated the position Draco had been in, and Draco *had* lowered his wand. The inch or so he dropped his arm before the other Death Eaters came bursting into the room was crystallized in Harry's memory.

Draco had chosen to put his and his family's lives over Dumbledore's, but Harry couldn't find it within him to judge Draco as Sirius had judged Pettigrew. After all, the cases were so different. Pettigrew had betrayed those who trusted him.

Dumbledore hadn't had any illusions about trusting Draco. Besides, Draco had been doing it to keep his family and himself alive.

Was it wrong?

Harry let the question linger in his head as he stood under the stream of hot water from the carp's mouth.

Was it wrong to put the ones you love over what is right and good?

Wasn't protecting the ones you love the highest level of morality?

Wasn't preserving and protecting what is most precious to you what life was really all about?

Was it wrong?

Had Draco been wrong?

Stepping out of the spray and drying himself off with a towel, Harry realized it didn't matter. It was done.

Draco was attracted to him.

---

Ron and Hermione returned from Hogsmeade with their arms laden with packages, and their faces shining.

"Madame Rosmerta's doing well," announced Hermione at dinner.

Draco's fork froze in mid-rise to his mouth as he was acutely reminded of woman he had placed under the Imperius Curse for months.

He could feel their eyes on him, and he looked challengingly up, but no one's gaze held accusation.

"Good," he said shortly, his tone not betraying his relief.

"Yes, in fact, she's dating one of the mediwizards who helped her at St. Mungos," continued Hermione, but that was all she said on the subject.

Draco wondered what the proprietress thought of him. Did she hate him? He knew that his use of the Imperius Curse against her would be one of the three major charges that the prosecution would hold against him. The other two would be letting the Death Eaters into Hogwarts and his role as an accomplice in the murder of Albus Dumbledore.

That was, of course, if he ever lived to see a trial. He could easily be killed in a surprise raid on their tent by either the Death Eaters or the Order, or he might even be taken as some creature's dinner when he was in his ferret form.

There was of course the issue that even if he lived to be taken into the Ministry's custody there was no guarantee that they'd give him a trial. It wasn't unheard of when there was so much evidence against a person, and having the Dark Mark branded on his arm was evidence enough for more than a few.

Harry had made no progress with the locket or discovering any other of the Horcruxes in the week that he'd had the books from the Manor. What if they were on the run for years? What if he had to spend the rest of his life cooped up in a tent with only a handful of people who knew where he was?

The thought settled uneasily in his stomach, and he eyed his half eaten meal glumly.

"Wanna go flying?" asked Harry, noticing Draco's quietness.

Draco shook his head. "I'm going to look at those books again," he said.

"I'll go flying," said Ron through a mouthful of bread.

"I'll help you ... Draco," said Hermione, a hint of color on her cheeks.

Ron choked on his bread, but was silenced from a dull thump under the table and a glare from Hermione. Ron winced, his hand reaching under the table, and Draco suppressed a gloating laugh.

He could feel Harry tense next to him, and although the other boy did not look up from his plate, Draco could tell that he was waiting with bated breath.

"That'd be nice ... Hermione," he said, and Ron made the sound of a strangled bugle.

It was more to gall Ron than any genuine desire to be friendly to Hermione, but the feel of Harry's hand underneath the table against his thigh filled him with a sort of ... contentment.

"On second thought," said Ron, frowning, "I think I'll hit the books too."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh honestly, Ronald ... Draco's *gay*."

"Some people are chasers for both teams, Hermione," he said, in a tone that suggested she was not as wise to the world as she thought she was.

Harry's hand tensed on Draco thigh, and an absurd sort of warmth filled Draco as he registered that Harry was being ... possessive.

"No point in flying solo," said Harry lightly.

"Fine," snapped Hermione, not looking at all pleased.

Draco wondered why she had been so eager to be alone with him, or was it that she resented Weasley's distrust?

They settled in the living room in stony silence, Hermione gripping the cover of her book so hard that her knuckles were white.

"Don't go falling into trances, Harry," she warned.

"I won't," said Harry.

Nonetheless, Draco made sure to glance up from his book every so often to make sure that Harry hadn't. Yet Harry looked completely present, turning the pages every so often that Draco was reassured that his boyfriend wasn't trying to pull a piece of his soul out.

After an hour, Draco closed his book, sighing. Nothing useful about Horcruxes or any mention of Slytherin's heirlooms had been in the book, and he looked around for another book that he hadn't already leafed through. Unfortunately, it was in Ron's hands, and he didn't look anywhere near being done with it.

Harry noticed, and he said, "Why don't you look through Dumbledore's Pensieve and see if you can't find anything? You've never seen his memories before; maybe you'll find something we've missed."

Draco wasn't the only one surprised at the offer. Ron and Hermione looked more than a little stunned.

Harry caught their expressions, and he scowled. "We're all on the same side," he said gruffly as he went into the kitchen.

A moment later, he returned with Dumbledore's Pensieve balanced carefully in his hands and set it gently on the table. "Here are the memories we've already seen," he said, poking his wand into the shimmering contents of the bowl. "I'll start you with the ring and the locket."

Silvery strands floated to the surface, and Draco caught glimpses of images before they flickered away, rolling under a new memory.

"What do I do?" he asked, staring at the bowl with some reservation.

"You've never used a Pensieve?" asked Hermione, surprised.

He shook his head, resenting that she should have experienced such a powerful magical object before him.

"I'll go with you," said Harry. "My first time alone was really unpleasant. No one can see you in the memory, and when you're done you just sort of ... push up, like from the bottom of a pool up to the surface. Just put your face to the bowl."

"Okay," said Draco, not sure he really understood.

"Ready?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," said Draco with more courage than he really felt. He lowered his face to the bowl, and just when he was about to ask why nothing was happening, he fell into the memory.

It was a little bit like Apparating, only without the painful sensation of being squeezed through a straw.

"Where are we?" he asked, staring around him. They were on a country lane, and standing before them was a man wearing the bizzarest arrangement of Muggle clothing Draco had ever seen.

"That's Bob Ogden," said Harry. "We follow him."

"Where are we going?" asked Draco after some time.

"Voldemort's grandfather's house," said Harry.

Draco's eyes widened, and shortly the lane curved, affording them a view of a small valley, in which there was a town named Little Hangleton, if he were to believe the sign, and across the valley was a manor.

"Is that it?" he asked, pointing to the manor.

Harry snorted. "No. You'll see."

They followed Ogden down a steep slope, and Draco got a better view of Little Hangleton. "Is it in Little Hangleton?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "It's down another lane ... not in town. You'll see."

There was something grim about the way Harry said "you'll see" and Draco wondered why. Very soon, however, he understood.

Ogden led them a rocky, unkempt road that led to an area of tall, dark trees. When he saw Ogden draw his wand, Draco automatically reached for his.

"Don't worry," reassured Harry. "You don't exist here. Nothing can touch you. We're here now."

Draco stared around him, but all he saw was a dilapidated house.

"*That?*" he said in disbelief, staring at the broken roof, moss covered and grimy walls. Surely no



one could live there ...

Just then one of the windows was pushed open, and Draco jumped.

"That," said Harry, his voice even grimmer than before.

Suddenly, a man jumped down from a tree in front of Ogden, and Draco swore, his heart leaping in his throat.

"Who's that?" he demanded, staring in revulsion and not a little fear at the hairy, dirty man whose eyes, Draco thought, seemed to be staring in different directions. "What's he saying?"

"You're not welcome," translated Harry. "He's Voldemort's uncle, Morfin."

Draco looked quickly at Harry, unable to believe that the Dark Lord could be related to such a person. He wondered whether Morfin was a Squib when suddenly there was a bang, and Ogden fell to the ground, groaning and holding his nose as puss streamed from his fingers.

Draco was repulsed.

"Morfin!"

Draco turned and saw an older, shorter man emerge from a door that looked to Draco to have a snake nailed to it.

"Voldemort's grandfather, Marvolo," said Harry quietly before Draco could ask.

They listened as Ogden and Marvolo talked before they followed them inside. The inside of the house was even worse than its exterior. He almost didn't notice her, her dress the same color as the dirty stone, but there was a girl in the room.

"Voldemort's mother, Merope," said Harry.

It was surreal, like a play being interrupted by the narrator to introduce the characters before they had a chance to introduce themselves.

Draco flinched when Marvolo bellowed at Merope for dropping a pot. Her whole body seemed to shake as she tried to use magic to levitate the pot to the shelf. In the second it took for the pot to fly from the floor to the wall and break in two, Draco wondered if she had ever gone to Hogwarts.

Morfin's cackles and Marvolo's screams rang through the house, and Draco chanced a glance at Harry, who looked lost in thought.

"What?" he murmured, and Harry blinked.

"Just a little like the Dursleys is all," said Harry quietly, and Draco went rigid. Harry noticed, and he said, quickly, "Not that it was this bad, of course. Poor Merope, eh?"

Draco felt sick. "They locked you in a cupboard," he said, his voice shaking with anger.

Harry didn't say anything.

And suddenly it wasn't just a wizard who had been locked in a cupboard by his Muggle relatives, or even someone he vaguely cared about; his boyfriend had been locked away by people who were charged with his wellbeing.

Blood roared in his ears, and he nearly missed what Marvolo was saying.

"See this? See this?" roared Marvolo, waving a large, black ring on his finger in front of Ogden's face. "Know what it is? Know where it came from? Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?"

Draco turned sharply to Harry. "Harry!"

"What?"

"The ring ... he said it has the Peverell crest on it!" said Draco excitedly. "Hermione was right!"

Harry looked gobsmacked.

"Peverell ... " Harry repeated in a hushed whisper. "Gods, all this time we've only wanted to know how Dumbledore destroyed it, not why Voldemort chose it as a Horcrux."

He groaned and then said, "Come on ... let's go tell them."

He grabbed Draco's arm and they soared out of the memory and back into the sitting room.

Hermione and Ron took one look at their excited faces and asked, "What?"

"The ring had Peverell's crest on it," said Draco.

It took a moment for this to register in Hermione's mind, and when it did she shrieked with excitement, jumping up and down, crying, "I was right! I was right!"

"So we have to find the Peverell mansion," said Ron, looking excited. "We find it and we find more Horcruxes."

"Maybe," interjected Draco, but he, too, was grinning.

Harry nodded. "It makes sense ... Voldemort had to know that the Peverell's were related to Slytherin or why else would he make it a Horcrux?"

Hermione snapped her fingers. "Oh I've been such a fool!" she cried.

"What?"

"Of course! I've been so stupid ... I can't *believe* I forgot!"

"Hermione," said Ron sharply, looking anxious and impatient. "What?"

"The sorting hat!" she said, her face glowing. "Our fourth year ... we were all there. It told us where Slytherin was from! It told us where all of the Founders were from."

Harry, Ron and Draco looked at her blankly.

"Only I don't remember!" moaned Hermione. "We have to ask the Sorting Hat again. We'll have to do that tomorrow."

"Hang on ... " said Harry slowly. "I think I remember that ... "

"You do?" asked Ron, surprised.

"Yeah, well, I've only heard three songs from the sorting hat ... but I remember it talking about the Founders."

Draco shook his head. He had never paid attention during the opening feast. "You'll have to go tomorrow before the wand ceremony. Speaking of which, I'd feel better knowing that no nosy reporter was going to sneak into here and find me."

"I forgot about that," said Ron, blinking. "Where are you going to give the interview, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. It wasn't something that he had given much thought to. "Dunno. Probably up at the castle."

"Do you think the ceremony will be in the castle or outside?" asked Draco.

"They might want to do it by Dumbledore's tomb," said Hermione slowly.

Ron frowned. "Be a bit of a damper, wouldn't it?"

"It would be just like the Prophet to make everything more dramatic than it really is," said Hermione, her expression sour. "And what with that Skeeter cow doing an interview ... I bet she's going to want to milk it for all it's worth."

A sudden thought occurred to Draco and he said. "Are you being paid for the interview?"

Harry looked surprised. "I don't think so," he said. "Why?"

"You should," said Draco. "You can use the money to buy me some clothes!"

---

"You look happy," said Lockhart as soon as Harry had walked into his bedroom.

Something about Lockhart's voice reminded Harry of Rita Skeeter, and he looked sharply at the portrait. "Yeah?"

"In fact," continued Lockhart, looking carefully at Harry, "I'd say something *good* happened today."

"Well, it did," said Harry shortly, tugging his trainers off, and not liking a bit where this was going. "We learned something new about Voldemort."

Lockhart winced horribly, and was quiet for a moment, letting Harry change into his pajamas without comment. Harry kept his back turned to Lockhart so that the portrait wouldn't see his triumphant smile. It had been bad enough hearing that morning that Lockhart had heard him say Draco's name when he was ... sleeping ... Harry could feel heat crawl up his neck ... but finding out that he and Draco were boyfriends and had spent a very enjoyable time working together on an ice-maker was not in Harry agenda.

"You're blushing," said Lockhart, a cackle in his voice.

"Shut up," muttered Harry, inwardly cursing as he felt his cheeks flame. He quickly strode over to the light switch before Lockhart could make any more comments, and he was very glad that Ron couldn't see him. Ron spent almost every night back at the Burrow, and the ones he didn't, he was usually with Hermione.

It was something they had all mutually agreed to not talk about, although Harry had been sorely tempted when Ron had come down to the breakfast table looking faintly awed and very content.

Best friends didn't share everything, after all. And he most certainly wasn't going to share his experience in the kitchen with a portrait of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Where is he?" asked Lockhart, his smirking voice lancing the darkness of the room. "Where's lover boy?"

"I'm doing an interview with Rita Skeeter tomorrow," said Harry.

Lockhart didn't speak again.

---

Draco couldn't sleep that night. He lay on his back, staring at his now fixed and properly working skylight, hardly seeing the twinkling stars as his mind was far away.

He was Harry Potter's boyfriend.

It wasn't just a title either, he thought to himself, both a little shaken and pleased by the realization. He was genuinely attracted to Harry. Harry was quite fit ... apparently defying the Dark Lord built long, lithe muscles ... and beyond the physical, the sheer intensity with which Harry did everything was ... well it was *hot*. He blazed through red tape and Ministry instructions and social expectations with such God damn aplomb that it left Draco spinning in the slipstream.

Harry didn't just have goals, he had fucking missions. Draco had once watched one of Hermione's Muggle Movies about a man who went on impossible missions revealed to him in objects that blew up after having briefed him.

Harry made that man look like a third rate Auror with a desk job.

Harry's will to live defied all reason and expectations. It wasn't just his incredible history of surviving certain death with the Dark Lord every year; it was also how Harry persevered when others would have given up. He endured a childhood with the Dursleys, people who treated him as though he were something nasty and a burden. Nothing could smother Harry's fierce determination to survive, and his refusal to give up drew Draco to him.

Draco himself had been driven to the point of despair too many times to count last year, and yet he forced himself to pick himself back up again. He had no patience for people who fell apart when things got uncomfortable, dangerous, or threatening. That Harry seemed to thrive on these conditions was unbelievable, but admirable.

And there was a sweetness about Harry ... a goodness to him. Goodness was attractive.

So yes, he was attracted to Harry.

And if their little tryst in the kitchen was anything to go by, Harry was quite attracted to him as well.

Heat bubbled low in his stomach, and Draco's breath came out a little harsher than he had intended. What had happened in the kitchen ... he smile wryly. He had never meant it to get that far. He had enjoyed teasing Harry with those damning little circles on the crook of his arm, delighting in the shaking breaths and, Salazar Slytherin help him, even the endearing little shivers and trembles he could feel under his fingers. He had deliberately frustrated Harry by wanting to fix the icemaker instead of snogging on the couch.

But he hadn't meant for things to get so out of hand. He didn't know what would have happened if Harry's head hadn't hit the button for the icemaker.

So no, it wasn't just a title to Draco, like being Pansy's boyfriend had been.

He winced, feeling the rough cotton of his pillow sheet tug underneath his cheek.

He was *still* her boyfriend.

He had never gotten around to officially breaking things off with her. Sex had taken an edge off the panic that had driven him all year long to fix the Vanishing Cabinet. So he hadn't bothered with breaking up with her, even though they only saw each other in frantic couplings in the middle of the night when Draco was near breaking down because *nothing was working*.

Harry was *not* going to be happy about that.

*If he ever finds out*, he thought to himself. And any Slytherin worth his salt could keep a pug faced skeleton hidden in the closet without a certain Gryffindor being none the wiser.

Harry was just so *different* from Pansy. Even before sixth year, Pansy's and his relationship had been like living in a temperature controlled room ... pleasant, reassuringly predictable, and completely appropriate.

With Harry it was like stepping outside. Everyday was impossibly and completely different.

Draco frowned, and turned on his back, staring up at his skylight as a thought occurred to him that unsettled him.

Why was Harry attracted to him?

He was a Death Eater, an accomplice in the murder of Harry's father figure, related to the woman who killed Harry's godfather, he was an almost murderer of two Hogwarts students, one of whom was just across the hall and Harry's best friend, he was on the run from both sides of the war, he was a prejudiced pureblood, had tried to get Hagrid fired, had nearly gotten his precious Hippogriff killed ...

Something tightened in his stomach like a fist.

Navarre wasn't any of those things.

He was hugely wealthy, attractive, showered Harry with expensive presents ... although what the scrap of paper inside the gold box had been was beyond Draco ... and was going to be teaching at Hogwarts next year.

So why was Harry attracted to him? Why when Navarre had so much more to offer Harry than Draco did?

Was it a hero thing? Was Harry attracted to him because Draco needed him? The Dark Lord himself had played on Harry's need to be the hero. Hadn't Harry pulled the Beauxbatons champion's little sister out of the water in addition to his own hostage? Hadn't Harry saved Ginny Weasley from something in the Chamber of Secrets?

*No*, he told himself firmly. *If it was just a hero thing he would have stayed with Ginny.*

He had a feeling that Harry hadn't told Ginny about the prophecy, or about the Dursleys. After all, if he had only ever given the barest of details to Weasley and Granger, why would he say

any more to his girlfriend?

But Harry had told him. Or rather, Dudley had, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Harry knew that he knew. Harry had even mentioned the Dursleys in the Pensieve that night.

Harry was attracted to him.

Harry trusted him.

Harry wanted Draco to call him Harry, not Potter.

Draco smiled to himself, his body relaxing for what had been the first time in months.

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Ministry officials began arriving early the next morning, and just as Hermione had predicted, they had begun conjuring chairs nearby Dumbledore's tomb, blindingly white in the sunlight.

"It'll be like getting Sorted," said Hermione, observing the sweating, red-faced ministry officials arranging ribbons and streamers across a podium. "When's the Minister coming, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, shifting the tent bag onto his other shoulder while being careful not to dislodge Draco, who was in the crook of his arm.

They had decided that morning at breakfast that it was just too risky to leave the tent by itself while they were at the ceremony. Rita Skeeter, an Auror, or even just a curious student could have wondered in and found what would be a suspicious amount of information on Horcruxes, Slytherin, and Hermione's copious amount of notes on Voldemort. So they were storing the tent in the Room of Requirement until the ceremony and the interview were over.

"Are you *sure* Hermione that no one'll be able to tell that Draco isn't a real ferret?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Hermione, and she led the way into the castle.

"Harry!"

Draco's claws sank into Harry's arm, and though he winced, he didn't say anything, not trusting himself not to groan when he turned around.

"I don't believe it," he heard Ron mutter, and Hermione made an angry sound in the back of his throat. Frowning, Harry turned around.



Scrimgeour was not alone. He was flanked by Percy and Dolores Umbridge.

Anger flooded Harry, and felt his body go rigid with fury as he met Umbridge's cruel, watery eyes. Percy was staring straight ahead, as though he couldn't see them.

Harry was so angry he couldn't even speak. He was holding the tent so tightly in his arm that he could feel the poles dig into the bones of his arm. He could feel Draco shaking in his arm and he wordlessly handed Ron the tent so that he could hold Draco.

"How are you, Harry?" asked Scrimgeour, extending his hand.

Harry stiffly shook it.

As though suddenly remembering, Scrimgeour shook Ron and Hermione's hands, although they did not return Scrimgeour's "good morning."

"Ready for the ceremony?" breezed Scrimgeour. "We're just on our way to meet the young ones in the Great Hall. Care to join us?" he asked them, although he looked only at Harry.

"When's Rita Skeeter getting here?" asked Hermione.

Harry saw Scrimgeour's eyes flash but then he hurriedly smiled. "I'm afraid that we're running a little late! Rita's already there."

Hermione's smile was thin. "Yes, I remember her being quite punctual," she said.

Umbridge seemed to swell before Harry's very eyes, bursting to say something, or interrupt with a "hem, hem", but she said nothing. Percy shoved his glasses up higher on his nose, even though he still looked above them.

Ron was just as silent, although the glares he was aiming at Percy spoke volumes.

"No thanks," said Harry coolly. "See you."

"See you, Minister," corrected Umbridge softly, her toad face twisting.

Once, Harry would have felt threatened by that look. He would have worried that she was going to disband the Gryffindor Quidditch team, or make him write "I will not tell lies", or sack another professor.

Things had changed.

"Now, now," said Scrimgeour. "No need to stand on ceremony. I imagine one day, and not too far away, Harry'll be calling me Rufus!"

Percy looked so angry that he was shaking, and Harry wondered if Scrimgeour had ever called Percy Wetherby.

"Well, must be off. I'm afraid we've kept Rita waiting long enough," said Scrimgeour after a long pause in which no one spoke. "Sure you don't want to come, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, and Scrimgeour left, Percy and Umbridge a half a step behind. When they were almost to the entrance, Harry called out, "Umbridge! The centaurs send their love."

Her eyes widened and her tongue darted forward, licking her suddenly parted lips before she scurried into the Great Hall.

"Good one, Harry," said Ron, looking a little bit less like he was about to march after Percy and clobber him.

Hermione, however, was still glowering.

"I can't believe she's still employed by the Ministry," she spat.

"Didn't you see her at the funeral?" asked Harry.

"No," she said shortly. "You should file a complaint, Harry. Tell what she did to you and how she nearly used the Cruciatus on you. You're the Chosen One ... everyone will listen you!"

But Harry didn't think that it would really matter even if he did. Dolores Umbridge's were like weeds. When you pulled one out, four more shot up.

"At least she's not teaching here," he said as they walked up the stairs.

"McGonagall wouldn't let her," said Ron. His ears were still bright red, and there was a set line to his jaw. His head-lock hold around the tent made Harry wonder if Ron wasn't imagining it was Percy's head he was strangling.

When they were finally in front of the Room of Requirement, Harry took the lead, pacing in front of the door thinking *I need to hide my tent*.

Draco stiffened in his arms when they stepped into the room, and Harry petted him, knowing there was nothing to say.

Draco had spent months trying to repair the Vanishing Cabinet. How many hours had he spent working on it, being driven to desperate measures of cursed necklaces and poisoned mead when nothing he was doing was working?

Harry had seen Draco crying in the bathroom, his despair a disease that had ravished his body until he looked like a bruised shadow of what he used to be. How many times had Draco screamed in frustration and wept in front of the Cabinet when, day after day, nothing he was doing was making any progress?

Draco must have been frantic by the night he got it to work. He had only a few days before school was out and before Voldemort killed him and his family for his failure. Harry couldn't imagine what it had been like.

"Harry, let's go," said Hermione, tugging on his shoulder.

Harry blinked and looked at Ron and Hermione. Ron's arms were empty and his face was set. Hermione didn't smile or say anything else, but Harry could tell that he was on the verge of tears.

"Yeah," he said roughly, and they left the room.

They met no one in the hallway or down the stairs, but as they were walking into the Entrance Hall they saw the end of a procession of black robed children walking outside.

"We're late!" said Harry, breaking into a run.

They ran past the children, who looked startled as the three of them ran by. Harry could imagine the sight he, Ron and Hermione made ... running in Muggle clothes with a ferret clutched in his hands. They ran past the long line of students, and Harry saw the professors who were leading them to the rows of chairs set up down by the lake. Harry heard Professor McGonagall yell at him as he passed her, but he didn't stop. Hermione gasped an apology to her as she tore after him and Ron.

Scrimgeour, several Ministry officials Harry didn't know, and Percy and Umbridge sat in the first row of the seats. Percy was turning to talk to a witch behind him, a rather self-satisfied expression on his face. As he caught sight of Harry, Ron and Hermione, however, his face stiffened and he said something to the witch before turning around.

Harry heard the sound of cameras going off and their flashes brighter than daylight, and very briefly he caught a blur of a woman in a form-fitting green suit with an acid green quill floating above her. Percy shifted, as though his disapproval kept him from sitting still, when they

collapsed into their chairs, out of breath and very hot. It had been awkward to run holding Draco, and he had had to be careful not to dig his fingers into him as he ran.

"Made it," panted Ron, sagging in his seat.

"Ooh, my side," wheezed Hermione, massaging it.

Scrimgeour nodded at Harry, but Harry didn't have the energy to do any more than look at the other man. Umbridge sat on the Minister's right, and she, like Percy, looked disgusted and furious.

A grim sort of pleasure filled Harry.

Music started and there was the shuffling of feet as people stood, turning to watch the students walk down the aisle in a single file line. They looked a little nervous, and Harry understood, remembering what it had felt like to get his wand and to get Sorted. For these kids, it was a bit like the combination of the two experiences, only with adults instead of fellow students there to witness.

"Look at the bag," muttered Ron, jerking his head at Scrimgeour.

Harry hadn't noticed when Scrimgeour waved at him, but the Minister was holding a black velvet bag that was strangely lumpy, as though it had swallowed a misshapen creature with rectangular spikes.

"The wand boxes," whispered Hermione. "Ooh, I still have mine."

Harry was surprised. He had no idea what had become of his Ollivander's box.

Scrimgeour walked up to the podium and pointed his wand at his throat.

"Welcome," he said, his gravely voice ringing across the field. "Today we celebrate the new generation of Hogwarts students under the care and guidance of Headmistress McGonagall."

He nodded at Professor McGonagall, who was standing in front of the children with Professor Flitwick at her side, looking very dwarfed by her tall stature.

Scrimgeour turned so that he was facing in the direction of Dumbledore's white tomb, which stood several dozen feet off to the side of the assembly. "I know that Albus Dumbledore would have been very proud and pleased to have been here today."

There was a moment of silence following these words, and Harry's head turned towards the tomb, his eyes transfixed.

Draco was very still in his arms.

"In these dark times, it is important that we celebrate youth and education, as these are the architects and tools of the future. The Ministry of Magic is pleased to offer you the opportunity to use Ollivander's remaining wands to see if they will aid you in your education. Ollivander was a casualty in this war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ... "

There was an uneasy ripple through the crowd.

" ... and we honor his memory now. We hope that these wands can help some of you. Of course, as Ollivander used to say, 'the wand chooses the wizard!' All those left at the end without an Ollivander wand will have the opportunity to consult Mr. Dereby, who has brought his own collection of wands."

The students in line shifted, and Harry knew that each one hoped that they got an Ollivander's wand, not a Dereby wand.

"And so I will now turn the proceedings over to Mr. Dereby," said Scrimgeour, bowing stiffly to a tall, broad chested man with a pleasant smile.

People in their seat leaned forward to get a better look at Dereby, who had taken the bag of wands from Scrimgeour and was arranging them on the grass.

Professor Flitwick walked up to the podium, several students following him with their arms filled with very thick books. They stacked them up behind the podium, and Flitwick climbed on top of them.

"Is he the new deputy headmaster?" whispered Harry to Ron, who seemed much more in the know about the going ons at Hogwarts these days than either Harry or Hermione.

"Yeah," said Ron. "He's been here almost as long as McGonagall."

Harry suddenly remembered a younger Flitwick from Snape's Pensieve memory of their final exams, but he didn't say anything because Flitwick had just called out, "Norton, Alicia!" in a magically amplified voice.

Alicia's hair was braided clumsily down her back, but she eagerly walked up to Dereby, looking

excited as he opened the first box. Unlike Flitwick, Dereby hadn't magically amplified his voice, and so Harry couldn't catch what he was saying to her as he handed her the wand. He had some idea, though, when Alicia began waving the wand enthusiastically.

Dereby wordlessly handed her a new one, and she waved it like a conductor before Dereby handed her yet another one. By her sixth new wand, Alicia barely flicked the wand before Dereby presented her with a new one.

The other children looked uneasy, and Harry thought that Alicia might cry. He noticed that Umbridge's smile was getting wider and wider as the pile of boxes Alicia was going through was getting smaller.

On the third to the last wand, however, Alicia's mouth dropped open in a small 'o' of surprise, and she waved the wand, and red sparks flew out the end of it.

The crowd applauded, and Alicia went happily to the end of the line, showing her wand to the other students.

"Woolsey, Jacob" found his wand after the fifth try, and the boy after him on the third.

"Greensburg, Amanda" found her wand faster than anyone, on the first try, and Ron clapped very loudly for her.

But "McGinnely, Frank" went through all of the wands, and not a single red spark come out the end.

Everyone was very quiet as he walked to the end of the line, his head bowed. He would have to get a Dereby wand, and Harry wondered whether using an Ollivander wand that didn't fit you was better than using a Dereby wand that did. After all, that was what Ron had done his first year, and he had gotten on fine.

Of course, Neville's wandwork had really improved when he had come back after fifth year with a new Ollivander wand that fit him.

The ceremony went on for another hour, several more students returning to the line empty handed but the majority clutching their new Ollivander wands in their hands. At the end, there was a small pile of Ollivander wands left over, and Harry wondered what was to become of them.

The music started again, and people left their seats to talk with one another, some congratulating the children.

House-elves dispersed through the crowd, carrying pumpkin juice and food, wading between people's legs and squeaking apologies.

"Harry!"

Harry turned and saw Rita Skeeter striding towards him, her gold teeth winking in the sunlight as she beamed. She looked much better than she had the last time he had seen her, in the Three Broomsticks in his fifth year. The rhinestones were back in her glasses, her hair in tight curls, and her clothes a lot smarter than they had been two years ago.

"Hello," he said.

Rita seemed to notice Ron and Hermione and she said, "Hello. Lovely to see you again," but not after she and Hermione had exchanged leveled looks with one another.

"Working for the *Prophet* again?" he asked, keeping an eye out for her acid green quill.

"Yes," she said, a smile stretching across her red lips. "They were quite keen to take me back in ... light of my contacts. Of course I asked for a substantial raise."

"Of course," said Hermione coolly. "What horrible things did you write today, Rita?"

Rita glared at her. "I see you haven't changed, Little Miss Prissy."

"Likewise."

Rita took a deep breath, as though just remembering that Hermione was Harry's best friend and that he might take away the interview if she insulted her too much.

"Want to do the interview now, Harry?" asked Rita, turning her attention to him. "I thought we'd put it in the *Prophet*."

Harry had thought about asking Luna if they could put it in the Quibbler, but Hedwig had gone hunting, Pig was at the Burrow, and he didn't really feel like walking all the way up to the Owlry. "How much is the Ministry leaning on the Prophet these days?" he asked.

Rita's eyes gleamed. "Ooh, got something to say about the Ministry, have you?" she breathed, her long red nails catching the sunlight and gleaming. "*The Chosen One Speaks Out Against Ministry* ... and then a subheading of, *What Harry Potter Thinks of New Minister* ... "

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, sort of," he said.

Rita's Quick Quote Quill palpitated in excitement.

"Shall we do the interview now, Harry?" asked Rita. "I can rush it to the Prophet and it'll be in the morning paper."

But Harry had just seen Scrimgeour flanked by two Aurors walk towards him. So had Draco, who was lashing his tail in agitation against Harry's arm, digging his nails in sharply. "In an hour. Meet me in the Great Hall in an hour."

They walked quickly away, Harry pretending that he hadn't heard Scrimgeour calling his name.

"Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked Dobby, invisible under the tray he was carrying above his head.

"Mr. Weezy, Miss," he said to Ron and Hermione.

"Hi Dobby," said Harry. Draco started in his arms, staring at Dobby.

"Hey," said Ron, helping himself to some food.

"Can I carry that for you, Dobby?" offered Hermione, who had been muttering for minutes about S.P.E.W. and had glared at Ron when he had asked if she wanted a toffee.

"Dobby has it, Miss," squeaked Dobby.

He held the tray in front of him, his small arms straining to hold onto both sides, and he scuttled forward, the tray bumping against Harry's legs. "Harry Potter, sir," he said, his ears quivering with excitement. "Headmistress McGonagall offered Dobby a raise!"

"That's great!" said Harry.

"Dobby that's wonderful!" said Hermione, beaming. "How much?"

"Two Galleons," squeaked Dobby, his enormous eyes even wider than normal.

Hermione frowned, but before she could say anything, Harry said, "Are you going to buy more socks?"

Dobby shook his head, the glasses on his tray tinkling dangerously as he whipped his head back and forth. "Dobby cannot accept it," he said gravely.



"Eyw Ought?" asked Ron thickly through an eclair.

"Dobby is ashamed!" burst Dobby, his eyes bright.

"There's nothing wrong with having your work valued," said Hermione firmly.

Dobby shook his head, causing the juice to slop down the sides of the glasses, and Ron watched with some unhappiness as the eclairs soaked up the juice like a sponge. "Dobby does not deserve it!"

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Dobby spilled juice all over her," he moaned. Because he looked as though he were about to beat his head against the tray, Harry quickly took it from him.

"Who, Dobby?" he asked.

"P-Professor Umbridge," whispered Dobby in a terrified voice, wringing his hands.

Ron laughed so hard he choked on his eclair, and Hermione had to pound him on the back.

"Congratulations, Dobby," said Harry, grinning, giving Dobby back his tray.

Dobby seemed to be somewhat reassured at their approval, and he left them to wander throughout the crowd, offering soggy eclairs and half-empty glasses of pumpkin juice.

"They're funny things, aren't they?" said Ron as they watched Dobby weave through the crowd.

"Let's go," said Harry, leading the way back into the castle.

"What're you going to say in the interview, Harry?" asked Hermione when they were well away from the crowd.

"Try to get Stan Shunpike released," said Harry immediately.

"And?" prompted Hermione.

"Well ... that's it really. Maybe get Umbridge fired."

"Percy, too," said Ron quickly.

Hermione shook her head impatiently. "Harry this has to be more than just about individuals ... you have to campaign for a reform in the justice system ... trials for everyone so that what happened to Sirius doesn't happen to others. And of course you have to talk about Draco."

Harry startled, his hands automatically tightening around Draco. "Draco?" he repeated.

"Of course," said Hermione, looking surprised. "You should talk about how Voldemort was threatening him, and how you thought he wasn't going to go through with it, but then Snape came in and ... did it."

"But people'll think Harry's sympathizing with Malfoy!" said Ron. "That's not about to make him very popular."

Draco lashed his tail impatiently, making it very clear that he wished to speak, and so Harry quickened his pace.

"It will put Draco in a better light," said Hermione, "if Harry Potter's on his side."

"But the Order ... " started Ron.

"Lupin'll take care of the Order," said Hermione confidently. "He wants Draco cleared, too."

They argued until they were in front of the Room of Requirement, and then Harry broke into their argument. "Shut up for a minute," he said, but there was no heat in his voice.

*I need to hide something ... I need to hide something ... I need to hide something.*

"Wait here," he said, opening the doors when they appeared. He hurried inside, catching sight of the blood stained axe again, and he quickly picked up the tent and left.

Ron and Hermione were glowering at one another when he stepped out of the Room of Requirement, and as soon as he stepped out the door Hermione began pacing. Harry exchanged a glance with Ron, who looked just as confused as he was, and he was about to ask Hermione what she was up to when a door popped open in the wall.

"We'll talk in here about it," she said, leading the way inside.

The room was small, completely bare without even so much as a chair to sit on, and Harry took up a corner of the room. As soon as Ron shut the door behind him, Harry turned Draco back into a human.

Draco appeared a moment later, waving smoke out of his face.

Ron and Hermione immediately opened their mouths to speak again, but Harry cut across them. "What do you want me to do, Draco?" he asked.

Draco was quiet for a moment, thinking over what Ron and Hermione had said. On the one hand, having Harry say he was on his side before the war was over would force the Wizarding world to start thinking about him in a new, more positive way. People pitied those the Dark Lord threatened. And the fact that Harry witnessed that he didn't kill Dumbledore and wasn't going to until Snape came in made him look redeemed. On the other hand, there would always be those who would say that losing the Malfoys would be no great loss to Wizarding society, what with Lucius being a convicted Death Eater. He had seen the papers ... no one had mourned very much over Narcissa's death, even when mediowizards announced that she didn't have the Dark Mark.

"What would you say?" he asked, his voice heavy.

Harry licked his lips. "Do you think you would get immunity by being the Chosen One's boyfriend?"

Draco raised a pale eyebrow, and Harry quickly said, "I'd tell her that you were being threatened by Voldemort and that you weren't going to go through with it."

"But then you'd reveal that you were with Dumbledore," said Ron. He turned to Draco. "It's not that I don't want you to get off, Malfoy. It's just that I think that if Harry talks about you now, people are going to start looking for you even more. Lupin's having a hell of a time distracting the Order as it is."

Hermione's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought about that," she said in a small voice.

Draco closed his eyes. "Don't do it, Harry. Tell her that you think that there should be some sort of prison reform like Granger said," he sighed. "So that people's fathers aren't killed on Ministry watch," he added bitterly.

Harry frowned. "Why wasn't that ever in the papers?" he asked. "Your mum was."

Draco shrugged. "Ministry probably didn't want to admit there was a breach in security." He frowned, remembering that Snape had been a tall black man in his memory, a man he had thought he had seen at the Ministry before.

"Maybe he isn't dead," suggested Ron. "Maybe Snape just ... " he trailed off, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

Draco snorted. "And maybe the Dark Lord doesn't want my boyfriend dead."

Harry smiled suddenly. "Do you want to stay in here until the interview is over?"

"I don't see why we don't just move in here," said Draco. A look of concentration came over him, and suddenly there was a chair in the room. 'We'd have everything we'd need."

"Because when other people can't get into this room they're going to wonder why not," said Harry knowingly, recalling vividly how he had obsessed that year over what Draco might be doing in the Room of Requirement. "Besides, the tent's nice, isn't it?"

"It's small," said Draco bluntly.

Harry suddenly remembered how enormous Draco's mansion in Wiltshire had been.

"And nothing in it works how it's supposed to," continued Draco.

"I thought you liked fixing them," said Hermione. "You did a great job with the oven and the toaster and the microwave."

"Yeah, otherwise we'd be eating canned raviolis every night."

"I'm bloody sick of not being able to go outside!" burst Draco, his voice echoing in the small room.

Stunned silence met his words, and the others exchanged uneasy glances with one another, no one knowing what to say. On the one hand, it was obvious that Draco couldn't go outside unless he wanted half the Order to descend on him. And yet Harry knew that this was exactly how Sirius had felt, and hadn't it driven Sirius to desperate measures?

Draco sighed. "Sorry. Let's just go."

Harry looked miserable when he turned him into a ferret. "I'm sorry, Draco," he said softly, picking him up.

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The Great Hall was empty when they arrived, and they automatically made for their usual

places at the Gryffindor table.

"Hard to believe we won't be coming back here next year," said Hermione quietly, rubbing her finger against the well-worn wood of the table.

"I know," sighed Ron, looking up at the enchanted ceiling. "I'll miss the Halloween Feast."

"I'll miss Quidditch," said Harry.

Ron moaned. "Just when I was getting good!"

Just then the doors opened, and the three of them turned to see Rita Skeeter entering, but her face was far from happy.

Scrimgeour was following right behind her.

"What's he doing here?" muttered Hermione out of the corner of her mouth, but Harry had a good idea what Scrimgeour was doing.

"Harry," said Rita in a clipped voice. "Let's begin."

"Hang on," he said, and he turned to Scrimgeour. "Why are you here, Minister," he asked, not bothering to try and sound friendly.

"I thought this would be a good opportunity to discuss some of the Ministry's options, Harry," said Scrimgeour smoothly. "Just wanted to get your opinion on some of the things we have in mind."

"Like what?" asked Ron loudly.

Scrimgeour turned to Ron, looking at him carefully underneath his shaggy eyebrows. "Your father's Arthur Weasley, isn't he?" he asked. "Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects that I set up last summer."

Ron licked his lips and nodded, looking suddenly tense.

"What 'things' does the Ministry have in mind," asked Harry, turning the attention back to himself. He very much hoped that Mr. Weasley's job wasn't hanging in the balance.

"Well today's ceremony of course, and the Campaign Against Poverty, The Magical Equality Act, and, of course, The Albus Dumbledore Scholarship," said Scrimgeour. "Shall we begin?"

And then, without waiting for Harry to respond, Rita asked in a monotone, "How do you feel about the Ministry providing the remaining Ollivander wands free of charge in addition to paying for the services of Mr. Dereby and his wands to the students today?"

"I think it was the right thing to do," said Harry immediately. "Helping people is what the Ministry should be doing." He paused to consider his next words about Stan Shunpike, but Rita had already moved on.

"Harry, what do you think of the Campaign Against Poverty's mission statement, 'Every person is entitled to shelter, food, a magical education, and the tools for a successful life'?"

"Uh, good," said Harry, and then, before he say another word, Rita asked another question.

"The Magical Equality Act, going into effect in just a few months, will establish a meritocracy test, for which all government positions will be earned based on one's score. Study pamphlets are provided free of charge, and the Ministry expects that this will ensure that the most qualified are put in positions of acting on the will of the people. What do you think of this?"

"What if centaurs, werewolves, or house-elves passed the test?" interrupted Hermione before Harry could say anything.

Scrimgeour's face soured suddenly before he hastily rearranged it into an expression of contemplation.

"That's not something we had thought about," he said, speaking slowly and every so often glancing at Rita's Quick Quotes Quill, which Harry was startled to see was blue, not Rita's usual acid green.

Scrimgeour nodded at Rita, who looked as though she would rather eat doxy eggs than ask the next question.

"The Ministry has decided to award an annual scholarship in the memory of Albus Dumbledore," she said, "The recipient of the scholarship would be a student who exemplified the qualities Albus Dumbledore was known to have admired in others, and others admired in him. The scholarship would cover the full cost of Hogwarts for seven years. How does it make you feel to know that the Ministry wants to encourage more people to emulate this great man?"

Hermione made an angry sound in the back of her throat, frustrated that Scrimgeour had never answered her question.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing," said Harry. "I mean, Dumbledore was a great man, and the more people we have like him ... well ... the fewer Voldemorts we'll have, won't we?"

Rita jumped, nearly losing her seat at the mention of Voldemort, and Scrimgeour winced horribly.

"Yes, well, thank you, Harry," said Scrimgeour quickly. "But I'm afraid that's all the time we have ... Rita has another interview scheduled today with Dereby, and I'm afraid she can't miss that. I'll be sure to tell your father that I saw you today," he said, looking at Ron, who paled.

Scrimgeour stood up, smiling at all of them, his eyes glinting with triumph. Rita, however, did not stand up. She was fiddling with the quill, which was still writing on the pad.

"Stupid quill," she muttered, and she ripped off the scribbled piece, leaving it on the floor. "I'm ready, Minister," she said, standing.

"Good," he said, and he made sure that she walked in front of him. "See you," he said, waving vaguely behind him at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Ron started swearing as soon as the door clicked shut. "Do you think he's going to sack my dad?" he asked bitterly.

" 'Course not," said Harry bracingly. "Everyone knows you're my best mate. You've got, like, best friend immunity."

"Sometimes I really love Rita," said Hermione, her face glowing.

"*What?*" demanded Harry and Ron, turning their heads so fast Harry got a pain in his neck.

"That was the worst interview ever! I didn't even get to mention Stan Shunpike!" he said angrily.

Hermione held up her hand, and the scrap of paper Rita had thrown to the floor was in it. "Apparently, Rita thought the same," she said.

"What?" asked Harry, taking the paper from her hand. "*The Quibbler?*"

"Hang on ... " said Ron slowly. "You mean this is going in the Quibbler?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, it'll be in the *Prophet*. But Harry's real interview will be in the

Quibbler, which will do very much to discredit whatever is said in the *Prophet*."

"But when's my real interview?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, must I spell everything out for you?"

"Yes," said Ron, completely unashamed.

"Rita will be around sometime for the real interview, and I promise you it won't be this pathetic two minute quote fodder that we just had," she said, looking very forbidding all of a sudden.

"Come on. We have to go wait by Dumbledore's office for McGonagall so we can talk to the Sorting Hat."

But Professor McGonagall was already in her office when they knocked, and she was not alone.

"Harry," said Navarre, looking surprised and pleased. He rose from his chair. "Ron, Hermione," he said, nodding at them. He caught sight of Draco but didn't say anything.

"Hi," he said, his grip on Draco tightening. He didn't smile back at the other man, remembering that he had hexed Draco.

"Enjoy the ceremony?" asked Navarre.

"It was alright," said Harry coolly.

"Yes, Potter?" said Professor McGonagall. "I told you I'd send you an owl."

Harry's gaze flickered to Dumbledore's empty portrait.

"Actually, Professor," said Hermione, stepping forward. "We wondered if we could borrow the Sorting Hat."

McGonagall's eyebrows raised, and there was a long moment of silence in which Hermione fidgeted nervously as her favorite professor stared at her. Harry could tell that Navarre was trying to get his attention, and so Harry assiduously kept his gaze on Draco.

Finally, McGonagall sighed and pointed to the table where the Sorting Hat was. "Bring it back tomorrow morning," she said. "I'm entrusting this in *your* care, Ms. Granger."

"Thanks Professor," she said, and she picked up the Sorting Hat, which grunted, as though disturbed from it's sleep.



Hermione grinned at him excitedly, and Harry smiled back, feeling like the next Horcrux wasn't so very far away now. "We'll return it tomorrow, Professor," promised Harry, and the three of them turned to walk out of her office when Navarre spoke.

"Are you by chance going somewhere in the vicinity of Hagrid's house?" he asked.

"Sort of," said Ron, his voice suspicious. "Why?"

"I wanted to get his advice on my lesson plan for next term," said Navarre, surprising them. "Would you mind showing me the way?"

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they left.

"Is that a tent, Harry?" asked Navaree, and Harry jumped when he realized that Navarre was standing only inches from him, his long hair brushing Harry's arm.

"Y-yeah," stuttered Harry, feeling his face heat as Navarre's Veela charms sent tingles up his arms. Draco dug his claws into Harry's skin and batted at Navarre's hair, snarling.

"I haven't been in a tent in ages," said Navarre. "Would you mind if I popped over some time?"

Not knowing what he else he could say without sounding as though he was hiding something, Harry nodded, and Navarre smiled at him.

"Did you ever use the charm I gave you for your birthday?" asked Navarre, his arm brushing Harry's back as he leaned forward to touch the tent. Harry brought his arms in closer to his side. Harry could see out of the corner of his eye that Hermione was watching them carefully.

"No," said Harry, remembering that he had stuffed the scrap of paper in a pair of jeans he rarely wore. "What is it?"

"Oh just something amusing from Fred and George's shop," said Navarre, and Harry could have sworn that he just winked at him.

Harry was relieved when they got down to the grounds and pointed Navarre in the direction of Hagrid's hut.

"I don't trust him," said Ron as soon as Navarre was out of earshot.

"Why do you think he wants to look at our tent? Do you think he suspects something?" asked Harry, frowning.

Hermione fingered the tip of the Sorting Hat as she stared after Navarre, a thoughtful look on her face.

---

After they had set up the tent, Draco disappeared into the kitchen, where he attacked the food processor none of them had dared touch since it had chased Hermione outside weeks ago. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had gone to the Burrow for dinner, and Draco thought that if he had to spend another second as a ferret he'd *Crucio* something.

Spending time as a ferret always put him in a terrible mood because he was left unendurably helpless in that form, and helplessness was *not* a trait to be found in a Malfoy. To be helpless meant that you were weak.

Draco Malfoy was not weak.

As though proving that he was afraid of nothing, inferior to nothing, and that the world had best make damn sure it didn't think differently, he switched the processor on.

ZRIM ZRIM ZRIM

He leapt backwards as the appliance rattled on the counter, its twin metal blades slicing at the air as its entire base rattled, surging across the counter in long drags.

He eyed it warily when it got to the edge of the counter, prepared to leap forward in case it fell. He didn't want it broken. It teetered precariously on the edge, its blades still cutting at nothing as it gently rocked back and forth, only barely catching itself every time.

"It's stuck," murmured Draco, taking a few hesitating steps forward. He was disappointed; he had thought that taming the little bugger was going to be harder than the ice-dispenser. He was running out of kitchen appliances.

Just as he picked up the processor, it roared to full throttle life, struggling in his arms as its blades whirred stronger than before as it tried to attack Draco's fingers.

Draco grunted, wrestling it to the ground, pinning it with his weight.

"Shite," he growled as he struggled to keep it trapped underneath him. He reached for his wand, but it wasn't there.

"Oh fine!" he exploded, turning his head, trying to find it. It had rolled underneath the

refrigerator. He stood up, wrapping his arms around the processor as he had seen some of the Mudblood students at Hogwarts do with a triangular shaped brown ball, and he heaved it into the sink, where it banged about.

He got back down on his stomach and reached underneath the fridge for his wand. His fingers brushed the smooth wood, but he couldn't get any purchase on it. He was afraid that if he pushed any farther he would push it beyond his reach.

Growling, Draco got to his feet and looked at disgust at his dusty shirt ... one of Harry's and so too small for him. He cast a look at the processor, which had made quick work of the sponge, shredding it into yellow bits, and he hurried up to his room for a hanger.

He ran past Lockhart's portrait in the hallway, and grabbed his door handle, pushing forward, until to be shoved backwards.

"DAMN IT!" he shouted. He had forgotten that he had magically locked his door before they had packed the tent.

Granger's room was just across the hall, and he strode towards it, frustration propelling him to her door in two long strides. He had his hand on the door handle and had even twisted it, but he didn't push it open. It didn't seem ... right just going into her room when she didn't know.

He laughed in disbelief, his forehead resting against her door. He could hear the processor in the kitchen rattling around in the sink, furious that it couldn't get out. Harry, Hermione, and Ron were still outside, no doubt plotting Harry's next interview with Rita. He felt strangely removed from it all, as though it was a world beyond his own.

He couldn't stand being locked up anymore. He felt like a prisoner, trapped in a three bedroom, one bathroom, mad appliance ridden tent. He couldn't go outside unless he was invisible or a ferret, he could only speak to four people, five if you counted Snape, which he didn't, and he had hated all four people passionately not even three months ago.

He was gay.

Oh ... *God*, he thought to himself, half amused, half hysterical.

He pushed away from Hermione's door and his eyes fell on Harry's. "Well we are boyfriend and ... boyfriend," he said, and he walked briskly down the hall, ignoring Lockhart's inquisitive but silent gaze, and he opened Harry's door.

Harry's room was the opposite of Draco's. Where Draco made his bed every day ... with his wand of course ... Harry only occasionally did, and then by hand, complaining his charm made the sheets too tight. Harry's oversized, old clothes were strewn about the floor.

Harry's closet was even worse, but Draco didn't have time to think about that. He took a wire hanger out of the closet. He was turning to walk back out the door when something he hadn't seen before caught his eye on Harry's night table.

A leather-covered book without a title.

Curious, Draco sat down on Harry's bed and opened it in his lap.

Harry and a woman with long red hair and bright green eyes looked up at him, their arms wrapped around one another.

Something tightened in Draco's chest, and felt his hands start to shake. So, Potter was still attracted to Gin ... His thought trailed off as he looked closer at the woman. She had red hair, but the resemblance between her and Ginny ended there. She was older, too, at least twenty years old, and those green eyes were awfully familiar.

He stared in disbelief at the man, realizing that it wasn't Harry, but his *father, James*. He had heard people tell Harry "you look so much like your father, but you've got your mother's eyes," but he had never known how true it was until now.

Harry's parents stared up at him, and then Lilly whispered something in James ear and he laughed. He looked a lot like Harry when he laughed. He flipped through some more pages, and he noticed that the binding was beginning to break down, the pages having been turned thousands of times.

And then Draco felt like an intruder, and so he put the book back and left with the hanger he had come in for.

Crookshanks was sitting on the counter, hair on end and growling at the processor, his tail lashing. Draco was intensely glad that Crookshanks hadn't batted a paw at it. Granger might have forgiven him for many things, but mangling her cat would not be one of them.

He ignored the processor's sudden intensified roar as he walked by it, and he got down on his stomach again, using the hanger to lengthen his reach and slowly drag his wand back to him.

"Right," he said firmly when he got his wand back. He stood over the processor and cried, "*Stupefy!*"

The hex bounced off the plastic, and Draco jerked to the side, missing the hex by inches. Crookshanks hissed, and Draco watched, stunned, when the hex ricocheted off the refrigerator and hit the kneazle squarely in the rump, paralyzing the creature. Draco lunged to catch it before it fell in the sink, remembering at the last moment that Crookshanks had a tail, and he whisked it above the gloating chuckle of the blades.

"Merlin," panted, setting Crookshanks on the floor. "*Renervate!*"

Crookshanks came to with an outraged yowl and swiped his paw across Draco's hand, hissing, before running into the sitting room.

Irritated, Draco hastily healed the scratches, not wanting to have any evidence that he and Crookshanks had quarreled. If Granger suspected that he had done something to Crookshanks she would flay him alive. The fight she and Weasley had had their third year about their respective pets had been legendary.

"Note to self: don't try and Stun it," he said to himself, turning his attention back to the processor, which seemed even angrier now that he had used magic on it.

He couldn't see what the point had been in trying to infuse magic with the appliance. It was like an insane dog that barked incessantly and tried to bite anyone who came near it. He remembered how temperamental the microwave had been (which he still hadn't entirely figured out yet) and smiled grimly at the angry piece of machinery doing its best to leap out of the sink and amputate his fingers.

He pointed his wand back at it, his knees bent and ready to fling himself away, and yelled, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The Disarming Spell hit the processor's soundly, and it flung itself against the back of the sink, its blades sputtering pathetically for a moment before roaring back to life.

"*Rictusempra*"

The processor gave a wheezing shudder before it resumed its attack. In fact, the spell seemed to energize the machine, and it jumped a good six inches out of the sink, blades whirring madly like a rollypolly that had fallen on its back.

"Fuck!"

"*Tarantallegra!*" turned out to be an even worse idea. The food processor did a mad tap-dance in the sink, its blades whirring like the pincers of an acromantula.

"*Impedimenta!*" had only emboldened the damn thing, and "*Petrificus Tatalus!*" was as useful as a flobberworm.

Very red in the face and holding his wand so tightly in his hand that he couldn't even bend his wrist, Draco glared at the processor. He just wanted to see what it did when it was working properly, what the wizard who had owned the tent had meant for it to do, *and it wouldn't cooperate.*

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that he should be shouting useless hexes at a mad appliance because he didn't have anything else to do. It was just like the Vanishing Cabinet all over again, struggling to find the right spell and fit the pieces together to save his family. It wasn't fair that he had just stand by and not do anything when Navarre hit on Harry. Harry couldn't even say he was dating anyone without everyone wanting to know who. Hot anger surged through him and before he even knew what he was doing, he raised his arm above his head.

"*CRUCIO!*" he bellowed.

Anger washed over him in wave after wave as he watched the processor scream, shudder and then finally expire in the sink, green smoke fizzing out of its body, and Draco felt the anger drain from him. His eyes felt hot and gritty, and he exhaled shakily. Exhaustion overwhelmed Draco, and he sagged against the refrigerator, his wand slipping from his limp hand, and he closed his eyes, tilting his head back and trying to breathe past the large knot in his throat.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Harry staring at him from behind the counter.

"Ah, shit," sighed Draco closing his eyes again.

He heard Harry's footsteps on the floor drawing closer, but Draco didn't open his eyes. He didn't think he could bear to see Harry's disappointed face staring back at him.

Two strong arms slipped underneath his back, and Harry pressed his body against his and rested his head on Draco's shoulder. He didn't say anything, and Draco felt close to laughter.

Had the world gone mad?

Since when did Harry Potter hug people who lost their tempers and *Crucio'd* kitchen appliances? Harry might drift through the laws on his own accord, but Draco knew Harry drew a line when it came to Dark Arts ... somewhere.

Still, though, he wrapped his arms around Harry's waist and held him. It felt nice.

After a long minute of silence, Harry said, "I never liked it anyway."

Draco snorted and tightened his arms around Harry.

"And I don't fancy Navarre," added Harry, his fingers digging in slightly to Draco's skin. "I know he fancy's me, but I don't want to be with him."

"He's very good looking," said Draco, feeling strangely at peace as Harry danced his fingers along Draco's arm.

"He's too tall," said Harry, and Draco could feel him smile against his neck.

"Well, he's very wealthy. You could have a private Quidditch pitch and all of the designer clothes you could ever want."

"I don't care about clothes. Besides, once this is all done with, you'll get all of your money back," said Harry, pulling away and looking Draco in the eye. "*You* could build me a private Quidditch pitch."

"True," admitted Draco. "I think I'm quite a bit wealthier than him."

"So, you see?" said Harry, pressing a kiss to Draco's lips. "No contest."

## Chapter 24

"*Crucio!*"

Harry did a double take when he saw the food processor scuttling out of reach of Draco's wand, looking more like like a crab than anything. When had it grown legs?

"Uhh... am I interrupting?" said Harry. Draco turned and saw Harry, then settled himself against the refrigerator.

"Why did you come back?" asked Draco, making himself more comfortable. It was still early.

Harry shrugged. "Fleur's pregnant..."

Draco raised his eyebrow as the horrible image of Ron with blonde hair entered his mind.

"What?" asked Harry suspiciously.

"Nothing," croaked Draco, and he waved Harry on. "The Weasleys were breeding, you were saying?"

"Yes," said Harry, frowning at Draco's choice of words. "And Mrs. Weasley started crying."

"And you left because of that?" asked Draco, hearing his voice rise with incredulity.

"No," said Harry, but he didn't laugh or sound indignant as Draco had expected him to. "Mrs. Weasley was crying ... and she brought out all these ... " Harry's face tightened. "scrap books from when she was pregnant."

The ache in Harry's voice cut at Draco.

"And there were framed pictures on the mantle of babies--I mean, her babies--Ron and everyone..." Harry's voice had gone from wistful to bitter, and Draco suddenly recalled that he had not seen a single picture of Harry as a baby on the Dursley's heavily burdened mantle of Dudley memorabilia.

There was a horrible silence that seemed to stretch up from Draco's stomach until it swelled in front of his eyes, giving him terrible clarity as he looked at Harry's carefully blank face.



It was a look that he saw quite often enough in Slytherin.

And on his mother, he thought, his breath catching.

Harry was very good at that face. Whenever he was feeling something he thought beyond Weasley's or Granger's spectrum of approval, or even comprehension, it settled over his features like a mist.

"Ah," he said, feeling rather useless. "Would you like to...ah...Crucio the toaster?"

Harry blinked behind his enormous glasses, looking thrown off. "Wh-what?"

"It's quite cathartic," said Draco, his smile going wider and becoming more forced as the silence lengthened.

Harry was staring at Draco with his lips parted in shock? Disgust?

Draco felt like laughing. High-pitched, hysterical laughter. Harry might use Unforgiveables against his enemies, and he might have let Draco's harmless little show of the Cruciatus slide, but he certainly didn't approve of joking about them. Hadn't there been rumors that Harry had been Cruciod at the Triwizard Tournament?

Regret fell on the back of Draco's tongue, choking him. He was about to apologize when he remembered that Malfoys didn't do apologies.

A warm hand on the back on his neck brought Draco back to the present.

"You prat," said Harry, chuckling. "You've already fixed the toaster."

Guilt, relief, and surprise flooded Draco in a tangled yarn, knotting his stomach. Swiftly, he leaned into Harry's personal space and said, "But not the icemaker."

Because that was what Slytherins did when cornered. They leaned in, pushed back, and never held their punches.

Harry laughed, delighted, and Draco saw the blankness fall away from Harry's face in shattered pieces that splintered like light over broken glass.

"Anyway," said Harry, "I couldn't stand it anymore and picked up one of the bottles of Firewhiskey Fred and George brought over and--"

"Hang on," said Draco, standing ramrod straight, and their chests bumped awkwardly together. "You have Firewhiskey?"

"Um...yes?" said Harry, looking somewhat perplexed.

"And you failed to mention this when you arrived because?!" demanded Draco, outraged.

"You had just *Crucioed* a food processor," said Harry dryly, letting his hand fall away from Draco's neck and gesturing to something in the sitting room. "I thought we could enjoy it after dinner."

Draco made a beeline for the bottle tossed haphazardly on the lumpy couch. "Screw dinner, Potter, and bring me my mug!"

--

"Stop moving," commanded Draco.

Harry giggled and slumped forward against the coffee table. "You look ri'liculous," he hiccupped.

Draco readjusted the frames on his face and squinted at Harry. "How can you see anything?" he complained.

Harry sniggered. "Give me back my glasses," he said, reaching for them, but Draco leaned back.

"Say please," he commanded imperiously.

"Please," said Harry, reaching again.

Draco twisted away, feeling boneless and warm. "In Parseltongue!"

"What?!"

"Do it!" ordered Draco. He let the glasses slide down his nose until he could more clearly see Harry's baleful glare. "Or I'll break them."

Harry's appalled face delighted Draco. Really and truly, he had almost forgotten what it was like to tease him. "Chop chop."

"Can't," blurted Harry after a moment of silence. "I hafta look at a snake."

But Draco wasn't paying attention. An orange blur had crawled into the room.

For some unintelligible reason, Crookshanks' squashes, mistrustful face made him feel profoundly guilty.

"Heeeeere Crookshanks," wheedled Draco, crawling towards the fluffy orange beast, who promptly hissed at him. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" slurred Harry, struggling to join Draco.

"I nearly killed Granger's cat," confessed Draco. Harry's eyes widened, and in a surprisingly accurate motion, he managed to pull the glasses from Draco's face and put them on.

"Hermione's gonna be mad," said Harry, looking worried.

Worried and very drunk.

"I know," said Draco serenely, and Harry listened as Draco told him how Crookshanks had nearly met an untimely end with the demon spawn that was the food processor. In the end, they both agreed that Obliviating Crookshanks was the only option.

Crookshanks, however, proved to be much more agile than anticipated, and they collapsed in a sweaty heap on the couch, laughing uncontrollably.

For a while, they just laid there in a comfortable, warm, drunk haze. It had been a long time since Draco had gotten drunk for the fun of it. That one time with Harry after Fleur and Bill's wedding didn't count of course. That wasn't to say he hadn't gotten drunk over the course of sixth year--but then it had been systematic, calculated drinking with the design to pass out. Passing out had been the only way he could sleep without dreams of Voldemort torturing his family or the Vanishing Cabinet.

He had found sherry bottles in the Room of Requirement and throughout the year, and he had drunk them while leaning against the Cabinet, miserable and anxious.

The last time he had gotten drunk for the fun of it had been three days before his mother had told him that the Dark Lord had a task for him. Blaise had come for the weekend.

Harry wiggled next to him, turning to face him, and Draco felt a thrill of warm pleasure. He turned on his side and smiled at Harry, who smiled back.

It was odd, he thought, how things worked out. But Harry was very comfortable to share a

couch with, so Draco didn't mind. Besides, Harry was...

"You're pretty," he said aloud, and then blinked when he realized he meant it.

"M not," slurred Harry against his neck. "I'm..." he looked up, his glasses askew and his eyes very bright. "Manly. Not Ron-manly...I'm Charlie-manly."

His message delivered, he sprawled himself over Draco as he reached for the Firewhiskey.

"No. I'm manly. You're pretty," said Draco. "I'm taller."

Harry emerged, the bottle tipped precariously to the side. "Ron's taller than you."

"Ron's straight. Doesn't count," said Draco, liberating the bottle from Harry and taking a generous mouthful. He didn't wince as it burned down his throat.

Still sprawled across his chest, Harry shook his head. "Nevarre's taller," he said, and he elbowed Draco as he took the bottle back.

Because this was true, Draco pulled Harry's hair. "Shut up."

For a long moment, they lay there, every once in a while taking turns with the bottle of Firewhiskey until Draco was seeing two lightening bolt scars on Harry's forehead.

"Why'd you use the Cruciatus?" slurred Harry, missing his mouth entirely with the bottle.

"Because."

"I mean," said Harry, scooting closer and flinging an arm over Draco's shoulders, "What made you so..."

*Evil?* wondered Draco, and he could smell the liquor on Harry's breath. But he liked how pink Harry's cheeks were, so he didn't mind too much.

"Angry?" finished Harry. "Because I know...I *know*," said Harry, pinching Draco's cheek, "that you have to be really, really angry. Like how I was when I did it." Draco was still trying to get over the fact that Harry had pinched his cheeks. "Your Aunt Bellatrix?"

"Yeah."

Draco could see Harry's snarl out of the corner of his eye.

Draco snorted, the stabbing pain that usually accompanied the mention of his aunt's name was dulled around the edges. "Stupid bitch," he said roughly, rubbing the hem of Harry's shirt between his fingers, his knuckles grazing Harry's side.

"Yeah, but I killed her," said Harry, very loudly. "So what made you angry?"

"Nevarre always hitting on you, Scrimgeour being a berk, the Dark Lord trying to kill everybody and making me try and kill Dumbledore, the way Nevarre looks at you, being trapped in this stupid tent...the fact that Nevarre has stupid Veela charms..." he cut himself off with a drink from the bottle.

"You were going to *Crucio* me in the bathroom, weren't you?" asked Harry.

Draco blinked, taken aback. It had been something they had never brought up, by a silent, mutual agreement, he'd thought.

"Yeah..." a delayed tingling at the base of his spine was starting to crawl up his back in nervous anticipation for Harry's response. That was the trouble with dating your old archrival; you never knew when a past grievance would come back to haunt you.

"I'm glad you didn't," said Harry, smiling, and Draco noticed that Harry's eyes were very green. Had he told Harry he thought he was pretty?

Draco smiled back. "Moaning Myrtle doesn't like you anymore."

Harry shrugged, and took the bottle from Draco. For a moment, there was no sound except Harry's faint hiss from the burning in his throat.

"Voldemort killed her, you know," said Harry off-handedly.

For a second, Draco forgot that Myrtle was already a ghost, and he wondered how the Dark Lord had gotten into Hogwarts.

"But she doesn't know that because all she saw were the basilisk's eyes," continued Harry. "Yellow eyes. Pow! Dead."

The Firewhisky churned in Draco's stomach. "Why? Why did he kill her?" he asked.

Harry blinked at him. "To prove he was Slytherin's heir," he said, as though it were obvious. The bitter twist of Harry's lips made Draco's stomach knot.

He felt sick.

"Hey!" said Harry, smacking Draco's chest with his hand hard enough to make Draco wince. "I want to show you something."

"What?" asked Draco, feeling Harry's shirt tug out of his fingers as Harry clambered off him.

"Lezgo lezgo," urged Harry, tugging at Draco's hand.

A drunk Harry Potter, is not a strong Harry Potter, and his tugging was ineffectual. "I wanna show you..."

"What?" said Draco.

"A field trip," said Harry evasively, betraying himself utterly with a shifty look.

Draco looked down at their joined hands, and he saw a flash of white across the back of Harry's hands. Curious, he caught Harry's wrist in his hand.

Harry brightened, thinking Draco had agreed. His smile vanished, however, when he saw Draco reading the words on the back of his hand.

"Draco, stop it!"

"I will not tell lies," read Draco, staring at scars. His grip tightened on Harry's wrist as an icy cold burned through him.

"Draco you arse, you're hurting me!"

Draco looked slashingly at Harry, and Harry's face faltered, suddenly unsure.

Pansy had always said he was frightening when he was drunk. Some things are genetic.

"What is this?" he said, his voice soft as he rubbed his thumb over Harry's recognizable scrawl. "Who did this to you?"

Harry licked his lips, his chest rising and falling in sharp hitches, and Draco tightened his grip. "Detentions with Umbridge. Let go."

Draco did, and Harry cradled his arm against his stomach, glaring at Draco. And Draco could tell that he had gone too far. That Harry was angry, and underneath that, a

little frightened.

It had been, perhaps, too much of a reminder to Harry that he was dating a former Death Eater. The Cruciatus Curse, joking about it, hurting Harry, his Dark Mark....

"She was going to use the Cruciatus Curse on me," said Harry, swaying slightly, and when Draco put a hand on his arm to steady him, Harry smiled. "Do you think maybe she was in Slytherin? Not a witch nor wizard who's gone bad hasn't been in Slytherin," said Harry in a sing-songy voice.

Draco tried, and failed, not to flinch.

"Except Wormtail, 'course," continued Harry, slumping against Draco's chest with a breathy giggle. "And me."

"You?" asked Draco, hesitatingly bringing his arms around Harry.

"Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," mumbled Harry. "And I've used two Unforgiveables."

*Harry Potter in Slytherin?*

"You're not a bad wizard, Harry," sighed Draco.

"Okay. Then you're not either," said Harry, sounding very pleased.

Draco snorted.

Harry pinched him harder than a drunk man had any right to, and Draco hissed. He felt Harry's smile curl against his neck.

"There's still more Firewhisky left," said Harry, but he didn't move out from Draco's embrace.

And that was nice. Draco had never held anyone for this long before, not even Pansy. Harry felt better than Pansy did. Harry was prettier too.

"Ron and Hermione will be back soon," continued Harry.

Draco scowled. Hadn't the Weasel moved out?

"Don't call him that," said Harry, pinching Draco's arm. "We could always, ah, just take the

bottle with us ... " he trailed off. Draco hadn't realized he had spoken out loud.

"Where?" asked Draco, blinking.

"Our field trip!" said Harry, sounding exasperated, and he pinched Draco again.

Draco growled in the back of his throat and pinched Harry back.

"You pinched me!" gasped Harry, pulling back from Draco, looking scandalized.

"You've been pinching me all night," said Draco.

"Yes, well, *you* deserved it!" said Harry, his body taught with indignation. "And I'm not pretty!"

"Pretty," drawled Draco, smirking.

Harry sputtered.

"What?" asked Draco, picking up the Firewhisky. "Pretty kitty?" he asked, and he tipped the bottle back, maintaining eye contact with Harry the entire time.

And then, because Gryffindors are illogical creatures, Harry kissed him. Kissed him on his throat, where his pulse fluttered just beneath his skin.

The kiss caught Draco off-guard, and he nearly dropped the Firewhisky, as Harry pressed his entire length against Draco's body.

Just as quick as it happened, Harry danced away, his cheeks red and his smile wide.

"Harry?"

"I wanted to do that before Ron got back," said Harry, his tongue darting out to lick his lips.

Draco felt heat pooling in his chest, and he pulled Harry back toward him. "Weasley can deal," he said before kissing Harry again.

Harry sighed against Draco's mouth, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, and he brought his arms around Draco's neck. He parted his lips to let Draco's tongue inside his mouth, and Draco crushed Harry tighter to him.

Draco let his hand ghost down Harry's back until he got to Harry's arse. There, he ground the



flat of his palm against it, pressing their hips tighter together, and Harry moaned into Draco's mouth.

Harry's hands were already under Draco's shirt, warm and urgent.

"Off," growled Harry, tugging at the shirt. "Give me that," said Harry, gesturing to the Firewhisky still clutched in Draco's hand.

Harry slung it back as Draco pulled his shirt off. "Oh God," breathed Harry struggling with his own shirt.

Impatient, Draco slapped Harry's hands away and tugged Harry's shirt over his arms and head, letting it fall to the floor.

"I—" started Harry, the words getting lost against Draco's mouth.

"Yeah," agreed Draco, not knowing what he meant and not caring. He could feel the cool glass of the Firewhisky brush his back as Harry flung his arm around Draco's neck, still clutching the bottle.

He squeezed Harry's arse again, and Harry's chest hitched. "Oh God," whimpered Harry, his knees buckling.

Draco was struggling to undue Harry's jeans while simultaneously trying push his own pajama bottoms off. A heady rush of arousal was licking up his body, and nothing, nothing had ever felt this good in his life.

"Wait," panted Harry, pulling away, swaying dangerously. "I'm drunk."

"Me too," said Draco, aching.

"M'kay," slurred Harry. But when Draco reached for him, Harry slapped his hand away. "No....I've got a better idea!"

"What? No," said Draco, frowning. "I don't want to stop."

Harry shook his head and nearly fell over. "Come on," he urged, stumbling towards the front of the tent. "Gotta hurry..."

"Why?" asked Draco, slipping his shirt back over his head.

"Because Ron and Hermione will be back!" exclaimed Harry, having trouble with the door handle. "And they'd say no."

"Okay."

Harry finally figured out the handle, and opened the door.

"Wait," said Draco, looking out at the dark sky. "People will see you without a shirt on."

Harry blinked. "Nooo," he said. "They'll be sleeping."

"Oh." Still though, something tugged at Draco's mind. "They'll....see me."

Harry sighed dramatically. "They'll be sleeping," he reminded Draco, looking impatient.

"Oh," said Draco. "Okay."

It felt wonderful to be outside, even though Harry tried to run into the lake and Draco had to tackle him. But even that had been nice because Harry had started kissing him again.

There was a moment of panic when they saw Hagrid's tremendous frame in the moonlight, and Harry had insisted that they "army crawl" until Hagrid was out of sight.

By the time they had reached the castle doors, Harry was only slightly less ridiculous.

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer—" Harry belted at the top of his lungs, and Draco tackled him again.

"Shut up!" he hissed.

Harry blinked at him and nodded.

Draco sighed and helped his boyfriend back to his feet. "Where are we going anyway?" he asked, looking around him.

"A surprise!" whispered Harry loudly, leading the way in haphazard zigzags.

"Harry Potter?"

Harry and Draco whirled around, and they saw a Muggle-born girl staring at them, her eyes huge.

"Y-yes?" stammered Harry, his mouth gaping.

"Who's he?" she asked, pointing at Draco.

Never one to wait to be introduced, Draco said, "Draco Lucius Malfoy." Then he winced. He shouldn't have said that.

"He's a ghost!" blurted Harry.

*What?!*

"What..." began Draco angrily, glaring at Harry.

"Ooh," moaned the girl. "How did you die?"

She asked with such flattering interest that Draco said, "Quidditch accident. Horrible business. Quite tragic. I had a huge funeral."

"He fell from space!" said Harry, getting swept up in the spirit of things.

"*From space?*" the girl and Draco asked at the same time, albeit with vastly different tones.

The girl looked expectantly at Draco.

"Ah...yes. I fell from *space*." He looked pointedly at Harry, willing him to keep his mouth shut.

"But wouldn't you be..." the girl gestured at Draco's body and made a grotesque face.

"I bounced," said Draco.

"Rubber-ducky charm," said Harry breezily. "Very rare. Bounced him right into the lake."

"Ooh," squealed the girl, turning from Harry to Draco with expectant yearning. "Did the Giant Squid eat you?"

"Of course not!" barked Draco, quite disgusted at the thought of being the regurgitated ghostly remains of the Giant Squid's lunch. "I drowned."

"Very tragic," said Harry, bouncing on the balls of his feet and grinning.

"But if you're a ghost," said the The Girl Who Would Not Shut Up, "how come you look so

solid?" She extended a hand towards Draco and stepped forward.

Draco took a prudent step backward.

"And how come you're not floating?" she asked, taking another step.

"New model," said Harry, coming to the rescue with his lovely little lies. "Must run. Ghost convention. Isn't that McGonagall?"

Nothing like terror to sober you up, thought Draco sourly, sprinting after Harry into the girl's bathroom down the hall.

"I thought you said that they were all going to be asleep!" he said angrily to Harry.

Harry shrugged hopelessly, his eyes darting between the sinks and the door.

"And what the hell is a rubber-ducky charm?!"

Harry sniggered. "A bath toy," he mumbled, getting on his knees in front of one of the sinks.

"What are you doing?" asked Draco, watching as Harry squinted very hard at the faucet.

"Shhh," hissed Harry, and then his hiss became somehow more dramatic.

Draco shivered, feeling goosebumps on his arms. His mouth dropped when he saw the sinks slide away to reveal a large hole in the ground, Harry inches from its edge.

"W-what?" began Draco, but Harry cut him off.

"The Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, smiling proudly.

Draco took this all in stride. He thought the Firewhisky helped. "But why did you ... " he trailed off.

Harry smiled and crooked his finger for Draco to come closer. "I wanna show you!" he said, smiling. "It's where I killed the first Horcrux," he said proudly.

"How do you get down?" asked Draco, staring dubiously at the dark hole in the ground.

"You jump," said Harry.

"And how do you get back up?"

Harry blinked, and Draco was happy he had asked. He was glad that he had a higher alcohol tolerance than Harry, otherwise, he suspected that they both would have jumped down the hole without a thought about how to get back.

"Last time Fawkes carried us up," mumbled Harry. He looked curiously at Draco. "Don't you want to see what's down there?"

"What is down there?" asked Draco, wrinkling his nose.

"A dead basilisk," said Harry calmly. "And a huge stone Salazar Slytherin."

Draco was oddly tempted.

Harry was wiggling with impatience. "I can speak more Parseltongue down there," he said winningly.

Draco shrugged. "'kay," he said. It was oddly surreal, agreeing to go down to a monster's lair with his boyfriend in order to spend quality time together.

Harry nodded, and summoned a length of rope, securing one end to the sink on the left, and tossed the rest down ahead of them. Then they jumped.

The drop was long, and Draco wondered if he was going to break all of his bones when he hit the bottom. He didn't, and Harry was waiting for him with the end of his wand lit with a Lumos.

The bones of small animals crunched under Draco's feet, sometimes painfully sticking into his heels. "I need shoes," he said to Harry.

"You can have mine," his boyfriend offered.

Draco glowered. "My own shoes. My own clothes."

His stomach knotted when he noticed an enormous filmy material on the ground. "Harry...is that snake skin?" he asked, his voice rising an octave.

"Yeah," said Harry, not sounding concerned. But Draco wondered if perhaps there wasn't a second basilisk.

They crawled through boulders, and Harry told him how Lockhart had Obliviated himself with

Ron's wand.

But when the huge carcass of the basilisk was illuminated by their wands, Draco reared back, his stomach rolling.

"You killed that?" he demanded of Harry, the ground unsteady under his feet. "Weren't you twelve?!"

Harry nodded, looking at the basilisk as though it were one of Snape's jarred ingredients. "Yeah," he said. "Ginny was right over here; Voldemort was draining the life out of her with his diary ... "

Harry's eyes grew distant, lost in memories.

Draco stared around the rest of the chamber, horrifically transfixed at the sight of Salazar Slytherin's statue. He looked like a monkey. In fact, he greatly resembled the Dark Lord's grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt.

"Harry," he said, his mind starting to form an idea. "Do you think...that maybe the Dark Lord kept another Horcrux down here?"

Harry blinked, looking surprised. "But the diary proved he was Slytherin's heir," he said.

Draco shook his head. "Yeah, but, he was the only person who could get in here—maybe he just kept another one down here."

Harry frowned. "Maybe," he said, but Draco could tell that Harry didn't think he was right.

Undeterred, Draco walked across the chamber towards Salazar Slytherin's statue. He hesitated just before he came to the dark, opened mouth of Slytherin, where the basilisk must have emerged.

"Harry?" he called, and Harry looked up again. "Can you, ah, see if there's any more snakes in here?" He fought to control a rising blush crawling up his throat when he saw Harry's face.

Dammit, he was just taking precautions!

Harry hissed something, and Draco, waited, tensed, for an answering hiss. When none came, he let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. "*Lumos*," he said loudly, urging the glow from his wand to become brighter, throwing light up inside the entrance to Slytherin's mouth.

"Draco!" called Harry sharply, hurrying towards him, his progress halted by his inability to run

in a straight line. "What're you doing?"

"Searching for Horcruxes," said Draco, his grip on his wand tightening.

"You shouldn't go alone," mumbled Harry, and together, they walked inside Slytherin's mouth, wandlight illuminating only feet in front of them.

"I really hope you haven't gone and gotten us killed," said Harry his voice tight.

Draco snorted. "You already killed the basilisk, Harry."

Harry looked surprised. "Oh yeah."

The end of the room came quickly in sight and Draco squinted at something he saw on the wall. A peg?

"Well, nothing here," said Harry. "Wanna go back?"

"Hang on," said Draco, stepping far into the room. "There's something over there."

"Where?" said Harry, extending his wand arm even further. "I don't see anything."

Draco stepped in farther. It wasn't a peg on the wall, something longer...He was within three feet from it when he saw what it was. "A key," he said, surprised.

"Where?" said Harry.

"Here on the wall," said Draco. "Come look."

It was a large, old, heavy gold key hung on a green ribbon from a nail in the wall.

"I don't see anything," complained Harry.

Draco sighed. "It's right here," he said and he reached up to the key and wrapped his fingers around it and vanished.

TBC – *This is the last note from the author dated 10 July 2007 – so it was never finished that I know of - Jevic*

A/N: Long time no see! I had this done a while ago, but never got around to editing and posting. Anyways, here's a new chapter! Feel free to let me know if there are any typos.