

Allegiance and Sedition

Prologue

Rumour had it that the war was not going well.

Harry raked all ten fingers through his hair for about the fifth time that day and pulled off his glasses to rub tired eyes. The memo in front of him - just a scrap dropped off by a generic barn owl belonging to the Order - did nothing but confirm the rumours. Twelve more dead. Thank the gods Ron and Hermione hadn't been on that team. Or Neville or Seamus or Dean or - the list just went on and on.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up. The room was humming with a low-level buzz as the memos were distributed. People were milling about the barracks' main hall, looking for help, looking for food, looking for information, or just a bed. It was difficult to place the source of the voice, but after a moment, Harry's eyes focused on Ginny Weasley. "Ginny," he said slowly, suppressing the urge to grimace at the ragged fatigue in his voice.

She approached, looking wary. "Have you eaten? You look like you could use it."

Caught, Harry squirmed under her scrutiny. "No," he said, not meeting her eyes. "I will."

"Come eat now," Ginny said, sounding as though she were trying very hard *not* to sound like she was trying to persuade him. "You've got to keep up your strength."

Harry held up the scrap. "Have you seen this?"

Ginny winced. "Yeah. I know. Did you know any of them?"

Harry shook his head. "No. But it doesn't change anything. Any day now, it'll be one of us. You know that."

Ginny shifted her weight, the shadows under her eyes deepening a little. "I know," she repeated.

"I'm not hungry."

"It doesn't matter."

Harry sighed heavily. She was not going to give in. "Fine," he said carelessly, and pulled himself to his feet.

Relieved, Ginny turned and led the way to the serving counter. Sliding her eyes sideways toward him, she asked hesitantly, "Have you been sleeping properly?"

"Define 'properly'," Harry said, scowling. "I haven't slept properly since my third year at Hogwarts."

Ginny calculated in her head. "Eleven years," she said quietly. "Has it been worse lately - the nightmares?"

"Oh, I don't really have *those* any more or less than I used to," Harry said, picking up a tray. "It's just that I can't sleep a lot of the time. Don't tell me about Dreamless Sleep. I know. It's just that - well, it gets addictive. I've had to stop using it so much."

Ginny's eyes were full of a pity in which he had no interest. "I'm - "

"Don't say it," Harry warned, his voice suddenly hard. He helped himself to water-logged cauliflower and moved down the line to inspect the main course offerings. They were as unappealing as always, but an over-baked slice of Shepherd's Pie and a hard, tweedy-looking roll somehow ended up on his plate nonetheless. He drank nothing but water and coffee these days, save for the odd trip to the nearest bar to oblivate himself with firewhiskey with Ron, on the odd occasion that they had an evening off together.

Ginny had silently followed him to a table in the adjoining room and sat down across from him at it. Harry forced himself out of his depressed stupor long enough to inquire after her work. Voice sounding a little brittle (Harry cursed himself for having hurt her, there), Ginny told him a little about the curse-breaking she'd been doing with Padma Patil and a few younger Ravenclaws. Everything was cursed these days; it was a lot of work. Harry listened to Ginny explain about the visitors' entrance to the Ministry, to the hexing around St. Mungo's, to the booby-traps all over Diagon Alley even the Muggle streets near it. It sounded every bit as depressing as everyone else's work.

Harry scraped his fork across the crusted edge of the potato layer of the Shepherd's Pie. He hated it even when it was made well, never mind when it was mass produced for what amounted to being an army kitchen, over-baked and left out to die a slow death under the heat lamps. "Do you think your people will ever catch up long enough for anyone to get anything done again?"

He hadn't meant it to come out as a criticism, and luckily Ginny didn't take it as one. She sighed, and Harry noticed how tightly-drawn the skin across her cheekbones seemed to have gotten. "No," she said flatly, honest. She looked up at him, pushing her tray aside

and resting her chin in her hands. "Unless you pull out some kind of miracle for us, Harry, I don't think we can win this war. Not logistically speaking."

Harry nodded slowly, the cement-like feeling returning to his gut - so familiar these days; a weight that simply never lifted. Ginny was still one of the few people who knew about the Prophecy. Thank the gods Dumbledore hadn't told everyone. The inner circle of the Order knew, and no one else. "Let's talk about something else."

"Good plan," Ginny said. "Hang on, I'm getting some coffee. Do you want some?"

"Sure," Harry said listlessly. "Black, please."

She made a face. "You're a brave man, drinking this vile stuff without heavy doctoring. I'll be right back."

She was gone, and the solitude was a temporary respite. Harry stared around the room, not really expecting to see anyone he knew. As far as he was aware, Ron, Hermione, Charlie and Bill were out on an assignment; Neville was on sick leave in St. Mungo's - just temporary spell damage, everyone was saying; he'd be out within the week; the rest of his classmates were randomly scattered throughout the continent. It was hard to keep track. Too much to think about.

Ginny set a cup of coffee in front of him, the soft clunk startling Harry out of his reverie. "Sorry," she said, catching his start of surprise.

"Don't worry. Thanks." Harry picked up the cup and took a sip, ignoring the scalding heat. The heat was the one thing this coffee had going for it; he wasn't about to miss out on it.

"I heard something interesting, actually," Ginny said, blowing on her own coffee and setting it down for a bit before drinking. "I had to stop by Headquarters, and I overheard Snape and Lupin discussing something."

"What?" Harry's interest stirred slightly. It had been a few weeks since he'd been by or heard any significant news.

"The Order has a new spy, apparently," Ginny told him. "I don't know who, but it seems to be very hush-hush. Well, obviously, I guess. They both sounded worried, though. I wonder who it is?"

Harry remained silent, the obvious (to him, at least) choice coming automatically to his mind. He didn't say Malfoy's name, however. He had no proof. It just seemed right. If Malfoy was going to join their side at all - and no one was saying that he had - then it

would have made sense that he become a spy. If he was not going to follow in his father's footsteps, then Harry simply assumed that Malfoy would follow in Snape's. As far as Harry knew, the Slytherin had more or less stayed out of the war thus far. They'd graduated from Hogwarts seven years ago now, and the war had been going on for the past five. Harry hadn't even seen Malfoy since then. Which was hardly something to complain about. "No ideas?" he asked instead.

Ginny shook her head. "I wondered if it might be - well, a Slytherin," she admitted. "Snape seemed personally involved, somehow. I couldn't really hear the whole exchange, though. Should have brought an Extendable Ear."

Harry nodded absently, his original suspicions deepening. Extendable Ears were now widely used on the Order's side of things; Fred and George Weasley were holding up their end of affairs by continually inventing ingenious new things for the Order to try. Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes seemed to be on hold for the duration of the war; the joke-shop had become a laboratory of sorts. The twins and Lee Jordan worked there steadily, occasionally assisted by Arthur Weasley when he had the time.

He drained his coffee. "Gin," he said slowly, "I'm done in. I think I'm going to take your advice and get some rest."

The tension in her face lifted a little. "Okay, good," Ginny said with a hopeful smile. "You still in number eight?"

"As always," Harry said.

"I'm in six. I'll walk with you."

Harry managed to hold up his end of the necessary exchange until getting to the door of the sixth bunkhouse and making his grateful escape. The door of number eight was locked, but opened to his wand.

It was dim inside, but a vague, shadowy figure rose up from one of the beds and crossed the room to him. Harry instinctively drew his wand, but relaxed when the figure grasped both of his arms in a familiar gesture.

"Harry, you fool, put that down. It's me."

Relief. He was being kissed, thumbs digging into his shoulders, and he couldn't help but clutch weakly at Justin's arms. "I'm so glad it's you. When did you get back?"

"Ten minutes ago, mate. I'm beat." Justin released him and backed away, returning to the side of his bed where he'd been unpacking.

"How was the raid?"

"Fine. Couple of injuries, but I don't really want to talk about it. You? When did you get in?"

"Day before yesterday," Harry said. "Waiting on the next assignment." He moved to his own bed and peeled off his jumper. "Anyone else here at the moment?"

Justin glanced up and heat flared briefly in his eyes, just a spark. "No."

Harry smiled for the first time in days. "Good." He pulled off the rest of his clothes and crossed the room. Lifted the blankets on Justin's bed and slid in.

The Muggle-born regarded him for a moment, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and shoved his pack under the bed. "I don't know if I have the energy for anything, Harry."

"I don't care. I'm just tired of sleeping alone." Harry turned on his side, facing the ex-Hufflepuff and waited, closing his eyes.

"There's no telling that anyone else won't be getting in tonight," Justin warned, stepping out of wrinkled trousers.

"I don't give a fuck. Are you coming in or not?"

Justin relented then. "Yeah. In a second."

Harry waited, and was not disappointed. Soon enough, there was another body beside him, warm and dependably *there*. Justin moved over to him in the narrow twin bed and slid his arms around Harry's body. They were not in love, never had been, and it really didn't matter. Harry just wanted someone to be there with him. It kept the dark at bay, just a little, and Justin was used to the nightmares now, anyway. One less thing to explain to a stranger. Harry's hand found the other's firming cock and began to work it into hardness, sighing his gratitude as the gesture was returned. This was all he wanted, just someone to get him off and then hold him afterward until he managed to fall asleep. He panted into Justin's warm, salty skin, his mouth, lips and tongue trailing over his face and mouth and neck until the release caught up with him and overtook him. Harry could have fallen asleep then, not caring a mite for the stickiness drying between them, but Justin was a bit more fastidious and always took care of these things. The sheets, their hands and skin were spelled clean, and Harry let his weight relax against the other, his breath already slowing into a slow, regular pattern.

Part of him worried that Ron would show up and be horrified, but as he was almost

certain that his best friend's assignment would last into next week, it wasn't a major concern. Anyone else, he could handle.

Judging from the sound of Justin's soft, untroubled breathing, he, too was falling asleep. Harry closed his eyes and shut off his brain. Just for a little while.

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In the darkness of his room in Malfoy Manor, Draco Malfoy woke with a start.

His wrist shot out automatically for his wand, but a sinewy hand clamped down around it before his fingers touched the familiar wood, without which Draco felt utterly stripped of power - but almost at once, he knew the shadowed figure looming before his sleep-fogged eyes.

"Quiet," Lucius hissed, the word soft, menacing, and full of warning. "Not a word. Get up."

Draco's heartbeat thudded in his chest. This was it. At last. He ducked his chin in a quick nod of obedience and sat up. "Can I - " he cleared his throat - "can I bring my wand?"

"Of course. You will need it. You know this. Come, Draco. Time is short." Lucius' tone was impassive. He would not, of course, be one to allow for the disorientation of being woken in the small hours of the night. Disorientation, even the concept, would be seen as an indulgence. Of weakness. Draco roused himself and stood, fingers finally closing around his wand.

"Get dressed." Lucius walked to the door. "You have five minutes. Look your best. This is an important night."

Another nod. Yes, an important night indeed. Draco wasted no time, and pushed down a flight of nervous butterflies attempting to explode within his gut. He dressed quickly. All black, naturally; what else could be more appropriate? In a sense, he was dressing for his own funeral. Draco hesitated slightly before choosing a shirt. He selected one with long sleeves and avoided looking at his still-bare left forearm.

Fastening the clasp of his cloak, Draco cast a quick look over his room and wondered if he would see it again. His eyes fell on a small, pewter plaque that stood on his dresser. It read *Trust No One*, and had been a sixteenth birthday present from his father. *Well, Father, I took your advice on that one. I trust no one. Including you.*

Another similar plaque read *To Be Slytherin is To Be Malfoy*. Slytherin. Underhanded.

Yes. Draco took nothing with him as he departed, yet closed the door very carefully behind him. Lucius was waiting.

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The hall was cavernously dark, and Draco felt no fear. He had thought long and hard about this decision. He knew what he was getting into. It was the final perfection of his father's training; to willingly accept being Marked by their Master, at last graduating into the ranks of those faithful few still willing to preserve the purity of their kind. Death Eater. Draco wondered briefly whether or not the most faithful Death Eaters were granted that sort of immortality which the Dark Lord himself had claimed.

Lucius' hand guided him a little more firmly than strictly necessary, but Draco knew better than to complain.

The hall was lined with silent, hooded figures, all watching this little procession. Glad of his not-inconsiderable height, Draco carried himself erectly and reminded himself of who he was. And whose. Lucius preserved a proud but dignified silence behind him. Draco could see two pinpoints of glowing red at the far end of the hall, and focused on them, willing himself not to shiver. A hissing as of snakes rose through the air like smoke and made his skin crawl, but Draco refused to be stirred by it. It was only Parseltongue, and even that pathetic sod Potter could speak it. It was nothing to fear. He approached steadily, ignoring the pinioning stares from all sides.

The hissing grew as he drew near, and the Dark Lord held up a hand once Draco was approximately ten meters away. "Luciuss," he said, the voice cold and high and very sibilant, "let him go. I wish him to approach me freely."

"My Lord," Lucius said, with a slight bow. He stepped away from Draco, all but melting into the shadows to Draco's right, and said, "he is indeed here of his own free will, I assure you."

"I will be the judge of that," returned the other. The eyes fixated on Draco, pulsating slowly. "Well, Master Malfoy. Approach me then, if you dare."

Remembering Lucius' coaching, Draco took six unwavering steps forward and dropped to his knees. Silently, he drew his wand and offered it. The Dark Lord's twisted, horrifying face contorted with - amusement? - and he took the wand from Draco's hands. "Do you offer me your service by this gesture?"

"I do," Draco said clearly. And did not shiver.

"How is it that you wish to serve me?"

"In any way that you command, my Lord," Draco said, giving the formal answer, his head bowed.

"Excellent. I accept your bounden service, Master Malfoy. Swear me this oath: That you would willingly follow me, no matter how strange the command, nor how unwilling your spirit; that you would willingly renounce all impurity of blood and those traitors thereof; that you would willingly forsake any and all allegiances for the sake of your loyalty to me alone; that you would willingly forego any personal desire, need or request should it fail to align with my will; that you would die before breaking your present avowal. Swear."

Draco held the glowing gaze steadily. "I swear it." Wondered what would happen if the oath was broken. Was it a blood oath, a magical oath, or something different? Or merely a spoken formality?

To his surprise, it turned out to be the latter. Draco filed this fact away for future reference.

"Extend your left arm to me," the Dark Lord commanded. Draco obeyed, pushing up his sleeve. He closed his eyes as bone-white fingers pressed into his skin, combined with the tip of a blazing-hot wand - not his own, he hoped - and felt the etching of the wand tip as though on his very heart, piercing his flesh and Marking him down to the soul. Pain flared through his chest and Draco felt himself gasping for air - as though his heart and lungs were now bound up in the ugly contortion of the figure being burnt into his flesh.

The Dark Lord stood and towered over him. Draco was released and sank onto his heels, clenching his arm with his other hand. The Mark pulsed against his palm, burning with heat. "Get up." It was nothing more than a hiss.

Draco staggered to his feet. The Dark Lord seized Draco's wrist, took his wand and ran the tip of it lightly over the Mark. It glowed red for a moment - not the red of those soulless eyes, but rather a darker, uglier shade - Draco's own blood, he realized after a moment. "Good," the Dark Lord said, apparently satisfied, a slight sneer in his voice. "Take your wand, Malfoy. Join your father and never falter from this moment."

"I will not, my Lord," Draco vowed, only now becoming aware of the sheen of cold sweat on his forehead and felt Lucius' hand on his shoulder, drawing him back. More would come later, he knew, but for now it was done.

He wondered if feeling devoutly relieved constituted as treason in this case.

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The thing was, Harry lazily reflected on a Sunday afternoon, his back against Justin's hard chest, that their side really shouldn't be as outnumbered as it was. However, the facts had it otherwise. The enemy apparently had more balls than their side did. Most of decent wizarding society had gone into hiding, aided and abetted by the Ministry. Those who were actually willing to defend anyone and anything were being picked off one by one. The Death Eaters were everywhere, and it was impossible to trust anyone these days. Anyone could be a spy - and anyone often was, seemingly.

Justin was snoring lightly. Harry had locked the door so many times as to be ridiculous, but he could not fall back asleep. He was to return to Headquarters on Tuesday, likely missing Ron in the process - he was due back Tuesday night or Wednesday, depending on any number of factors - and was using his spare time to try to relax a little. Especially since Justin was here.

Justin Finch-Fletchley. Not his number-one pick, but who knew who that might be? Certainly not Harry. What he did know was that the ex-Hufflepuff was a better-than-average lay, easy-going and just as happy as Harry to remain completely uncommitted and open-ended. When they were together, it was what it was. When they were apart, Harry rarely thought of him. Even the cuddling was somewhat perfunctory. Fond, but not passionate. And that was just fine, actually. Harry was in no mood for passion these days. It was all he could do to keep the apathy at bay.

Suddenly, he couldn't take the stifling warmth of Justin's bed any more, and pushed himself out of it. Justin didn't even stir. Harry headed to the shower and had a long one, rinsing every part of himself and wishing he cared enough to wank. He didn't. Some days, he even felt that his sexuality had died along with his personality and general enthusiasm for anything when the war had broken out. Five years was too long to keep caring.

Harry towelled his hair dry and got dressed quietly. Justin's snores had deepened. Harry went outside and sat down with the mostly-blank diary Hermione had given him the year before in an effort to get him to express his feelings a little more. "In *some* form, Harry," she had said, pleading with him to take it. Harry had shrugged and accepted it, even written in it a few times, but it generally seemed a pointless exercise.

Now, he sat down at a picnic table under a sulking, grey sky and attempted to gather his thoughts.

12. May.

War still on. Nothing improving. Haven't seen Ron in nearly two weeks. Justin here at the moment. Don't know when he leaves yet. I leave on Tuesday for HQ. Ginny said there might be a new spy. Wonder if it's who I think it is. Probably not - git wouldn't know

enough to come in out of the rain, never mind join the right side of a war. Wonder where he's been since Hogwarts. I miss playing Quidditch. Wonder if my Firebolt's still at Grimmauld Place? At least I'll see Remus on Tuesday. Maybe Dumbledore will be there.

Harry stared at the lifeless entry and, after a moment, decided to abandon it. He returned to the stuffy little room and tossed it in amongst his things. Justin was still sleeping, and that was fine. It was sometimes better if they talked less. Harry decided to go to the main hall and find something halfway edible to eat.

Perhaps someone he knew would be there. Perhaps someone who would be able to tell him something that would make him feel differently, like this stone on his chest wasn't sinking a little deeper every day. Like he'd be able to feel hope again someday. Harry shook his head at himself. Foolish notions. He pushed open the doors to the hall and went inside.

Chapter Two

Draco pulled off the mask even as he took his first, dizzy step out of the Floo. Damned thing was hot; his face shone with grime - a mixture of condensation beneath the mask and his own sweat. Delightful, really. The Manor was as still as a grave. Draco went upstairs.

His room appeared the same. Somehow smaller, perhaps. But otherwise unchanged. Draco tossed the mask down onto his bed and pulled off the grimy robes. Best not to even think about what had brought them to that state. It was something of a price to pay to keep his father happy, but if that was what it took -

Draco crossed to the stone basin in the corner of his room and splashed water on his face, glancing at himself in the mirror above. It was almost a surprise to see that he didn't look any different. Of course, it had only been - five days? Six? Draco paused, hands on his face, meeting his own eyes in the mirror as he concentrated. Six. Six days since he'd last been here. Draco shut off the water with a wave of his hand and turned away from the mirror. A glance at the clock showed that he had little time. He stripped off his clothes and changed into something clean and fairly nondescript. Nice, naturally, but otherwise designed to be unnoticeable. Fingers combed quickly through his hair, tucked it behind his ears, and he was ready to go. The Mark pulsed gently beneath his light-blue button-up. Draco strove to ignore it. The robe was hung with particular care, the mask *scourgified* and hung over it at the back of his wardrobe - its state, he knew, would be checked - and Draco left. He had his wand. Nothing more was needed.

The Apparating Chamber in Malfoy Manor was adjoined to the Floo Foyer and automatically tracked every Apparition. Draco Apparated to Diagon Alley, and from there to his destination.

Twelve Grimmauld Place was crumbling before his very eyes, but did not quite collapse upon itself when Severus Snape answered the door.

* * *

Snape refilled Draco's cup and regarded him darkly, the lines around his mouth deep with disapproval. "I understand the need to keep your father satisfied, Malfoy. What I fail to understand is why you would willingly allow yourself to be Marked."

The Mark, which had already been examined and sneered at by the older man gave another quiet throb. Draco pulled his cup toward himself defensively. "It was... necessary. He would have *Imperio*-ed me into doing it, regardless."

Snape sighed again; he'd been doing a lot of that. Draco added quietly, "I told you it was

more than likely going to happen when we last spoke."

"You did not tell me that you were going to choose it," Snape said, his tone harsh.

"What difference does it make?" Draco shrugged, trying to mask his tension.

That earned him a glare. "It makes all the difference in the world!" Snape snapped. "Your loyalties are in serious question here, Malfoy. I was the only member of the Order willing to take you on - even Dumbledore is suspicious of your true motives."

For a moment, Draco was silent, his thoughts swirling madly in his head. His true motives. Better not to even broach the subject. "I am here," he countered quietly. "My father isn't. Isn't that enough?"

"I will be the judge of what is or is not enough of you, Malfoy," Snape said. His mouth twisted, and Draco's stomach twisted in reciprocation. He'd disappointed Snape, he realized, and the thought was not a pleasant one.

"So," he said coolly, trying to speak over his awkwardness, "what is my first assignment?"

Snape gave him a long, scrutinizing look. "I have not yet decided whether or not to grant you an assignment," he returned. He nodded, a sharp jerk of the chin, toward Draco's covered forearm. "Surely you realize that *that* makes you something of a security risk."

Draco opened his right hand and showed him the curl of parchment bearing Dumbledore's elegantly-scrawled address for the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters. "Surely *this* makes me something of a security risk to the other side, too," he threw back. Damn it, he'd known Snape would be an obstacle - and Snape was his entire link to this side of the war - but this was getting into waters Draco did not wish to explore at the moment.

If ever. Snape's glare did not lessen in the slightest. "Malfoy," he said through gritted teeth, "without my directly supervising your activities amongst the Death Eaters, how do you expect anyone to be able to trust you?"

His ire rising, Draco felt his lips thin. "Funny, I thought my word might mean something to you," he said coldly, his eyebrows nearing his aristocratic hairline.

Snape's fist banged down on the wooden table top, startling him. "Damn it, Malfoy!" he hissed, eyes shooting daggers across the divide. "Your word means nothing now! I *know* what it means to become a Death Eater, you foolish boy! Did you think I had forgotten? I alone know what you have sworn - and of your free will, too! What *word* can

you give me that can counter that? Am I merely to trust another promise or oath which could easily be as empty as your Dark Oath - if indeed that was empty? You have not told me that it was. I have no choice but to distrust you."

Draco's heart was pounding in his chest, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. His eyes were locked to Snape's, and he was half-afraid that his former Head of House was reading his soul directly. He blinked and dragged his gaze away. "What can I say?" he asked, almost rhetorically, tasting ash in his mouth. "What would you even believe?"

Snape sighed again and let his bony shoulders drop. He took a sip of what must be stone-cold tea and surveyed Draco calmly, apparently thinking. "Give me something, Malfoy," he said after a moment. "Some information. Anything."

"What would you like to know?" Draco picked up his teacup and noticed that his hand was shaking. He set it carefully back down again without drinking.

"Where have you been since Hogwarts? How about that, for a start?" Snape's face and tone were sardonic, but Draco heard the concern beneath it, and it was the concern that moved him to answer. After all, they had spent a fair amount of time together after they'd fled the castle at the end of his sixth year. After Dumbledore had died. Luckily, the truth had been discovered by all the pertinent parties and they had both returned to Hogwarts in the fall. Draco to his House, where he became something of a recluse, and Snape back to his post as Potions master, as Slughorn had gone.

Draco's guilt over Dumbledore's death had been considerable, but he had been quite relieved when Dumbledore had found a way to negotiate his own death, using a ghost form on the occasions when he needed to communicate. He wasn't a proper ghost, but then, Dumbledore never had played by the traditional rules. He appeared as a ghost, but it was not merely an imprint of his soul; when Dumbledore's ghost appeared, those who saw him experienced his full range of knowledge, personality and wit. Otherwise, he said, he had more freedom - fewer restrictions. Where, precisely, he went when he wasn't with the Order was something of a mystery. All anyone knew was that he was constantly working on the war, and finding the last Horcrux remaining - the one located in Voldemort himself.

Draco took another careful breath and brought his thoughts back to the question at hand. "At the Manor," Draco said simply. "With my father. Where else?"

"For seven *years*? Surely you jest." Snape was clearly disbelieving.

Draco shrugged. "No. I was there. I did a lot of research for my father. I accompanied him on a few trips out of the country. I taught myself a few other languages. I saw some

of my old friends from Slytherin, at least before the war broke out. Crabbe and Goyle both became Death Eaters, you know. I saw them both this past week. I think Zabini's hiding with his relatives in Sicily. Not much else, really. I was obviously being watched. As soon as my father knew the war was about to break out, he kept a rather close eye on me. All of my communications have been monitored, to my knowledge. I don't know. Where else was I to go?"

Snape's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why did it take you so long to contact me?"

Draco shifted his weight. "It wasn't an easy decision to make," he said uncomfortably.

"What prompted it, then?"

The edges of panic were stirring. This was forbidden territory. Draco looked up suddenly. "I really don't want to talk about this," he said, very clearly. "It's rather personal. Sir. Is it not enough for me to have told you that I would like to take the path you've chosen?"

The regard was stern. "Malfoy - if this is some misplaced - I don't know what - "

Draco felt his cheeks warm. "Nothing like that, sir," he said quickly, embarrassed.

Snape was clearly wrong-footed here, too. "Good," he said, his tone clipped. "Then I suppose the only remaining question is whether you are actually taking the same path or not."

Those eyes were disconcerting. Draco could not meet them. "I... hope I am," he said, his mouth suddenly dry.

The moment stretched out as Snape considered, his gaze nearly boring through Draco's skull. It was nearly ten full minutes of silence before Snape spoke again. The tone was slow, every syllable precise and very deliberate.

"Very well. I am going to trust you. Do not fail me, Malfoy."

Draco looked up quickly, his heartbeat quickening again. "I won't. Sir."

* * *

Harry unwittingly sat in the same place later that same day. "Remus, have you seen this?"

Lupin half-turned to him from the kitchen counter, where he was pouring water from a

steaming kettle into a teapot. "The memo about the raids? Yes, of course."

"Do you know why I wasn't sent?" Harry was still bothered by it; if Ron had been assigned, then why couldn't he have gone, too?

Lupin brought the teapot over and set it between them, his expression carefully neutral. "No, I don't, Harry. I assume that Dumbledore and company merely have something else in mind for you at the moment."

"I hate it that they keep sending Ron into situations like that!" Harry said violently. "He *always* gets the most dangerous things. Are they *trying* to get him killed?"

Lupin's expression was pained. "Better for someone you don't know to die?"

Harry stared at him and refused to feel chastised. "No! Of course not. I just wish - "

"I *know*, Harry. It's not easy for anyone."

Easy for you to say, Harry thought sourly, *when you've already lost the one person who really meant anything to you*. He sighed and didn't voice the nasty thought. Lupin's gentle face was already lined with pain and Harry didn't really want to add to it; it always just ended up that Lupin was the one he ended up shouting at much of the time. Possibly because he would take it and no one else would. Harry felt a twinge of guilt. "Fine. I know that."

"I understand how you must feel." Lupin checked the tea, replaced the lid to let it continue steeping. "How are the barracks these days?"

"Bleak," Harry said flatly. "I usually hardly even know anyone there. No one does, really. The army is so big, and with everyone being scattered off on assignment all the time, it's hard to get to know anyone."

"Not that you've tried," Lupin remarked dryly.

"True," Harry conceded, not caring. "Hey. I saw Ginny Weasley last week. She told me that she'd heard there might be a new spy."

Lupin glanced up sharply. "What made her say that?"

"She overheard something between you and Snape here," Harry said bluntly. "So don't lie to me and pretend you know nothing about it. Give it to me. Is there or isn't there?"

"Harry, you know I can't go telling you things like this. Not with security as poor as it's

been lately, in places." Lupin's face was remonstrative.

Harry bit back a retort, his anger provoked. "No, but you can apparently talk about it in full hearing of innocents like Ginny passing by? Tell us another one, Remus. Gods."

Lupin stood abruptly and strode over to the refrigerator. "I thought Molly brought some pastries by," he said, his voice muffled with his back turned to Harry, though Harry could still hear the hurt in his voice. He was bent over, riffling through the shelves, and another prickle of guilt made its way past Harry's barriers.

"Remus - I - "

Lupin stood and whirled around, holding a large, rectangular plastic container of some sort. His face was rather red. "I've always been honest with you, Harry," he said, rather more loudly than he usually spoke. "I've never been one to hide things from you. But sometimes I am not at liberty to share what little information I myself possess with you or with anyone else. I apologize."

"No - Remus, I'm - it's my fault. I shouldn't have asked," Harry said, feeling thoroughly terrible now. "I'm sorry. I... I shouldn't have said anything."

Lupin's face was still rather red, though the colour was receding now. "I know how you must feel," he said again. "But I sometimes resent being picked like a lock. I may be a simple man, but even I am not that simple."

"I never meant to imply that you were," Harry said softly, his guilt swamping him. Of all people to go hurting, why had he had to choose Remus?

Lupin was quiet for a moment longer, then closed the fridge door and came back to the table. "Treacle tarts," he said, peeling back the lid. "Help yourself. Molly made them; they're safe."

Harry watched his own hand shake as he reached into the bin. "Thanks," he said awkwardly.

Lupin sat down and took a tart himself. They ate in silence for a moment. Harry reached for another, and Lupin said quietly, "There *is* a new spy. Information is very tight around him. I could not possibly tell you who it is. As it stands, only Dumbledore, Snape and I know at this point."

"Would you tell me if I guessed?" Harry asked slowly, not wanting to push too hard.

Lupin hesitated. "I - I don't know. Who is your guess?"

"Malfoy," Harry said, watching Lupin's face. There it was, the telltale flicker. The air froze between them. "It's okay," Harry said, after a pause. "Don't tell me, then."

Lupin's eyes dropped to the row of tarts in front of him and he nodded, not saying a word.

After a bit, the wards crackled and McGonagall descended to the basement kitchen shortly thereafter. The mood was broken, and Harry was honestly slightly relieved.

* * *

Harry had had no idea whether Remus had spoken to Dumbledore or something, but when he'd been sent as back-up to the raid site, he hadn't asked or complained. He'd just gone. Ron had been slightly injured and was now in the Infirmary back at the barracks. Harry pushed open the door to the eighth bunkhouse and looked around. It was empty, but Justin's things were there. Well. This was going to be interesting, once Ron got out of the Infirmary. Harry put Ron's extra things down on the adjacent bed to his own and briefly wondered why, in the whole order of things, his bed was next to his best friend's rather than to the man with whom he slept on a semi-regular basis.

As he was contemplating this, the door opened again behind him. Harry turned quickly, but it was only Justin. "Hi," he said with a slight smile.

Justin's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Harry! I didn't know you'd be here."

"Just got in. You?"

"Yesterday. Leaving tomorrow morning."

Harry grimaced. "Ron's here," he said.

"Infirmary?" Justin asked, noting the telltale absence of possessions on Ron's bed. All the essentials were obviously in the Infirmary.

Harry nodded. "Of course. Anyone else here that I should know about?"

"Just me." Justin took a step closer and Harry found himself being kissed. He allowed it, and wondered once again what he was doing with Justin. He was positive that it meant as little to the other as it did to him, but - Justin drew back. "Hey. Something wrong?"

"No, I'm just tired," Harry said. Hufflepuff or not, Justin was quite fit. Dark hair falling

partway over his face, and an easy-going manner that his somewhat rarified upbringing had neglected to curtail. Eton-bound or not, Justin had always been likeable, genial, kind. There was no reason not to be engaging in this little dalliance with him. And, being as Muggle-born as they came, he was pretty damned trustworthy, as far as trust was involved. Which it wasn't, really. Harry had no idea whether the Prophecy actually had the power (or implication?) that he would not die before meeting Voldemort face-to-face, but he was willing to take his chances. Life was short. And sex, for a closet case in a boarding school, had been a rare enough thing.

"Tired?" Justin repeated, the word weighted with question.

Harry gave him a half-grin. "Not *too* tired," he amended.

He was rewarded with a lazy smile. "Good, then," Justin commented. "I was going to see if you were - "

"I am," Harry cut him off, his fatigue seeming to slide away as his nether regions grew interested in the conversation. Hell, he was twenty-four. In his prime, or thereabouts. Opportunities were few and far between. "What did you have in mind?"

* * *

Later, Harry had slipped out of his bed where Justin had left him dozing, and wandered the barracks grounds for a bit. The scenery left much to be desired; scrubby little bushes and stunted twigs of trees made up the bulk of the grounds, dotted with the occasional older tree. The ground itself alternated between gravel paths and dusty grass, but it was better than nothing. The wards would ensure that nothing got in or out that wasn't supposed to. His thoughts wandered back to Grimmauld Place before the raid, his last conversation with Lupin.

"Don't say anything," Harry had said, "but I just can't help wondering about Malfoy. I mean, I'm sure there are problems with him working for our side that I haven't even thought of. But where has he been since school? Somehow, I thought he would have either gone undercover for the other side or left the country."

Lupin had cast him a curious look over the top of his book - they'd been sitting in one of the drawing rooms, a fire kindled against the damp - and merely asked, "Why are those the only two options?"

Harry had thought about it, then given a short laugh. "Come on, Malfoy actually get his hands dirty and *fight*? I don't picture it, frankly. War seems a little plebeian for the likes of him. And I heard that Narcissa had left. You would think she'd take her son."

Lupin had remained silent for many minutes. Harry'd assumed that he'd gone back to reading and wasn't going to answer when after a bit, Lupin just said, "His hands are dirtier than you probably realize, Harry."

He hadn't looked up from his book or moved in the slightest. The atmosphere between them had suddenly thickened again, and Harry, well aware that Lupin could mean several things by his statement, knew better than to continue this line of conversation. He'd nodded, not knowing whether or not Lupin could even see it, and returned to his own reading.

Now, he strode around the grounds, hands shoved deep into the pockets of the robes he generally wore over Muggle clothing, lost in thought. Seven years was a long time in which to have lost track of a person. Further reflection made Harry wonder why he hadn't thought it odder that no one had ever passed on news of Malfoy. Possibly because the Slytherin just hadn't really mattered to anyone. None of Harry's friends had been friends with the git, for obvious reasons, and it was simply assumed that alliances would not be necessary. Graduation had been a relief in many senses, but one of them had definitely been that Harry no longer needed to endure Malfoy's existence in general.

Who knew what to think of this, then? Snape presumably had his reasons. Like the man or not, Harry had been forced to grudgingly give up the old feud when respect for the other had pushed his animosity aside. No matter what the reasons behind it all, it had taken Harry a lot of time to forgive Snape for Dumbledore's death. The memory of that horrifying scene would be etched into his memory permanently. However, the time had come for Harry to put it all aside in favour of his working relationship with Snape. Before Dumbledore had found a way to communicate with them again, he'd needed Snape's help rather badly. Still did, at times, in fact. Snape was in turn less unpleasant to Harry, and though it was still best that they not work together more than strictly necessary, Harry had come to respect the man's opinions and decisions. They had known each other for thirteen years now. It seemed a little pointless in light of the war to go carrying on a feud like that. Besides, it was exhausting.

Malfoy had kept up the game right until the end, however. Few of their interactions had passed without Harry wanting to beat the Slytherin to a bloody pulp, a desire which would have been happily indulged by Ron, had Harry allowed it. No, it was a mystery. Harry could not understand it, but he didn't like it. He didn't trust Malfoy; saw no reason why he should. And until it came up, *if* it did, he couldn't go asking Snape about it, either. Well. Perhaps the fates would be kind and not require Harry to have any contact with the pointy-faced git.

He checked the time. He'd promised to wake Ron in time for dinner, such as it was, and it was time. Harry turned and headed briskly off in the direction of the Infirmary.

* * *

Draco sat down heavily in the plain, unadorned room. He calculated that he would have until the next morning before he should really return to the Manor to report. Lucius would be waiting. The official story was that Draco was in the Leaky Cauldron and area, listening for any signs of the enemy's movement.

Draco pulled off his cloak and sat down on the bed - the only piece of furniture in the bland chamber, provided by the Ministry through the Order. What were they actually called, anyway - rooms for spies? Guest rooms? What? It was a mystery.

The enemy. It was both sides and it was neither side. It had taken a very long time to come to this conclusion, but in the end, Draco had managed to reduce the argument to all of two factors: his father, and Severus Snape.

On the one hand, Lucius was the obvious choice. He was Draco's father, after all. Narcissa had fled Wiltshire and England altogether just before the war had broken out five years ago. There had been no contact since, and Draco was left alone with Lucius. His own friends from Slytherin House had disappeared in equally enigmatic manners. The rumours about the Zabini family moving back to Sicily were apparently true. Crabbe and Goyle had turned up at his Mark initiation, but he'd not heard from them before that, nor had they spoken at the time. Nott was simply gone, as was Pansy Parkinson and the other girls from their year. He'd once heard an unsubstantiated rumour about Daphne Greengrass, but it hadn't been anything significant and Draco had forgotten it now.

Lucius had taken a much keener interest in Draco's life and general activities since his graduation from Hogwarts, and this intensified once Narcissa had gone. They had spent long evenings together in the Manor's library, sometimes talking, occasionally reading. Lucius had often brought the conversation gently around to the beliefs of their "kind", as he always put it, and Draco had always engaged him in the discussions without question. There was really no need to question. He had believed it throughout his youth, and now it was a moot point, anyway. The question was which person to follow, not whose moral code.

In addition to this, life was considerably less complicated when one could simply do what was dictated by one's father. Lucius had been fairly specific all along: when he felt that Draco was ready, the Mark would be taken. Draco had never protested; never seen any need to. And still didn't, to a large extent. He understood who he was and what was expected of him. Lucius had made it clear that his duties would be largely academic; no assignments like those of his sixth year were likely to be given.

The troubling factor had always been Snape.

Raised to keep his mouth closed when his opinion had not been requested, Draco had deduced for himself Snape's role in the war. The man had always been something of a mystery. Lucius mentioned him only very rarely, which was odd in and of itself. Draco knew that Snape had once been a Death Eater - when he'd been much younger - pre-Hogwarts - he'd come across a small collection of photographs of his father and many of his colleagues. Snape had been in the very background of one of them, toward the beginning when Lucius was still young. Only in previous years had traces of silver crept into the blond, streaking it so subtly as to only be visible in strong light. In the remembered photograph, however, Draco recalled that Snape had not been one of the intended subjects of the picture; he was merely someone who happened to be moving about in the background, walking repeatedly toward a low, unmarked building.

Draco had looked for the album later, perhaps during his first Christmas home from Hogwarts, the only time he'd actually gone home for Christmas. His young mind had remembered Snape from the photograph upon their first meeting at Hogwarts, but had never found the collection again. Snape, instantly memorable, looked nearly the same, Draco recalled, much as his father did. Only older. Draco had fallen into nearly instant awe of his Head of House, assuming him to be a friend of his father's, and set about trying to win the Potions master's respect.

Older, he'd realized that the significant absence of any further references, pictorial or verbal, to Snape's role as a colleague of his father's and servant of the Dark Lord's, combined with the fact that Snape taught at *Hogwart's*, the very domain of Albus Dumbledore, told Draco about as much as he needed to know. He'd once tried to ask Snape about it and gotten a very abstruse response. Only after the whole sorry affair of Dumbledore's death had Draco begun to think long and hard about Snape and what his current role on the *other* side of affairs could be. It wasn't difficult to guess, really.

Added to a few other, more personal facts, the bottom line was that Draco didn't want to disappoint either of them. He realized that it was something of an irreconcilable goal. He also realized that his gamble could result in disappointing both of them. Or - if he played his cards right - he could succeed in satisfying them both. What Draco wanted to avoid, more than anything else, was having to choose between his father and his Head of House. If he could possibly help it, he never would.

* * *

"This," Ron pronounced, holding up a large chunk of what appeared to be broccoli to the light, "is absolutely revolting. How do they expect people to *eat* shit like this?"

Harry studied it, grimacing; he had a mouthful of the stuff at the moment. The floret, cooked into limp submission, drooped over both sides of Ron's fork. It had a slightly

brownish look, and had been wilted in a heavy oil of some sort. Three-day-old fryer oil was Ron's guess, but Harry wasn't sure, himself. "It tastes like grass," he said around the chunk of half-chewed weed in his mouth. He picked up his glass of water and downed about half of it.

Ron was still staring abjectly at his broccoli.

"For gods' sake, don't eat it," Harry said sharply, suddenly annoyed. "Just put it down!"

Ron laid down both the fork and the broccoli and surveyed the rest of his plate. "I miss Hogwarts," he said gloomily.

"Well, you can't miss what's currently bombarded with Dark spells," Harry quipped cynically. "Can't you get your mother to send you something?"

"Us," Ron corrected, sounding a trifle hurt. "She always sends you stuff, too."

"True." Harry stood. "I'm getting coffee. Want some?"

"Sure. Four sugars, mate."

Harry made a face and wandered off toward the coffee counter. A younger bloke was there, a Hufflepuff from two years before his at Hogwarts, he thought. He couldn't be bothered to offer a smile; just waited his turn with a slight air of impatience. The younger man looked up at him quickly, waiting for his cup to fill before releasing the spigot. "Harry Potter?" the former Hufflepuff said tentatively.

Harry suppressed a sigh and forced a very slight smile. "The one and only," he said tersely. "Excuse me."

"Oh! Of course!" The other moved quickly aside and passed Harry a cup.

"Thanks," Harry said curtly. He glanced at the other. "What's your name again? Alex?"

He got a quick nod and smile. "Yes - Alex Smith. Zacharias' brother."

"Ah." Harry recognized him then. He had Zacharias' pale-blond hair, but apparently not his odious nature. Which was a devout relief. "Coffee's terrible," Harry said. It was the best he could do.

Smith nodded again, eagerly. "Yeah - it sure is! I need about ten sugars just to make it drinkable."

Harry just nodded and poured a second cup of coffee for Ron, adding all the requisite sugar. Smith was about to comment, looking happy, but Harry cut him off. "This is for my friend. I take it black."

Smith looked distinctly disappointed, yet somehow impressed at the same time. "Oh, right. Uh - "

Harry gave the former Hufflepuff another covert look. He was attractive. Smallish - short, and with a slender build. Pleasant face. Apparently infatuated with him. Harry considered it for all of about four seconds. "Nice to see you again," he said instead, cutting the other off. "Take care." He picked up both cups and turned back toward his table.

Setting the cups down, he caught Ron's eye. "Don't even suggest it."

Ron grinned. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"Liar."

"Clear case of hero-worship there. You could have - "

"No, I couldn't have," Harry said acidly. "I don't have any interest in stripping young blonds of their innocence."

"Liar," Ron returned, grinning cheerfully.

Harry shot him a dirty look, but had to concede the point. "Well, not *that* one," he amended. He didn't know why he hadn't told Ron about Justin, but he just hadn't and he wasn't going to.

"You do have a thing for blonds, though," Ron pointed out.

Harry thought of Justin's dark, wavy hair and preserved a dignified silence on that point. "You'd love him," he said instead, sardonically. "He takes about ten sugars in his coffee, according to himself."

Ron made a face. "Isn't he Zacharias Smith's little brother? Besides, he's not exactly my type."

"Point," Harry said. "Is anyone besides Hermione really 'your type'?"

"Shut it," Ron said, colouring as he always did. "Hey. You free tonight?"

Harry thought. Well, Justin was there, but - if Ron was, too - "Sort of," he said cautiously. "What did you have in mind?"

"Just the usual," Ron said. "Quick trip for a pint or two?"

Harry weighed his options, then looked his best mate in the eye and couldn't say no. Even he knew enough to recognize that Ron's presence seemed to keep him from sinking right to rock-bottom, as far as his moods went. It was good for him. And besides, he didn't see Ron all that often. With the way things were going, who knew how many more opportunities they'd have? "Sure. Just - give me some alone time before we go, okay? I'm just - tired, I guess." He felt badly about lying to Ron, but not badly enough that he wouldn't probably do it again.

"Sure," Ron said easily. "All of my stuff is still in the Infirmary, anyway. I'll hang out there until you're ready to go. I need to get a last dosage, anyway."

"Can you drink with that? Should you even be going out yet? I thought they wanted you to stay the night." Harry cast him a suspicious look.

"I do it all the time," Ron said airily. "I don't fancy staying that long. If I can leave for meals and I come get my medication like a good boy, I'll be fine. Just come round whenever you're ready to go, eh?"

"Okay," Harry said. He got up and cleared his dishes. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Sure thing." Ron waved him off, and Harry made his way back to the small, stuffy room he'd come to think of as a second home. And hoped that Justin might be there. Ron's flippant comment about blonds had somehow stuck in his mind and was bothering him. Harry vaguely felt that being with Justin for a bit would confirm that he'd gotten over that little thing. The blond thing. It wasn't and had never been anything but a hair colour preference, anyway.

Justin was there, not necessarily waiting for him, but there, and that was what counted. Harry's fears were, at least for the moment, laid to rest.

Chapter Three

Harry stared at the wall before him with a sinking feeling.

Derek Thomas, Dean's younger brother, voiced precisely what he was feeling.
"Fucking *fuck*."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Diagon Alley. That's just perfect. Well, come on, then. Let's see if we can crack any of it."

The Dark spells shimmered like a cross between molten glass and vapour between themselves and the jagged patch of brick wall. Some of the bricks were missing, too - and on the other side was a continuation of the same, ugly Muggle alley that they were currently standing in. Harry assumed that Diagon Alley was still the same on the inside, but something made him feel as though it was all a dream - that there *was* no magic; only Muggle bleakness. A world of Dursley-isms.

However, all evidence showed that the Dark side of magic was still very much present. Harry gave his head a slight shake and got to work. He and three other former Auror candidates (they'd been in training when the war had broken out again) began using both protective spells on themselves as well as gentle probing spells on the wall itself. There were many layers of spellwork here; that much became patently obviously in a matter of second.

"Shit!" Angela Jones managed not to drop her wand as she clapped a hand to her arm.

"Hex?" Harry inquired disinterestedly.

"Yeah. It's - ouch, it's bleeding - " Jones held out her forearm for Harry to peer at.

"Hmm. Try a *Sanius* or a light *Curatio*," Harry advised. He was technically the head of this particular assignment, which meant that he was responsible for injuries and so forth. And which was supposed to be considered low-danger. Meaning that the better Auror candidates had been assigned to better teams and assignments. Only Harry was prevented from going on most of them. Dumbledore knew exactly what Harry thought of all that, but it was difficult not to acknowledge the reasoning, at least until they came up a successful plan.

A successful plan. Harry snorted inwardly. Try a location for Voldemort, for starters. Harry suppressed a sigh and forced himself to pay attention to the mousy Welsh girl.
"You alright?"

"I think so," she said, light brown hair falling across her face as she inspected her healing handiwork.

"Good," Harry said. He examined his bit of wall. "Okay, let's try this: I'll hit it with a *Revelus* and see if we can get it to map out all the spells. Derek, can you cover with me a shield in the mean time? I don't want anything to rebound."

"Sure, Harry," the younger man said, obviously eager to get such an important job as to protect Harry Potter.

Harry suppressed an eye-roll and another sigh, pulled out his wand and began scanning the net of spells for weak areas.

* * *

At the barracks later, Ron wanted to know how it had gone. Harry had recounted the experience dully, explaining about the renewing spells. The short story was that the spellwork would be back the next day, basically, and continue to renew itself until they had discerned how to disable the renewing spells. In other words, his entire day's work had been for nothing.

"Bad luck, mate," Ron said sympathetically. "Hey. Were you assigned with Dean's brother again?"

"Yeah. Told you that already. Why?" Harry chewed a still-hard bit of baked potato.

Ron snickered. "Because he's staring longingly in your direction."

Harry leaned forward, scowling, elbows sprawling wide on the table. "If you say one thing about - *that* - I will be forced to hex your bits off."

The grin faded. "Harry, come on. Relax already. Why not? Is it the hero-worship thing that's a turn-off? Because you're too tense, mate. I think a decent shag would do you good. And he's obviously more than willing"

Harry shoved his plate away in disgust, both at its contents and at the topic of conversation. "Look, Ron," he said, patience strained, "I don't need that kind of shit to deal with right now. If I shagged that kid, I'd have broken hearts to deal with. I'm not in any mood to be of any use to anyone these days."

Ron regarded him quietly. "I was thinking of you," he said.

Harry shook his head. "Not interested. Unless it's just about having someone to just keep me company while I fall asleep or something. I'm not up for anything more."

Ron sighed and nodded. "Yeah. Okay. I get it. I mean, I'm glad Hermione and I got everything figured out - again, I mean - but I hate this being apart all the time. And most of what I miss is just that sort of thing. I just want to talk to her, see her. Pick a fight or something."

"Like *that's* so hard," Harry commented dryly.

Ron grinned again. "I know," he said. "But I miss it a lot."

"I'm sure you do," Harry said, his lip twisting in a slight smile. The familiar pang of jealousy twinged and he shoved it down, as always. It might be nice to have something so constant. This thought got pushed away, too. He wasn't sure that he could handle anything constant, anyway.

Ron stood up. "Come on, mate. It's been two weeks since we last had the chance to drink ourselves stupid. You up for it?"

"Sure, why not?" Harry answered tonelessly, without even thinking about it. He stood, too, and followed Ron to the counter to dispose of their trays.

* * *

Draco sat in his sterile room in the unnamed building and stared at the slip of parchment. At his word, it would shrivel and the Dark Lord would know that he had read and acknowledged it.

He wondered whether the first assignment was meant to test him all over again, find out whether or not he'd attained the stomach for this sort of thing.

Draco set the slip of parchment on the lone table near the bed and put his head in his hands. He didn't. That was the plain, simple truth. Somehow, he'd vaguely thought that being a Death Eater would have more to do with casting a lot of complex Dark spells, that his seven years of secondary education in the Dark Arts would actually be used. Draco knew spells to ignite entire villages and towns on fire - unquenchable fire, at that. He knew curses in seven languages. He spoke Arabic, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish and German now, nearly fluently. His accents had been perfected. He'd been thinking espionage and stealth.

Not cold-blooded murder. Not this nightmare again.

He could not kill the Muggle-born family.

It was an entire family of wizards of non-magical descent. And while Draco most certainly had his own views of that, it was a totally separate matter to kill without reason or a motive other than spite. If he was honest with himself, Draco could admit that he was a fairly spiteful person. But this -

If he'd come up against Granger in a battle situation, he most certainly could have hexed her. It would have been a life or death situation, and Draco would have done what had to be done in order to survive. Hell, there were *loads* of people that he wouldn't mind hurting, given the chance. But this - Draco's stomach roiled. He'd been thinking *watching, tracking, informing*. He had not been thinking *mindless thug. Monster*. That was it. He'd just signed on to becoming a monster.

The Dark Lord did not care a fig for Draco's intelligence, his learning, his finely-honed skills and subtleties. He likely saw no difference between Draco and Goyle. Draco felt physically ill. If he did not answer soon, there would be serious trouble. Lucius was already beginning to wonder where Draco kept going. Draco paced in circles within the confines of his Ministry-granted space. It felt like a prison cell, and the weight of his anticipatory guilt made him feel that perhaps it should be one.

To whom should he turn? To Lucius, who knew the merits of his skills full well? Or to Snape, who could not possibly help him, unless to offer him a place to hide? And that would mean severing all contact with his father along with the Dark Lord. Draco covered his face with his hands and continued to circle. His face was hot; he felt feverish. If he told Lucius that he couldn't do it, couldn't go through with his very first assignment, how would he react? With anger? Would he tell the Dark Lord? Would he help Draco? Offer to do it for him? Explain to the Dark Lord that Draco was meant to be spying, not killing? Or worst, would he simply send Draco away, disappointed and ashamed of his only son beyond all hope of redemption?

Draco sat down again, heavily. "Shit," he said aloud, to no one. It occurred to him that there was no one he could turn to. Lucius was the best it would get. Draco thought for one more long moment, then stood, picked up the slip, pocketed it carefully and left the chamber to Apparate.

* * *

The stare was long and very cool.

Draco fought not to squirm beneath it.

"Give me the parchment," Lucius said, his tone as cold as his face.

Draco silently handed it over. Lucius gave him an impatient look and wrenched it away.

He watched his father scan the short message before laying it aside with some care. He was wearing gloves, so as to protect the parchment from picking up his own magical signature. The silence between them was heavy. Draco waited, anticipating the worst.

At long last, Lucius looked at him. "You know that, according the Oath, I should report this," he said, his tone neutral.

Draco nodded - just a quick duck of chin, as he'd been taught. "Yes, Father."

The tension in Lucius' face eased just a little. Approving, Draco perceived, of his understanding of the situation. "Tell me how this assignment was unexpected. Explain to me how this agenda was never made clear."

Explain to me... it was their old examination format. "Explain to me the twelve forms of the Blood Boiling Curse," Lucius would have said, once upon a time. Months ago. Years ago. It didn't matter any more. The familiarity was neither a comfort nor a distraction. Draco considered his answer carefully. "You trained me for espionage, Father," he stated. "I was expecting my duties to have to do with my training. The... agenda was never unclear as such."

Lucius' brows lifted coolly. "You will not, I presume, plead ignorance to the fact that this sort of task is not only expected, but a necessary duty and a privilege both. Yes?"

Draco hesitated only slightly. "Yes, Father."

"Muggles and Muggle-borns have no place in our world. Yes?"

Draco kept his gaze and tone steady. "Yes, Father."

"You do wish to rid the world of non-purebloods?"

"Of course."

"Of course what?"

"Of course, Father," Draco said evenly, meeting Lucius' stern gaze.

Lucius regarded him for several long minutes. "I do understand," he said finally. "You are correct with regards to the purpose of your training. I admit that I was surprised, myself, by this assignment. Do you understand everything involved in the task?"

Draco fought not to wince. "Yes, Father. Do not be recognized. Hunt down the family, kill them. Cast the Dark Mark over the house and bring back the skull of the patriarch."

"Or?"

"Or - or the heart of the youngest," Draco said quietly.

"Correct." Lucius' expression was very nearly pleased. Another long moment of thought passed. "Very well," he said at last. "I will take care of it." He held out the slip of parchment for Draco to take back. "Deal with this. I will bring you the token for you to present to our Lord. Meet me here tomorrow at noon. Do you understand?"

Draco looked him in the eye and fought not to tremble this time. "Yes, Father."

Lucius' features became stern again. "You also understand that I will not do anything like this again? It is only because it is your first and you are still unseasoned at this. I will not cover for you, Draco. Our first allegiance is and always will be to our Master."

"I understand." Draco looked down at the faint, spidery scrawl on the parchment, hesitating. Then looked up swiftly. "This is just a token attack, isn't it?" he asked. "Just to show the Muggle-borns and all that." He waited for confirmation.

Lucius' face clouded. "Foolish boy," he said, his voice as hard as granite. "No. This is merely the beginning of the end, for them. The new beginning for the purebloods. There is nothing *token* about it, other than that which I will bring back for you. Is that clear?"

Draco felt winded. Stunned. How could it be that, during seven years of Dark Arts training, he had never fully realized that his father meant to *exterminate* all non-purebloods? He'd known, of course, that the wizarding race was not meant to be watered down by weaker lineage. He'd known the dangers of tainting magical lines with Muggle blood. Somehow, Draco could see no problem with this. And yet, it had never added up within his own head, his thought processes, that it didn't just mean keeping wizarding lines pure but rather the *elimination* of the weakness itself. Draco could not breathe. He made himself nod. "I - yes, Father. Very clear."

Lucius was still stern. "Go back, then," he said. "I know that you are testing out your espionage skills already, and I commend you for it. I was most displeased when my people caught you exiting the Ministry of Magic premises two weeks ago. However, when I realized what you were up to, then I was proud. Unorthodox, Draco, but a spy cannot reveal his secrets even to his father. I understand. Do not disappoint me."

Draco wanted to close his eyes. Instead, he said, "I won't, Father." And hoped he was telling the truth.

Lucius came closer, stroked a heavy hand over Draco's loose hair. "Good. Now go."

Draco nodded a final time, turned and silently made his way to the Apparating Chamber.

* * *

The white walls of the room had not changed any. Thanks be this room was not located within the Ministry itself. That it was so very warded that only Dumbledore himself would have had the power to breach its barriers. Draco sat on the bed, back against the wall, knees drawn up to his chest. He hadn't moved in hours. Dusk was falling outside and he had not switched on the light.

His entire world was whirling about him. It didn't add up. It simply wasn't *necessary*. Who could not see that? It was hardly a question of NEWT-level Arithmancy - it was a plain, simple question of being murder for murder's sake.

Draco could stomach most Dark theory. That was just fine. But this just didn't make sense to him. Half the Ravenclaws from his year had been half-bloods. He'd known that as well as the next person. It did not take a genius to see that the wizarding race could stand to gain from the likes of Padma Patil, for instance. He still felt that purebloods should not mix with the other sort, but killing them all outright - ! Draco's head swam. Nothing was making sense, just when he thought he'd gotten it all figured out.

It was time to go back to the beginning. To the moment when he'd decided that Snape's choice had been the choice for him. Only Draco had altered it so that it would not come to betraying his father. As Snape had betrayed any friends he'd had on the Dark side, if he'd had any. He'd thought this could work.

His eyes getting dry from staring at the wall opposite, Draco blinked several times, then closed his eyes and laid his head down on his knees. Nothing was making sense any more. Oh, wait - he'd already *had* that thought. Everything was going in circles.

* * *

Harry stared at the blank parchment. *Dear Hermione*, he'd written at the top. And then... nothing else.

He glanced around the empty room, desperate for distraction, but there was nothing for it. He'd put this off long enough, procrastinated. Harry was not a great correspondent; he knew this, but Hermione didn't settle for excuses like that. Harry heaved a sigh and dipped his quill in the pot of ink.

*How are you? I'm fine. Bored, but fine.
Ron's okay, too, although I'm sure you've
talked to him more recently than I have. I
saw him last week. Same old thing, we went
down to the local for a drink. Or two. As I'm
sure you know.*

*Otherwise, things are okay. The Diagon Alley
thing has been straightened out now, but it
took a full week. How's the curse-breaking*

*going? How's Egypt? Still too hot and dry?
Any more pick-pocket incidents? I still think
it's funny that whoever it was now has
Crookshanks' spare lead, along with your
cash. Nothing's really new, to be honest. Ginny
was by last week, too, just after Ron left. I
saw Seamus yesterday, just in London. He's
fine.*

*The journal thing is fine, stop asking about it.
I haven't had any startling revelations yet,
other than that I'm bored and hate everything
and everyone most days. That's hardly new.
Anyway, I guess I should get back to work
or something. Do you know when your next
leave is? Ron and I both miss you. Take care
of yourself.*

Harry.

Harry re-read it and concluded that there was nothing that could possibly be added. He sealed the scroll, cast about fifteen spells on it designed to protect it and make it unsealable, unreadable and undeliverable to anyone but Hermione. Hedwig was in her cage in the corner of the room. Harry's bed, next to the door, didn't offer any space to keep her cage anywhere else. He crossed the room and gave it to her. Owls who had been approved by the Aurors were permitted through the wards, which had been adjusted to allow them through. Strange owls from the outside world had to be checked first. To the great annoyance of many of their recipients, but the need for security was well understood. Harry affixed his scroll, gave Hedwig a quick pat and sent her off.

He checked his watch. His next assignment didn't start until tomorrow, and it wasn't time to go and make himself eat dinner yet. Besides, the news that day had been bad. Really bad. Harry wasn't hungry, as per usual. He decided to go and get a cup of coffee and see whether anyone he liked was in the main hall. It was better than nothing.

* * *

"Take it," Lucius insisted, thrusting what he was holding at Draco a second time.

Draco made himself do it, eyes fixed in horror on the cloth-wrapped bundle. It felt... soft in his hands. He closed his eyes for a second. He knew what it was. Of *course* Lucius would have chosen that option, if for no other reason than to punish Draco. "Thank you," he said hollowly, speaking to the bundle.

"I will not save you like this again," Lucius said loftily. "Are you ready? You must present it to him."

Draco looked up and nodded quickly. "Yes, Father. I'm ready."

Lucius' mouth twisted into a contemptuous smile. "Look at it, Draco."

Draco, trying to keep his hands from shaking, unwrapped the bundle and stared with revulsion at the still-bleeding human heart. It was very small.

"She was three," Lucius informed him, the pleasure evident in his tone. "Old enough to beg for mercy, in other words."

Draco swallowed again, something very hard lodged in his throat. He made himself nod again. "Excellent," he said woodenly. His mind, already made up, hardened its resolve.

"Wrap it again," Lucius instructed. "Let us go."

* * *

Draco's knee hurt where it had been in too-close contact with the polished, black-marble floor for too long now.

The Dark Lord finally took the bundle from him and opened it. A low hiss of appreciation escaped the lipless mouth. "Excellent, excellent," he said, the words more sibilant than

even before. "Very well done, my young servant. Behold!" He raised his voice and the bundle both. "Master Malfoy has procured for us the heart of a Mudblood child!"

The Death Eaters in attendance murmured their approval, some sounding impressed. Apparently the skull option was more popular amongst the younger initiates, according to Lucius, at least. The Dark Lord's approval joined theirs. "You may rise."

Draco remained where he was. "My Lord," he said formally, his head still bowed. "I have a request for your consideration."

Silence fell. "Leave us!" The Dark Lord called to the rest of the chamber. There was a shuffling of feet. Lucius left with the rest, not looking back. "Rise, Master Malfoy," that cold voice hissed. "Make your request."

Draco stood, a little dizzy from having been kneeling for so long. "My Lord. Thank you for hearing my request. My training since graduating from Hogwarts has all had to do with espionage and stealth. I think that I would make an excellent spy. I am sure that many of my former classmates are working against us and that I would be able to fit it fairly easily." This was a lie, but there was no need to make that known. "I would like to request that you assign me as a full-time spy in their midst. I have been practising my skills in this area for quite some time, and I think that I would be best used in your service in this manner." Draco held his breath and waited.

The Dark Lord's pupil-less eyes held him for a long minute, narrowed in thought. "Lucius has overseen your training?"

"Yes, my Lord," Draco answered promptly. "His entire library has been at my disposal for the past seven years. I have read nearly every book in it and learned quite a bit."

"This is no small achievement," the Dark Lord said, a touch of respect coming into his voice. "In this case - yes. I will grant your request. You will make your report to me once every fortnight. Communication will be done through your father. Is this what you had in mind?"

Relief. "Yes, my Lord," Draco said. "That sounds perfect."

"Go, then, my servant," the Dark Lord said. "Bring me as much information as you can, the more valuable the better. Be careful. If you are caught, no one will aid you. Do you understand? Not even your father."

"I understand," Draco said. This much he'd known already.

"Go."

He was dismissed. Draco bowed again, then turned and left the hall. It was done. His hands were stained with the blood of the heart where it had soaked through its wrappings. It would be necessary to wash them before he could continue.

The doors were heavy, and thudded ominously as they closed behind him.

* * *

Lupin, not Snape, answered the door at Grimmauld Place. "Malfoy," he said, that same hint of distrust colouring his tone. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Snape here?" Draco asked bluntly.

Lupin paused. "Yes, he's here," he said. He held the door open a little wider. "Come in."

"Thanks." It was curt; the bare minimum. They were on the same side, after all.

Lupin didn't answer; just led him into the foyer and said, "Stay here." He disappeared up a flight of stairs. Draco didn't hear him calling Snape's name, first or last, so they were obviously not on particularly friendly terms yet. He waited.

After about five minutes, Snape's heavy gait could be heard on the stairs. "Malfoy," he

said, when his face was in view. He sounded - neither happy nor angry. Deliberately neutral, then.

Draco met his eyes. "Sir. I need to speak with you. In private."

Snape nodded as though this was expected. "Come upstairs, then. I have a study up here which has its own wards."

Draco followed him up the narrow staircase. Snape was apparently staying on the third floor. There was no sign of Lupin. "Where did Lupin go?"

"How should I know? This way." Snape pushed open a door, waited and closed it behind Draco. "Sit." He indicated a choice of chairs, none of which matched any of the others. "Something to drink?"

"What have you got?" Draco asked, eyebrows lifting. He chose the least-comfortable looking of the chairs. It matched his mood, if nothing else.

Snape smirked to himself and poured two hefty tots of something paler than firewhiskey and handed one to Draco.

Draco sniffed it. It smelled... woody, sort of, and smoky. "What is it?"

"Drink and find out," he was told dryly.

Draco was suspicious. "Is it drugged?"

Snape cocked an eyebrow and took a sip of his own. "You saw me pour it, did you not?"

"Yes." Draco raised the small glass and took a sip. It was slightly unpleasant, but could be gotten used to. "Are you not going to tell me what it is?"

"Muggle liquor," Snape said briefly. "Scotch whiskey, to be precise. I don't expect your father drinks it."

Draco thought unwillingly of his father's library, of the fire, the innumerable books and the range of liquor on the sideboard. Brandy had always figured prominently there, as well as the finer varieties of firewhiskey. "No," he said tersely.

Snape sat down behind an old-fashioned desk. "What is it?" he asked, fixing Draco with that hard stare he was used to. "Has something happened?"

Draco inhaled the scent of the scotch again and tried to remember how he'd decided to answer this particular question. The answer evaded him. "I - no. I guess nothing has happened, except that I've realized what a naïve fool I've been."

Snape's hand, about to pick up his glass again, froze around it instead. He said nothing, but his entire frame went rigid, listening.

Draco realized that he would listen until he'd finished explaining himself, so he took a deep breath and went on. "I don't know why I didn't see it, but I somehow thought that all of this was just about purity of bloodlines and keeping Muggle-borns and purebloods separate and the like."

"But?"

The word was clipped, almost spat. "But it's about genocide," Draco said, his eyes on the pattern of the wood grain of Snape's desk. He felt cold again. "My first assignment was to kill a Muggle-born family. They were all wizards, even the children. I thought I was going to be spying and such. I didn't - I couldn't - "

"Spying on whom, precisely?" Snape cut in, his voice hard.

Draco hesitated. "Well - pretending to spy, I mean." He squirmed. "On our side."

Snape's eyebrows arched. "On *this* side, I presume you mean."

"Our side," Draco repeated more firmly. "I wanted them to think that I was going to spy, but report false information. I always wanted to actually spy on them, through our side."

Snape pushed his glass away and leaned forward. Every movement suggested tension and distrust. "Which would have lasted until the first time you reported a lie," he sneered. "Surely you see the flaw in this plan? Or else you were planning to report *real* information all along."

Draco refused to rise to the bait. "I thought I could pull it off," he said firmly.

"You thought wrong. The Dark Lord always knows when someone is lying to him," Snape said shortly. "However. That is not the current point. What are you - ?"

"I can't do it," Draco said intensely. "I can't work for them. I don't want to be a part of that. But I don't want my father to know. I've gotten permission to 'spy' on this side full-time now. I need you to find me information that partially true, but nothing crucial. And I will spy on them in return, if you wish."

Snape sighed. "Malfoy - learning how to spy on Death Eaters would take you another several years of training. Furthermore, that is *my* responsibility. I understand your predicament, however: I was once in the same situation, myself. I had understood that my role amongst the Dark Lord's servants would be more or less intellectual in nature. I did not attend or participate in the revels. I expected that I would be mostly researching for others to put into action, not be treated as a cadet. I was wrong, and when I realized that I could not possibly participate in what was going on, I fled. The principles as I understood them worked for me; the theory put into action did not. Is this how you feel?"

Draco took another sip of the scotch. It was vile, but felt good. "Yes. Only, it's complicated by my father."

Snape's eyes were dark and hooded with something that could have been compassion and could have been grief. "That, I wish I understood," he said bitterly. "I only wanted to

be as far from my father as possible." He drained his glass and set it down. "Very well, Malfoy," he said, tone changing abruptly. "We will install you as a regular member of the army and go from there. I will feed you information in time for your reports. How often do you need to report?"

"Every two weeks," Draco said. Suddenly, he was trembling again and twisted his hands together to prevent it from showing.

"Every two weeks," Snape repeated thoughtfully. "Very well. In the mean time - I assume you are interested in actually working for this side?"

Draco nodded.

"Good. In the mean time, you will be given regular assignments. If I require your assistance in any way, I will let you know. Does this sound like something you can manage?"

"Yes." The trembling wouldn't stop, nor would the feeling of having betrayed his entire ancestral line.

"Malfoy." Snape's eyes were almost kind. "I will personally see to it that you be allowed to return home when you feel the need to. I will not separate you from your father entirely. There is no need to be concerned on that point."

Draco nodded, hating himself. He could not bring himself to say thank you.

"Come," Snape said, getting to his feet. "I will escort you to the barracks, then, and get you oriented. Find you a bed and the like."

Draco left his unfinished scotch on the desk and followed Snape from the study. There was no going back now.

* * *

Harry was folding his laundry - a task which he hated, but not quite as much as he hated his clothes being wrinkled all the time. Life without the Hogwarts house-elves had taken some adjusting to, and Harry was still adjusting. He balled socks and tried to remember when Ron had said he'd next be through an assignment. He was just finishing this when the door to the bunkhouse opened. Harry looked up, hoping against hope that it might be Justin - he was currently feeling hornier than he had in days, but he and Justin never wrote, so -

It was decidedly not Justin. Snape appeared in the doorway. Harry recoiled. "What are *you* doing here?" True, he respected the man and even got along with him these days, but to have him *here*, in the bunkhouse was nearing the unthinkable.

Snape just sneered at him. "Escorting your newest colleague," he told Harry in a tone that hovered between smug and dry.

He came into the room, holding the door open for whomever it was who was with him. Harry's jaw dropped. Expected or not, it was even more of a shock to see *Malfoy* here. "Malfoy," he said, and knew that he sounded shocked.

He got another sneer, Malfoy-style, in return. "Potter." Malfoy turned to Snape, appealing. "Do I have to stay here? In *this* dorm, or whatever it is, I mean?"

"It's the only unclaimed bed, I am afraid," Snape said, sounding truly apologetic. "I imagine you two will live. There is no need to stay in here. The main hall, as I showed you, is where most people eat and spend spare time. I will be back in twelve days at ten in the morning, as we discussed. In the mean time, you will be receiving an assignment or two."

Malfoy nodded and Harry had the sudden thought that his ex-rival had the look of a kitten that someone was abandoning. He reminded himself that Malfoy was a huge git, always had been and always would be, even if he was apparently on Harry's side of the war now. He shoved his sock balls into his pack and attempted to ignore Malfoy - and the fact that his heart was beating rather uncomfortably quickly.

The door closed behind Snape. Malfoy went silently to his bed, across the room from Harry's. He began to unpack, ignoring Harry with equal resolution, it seemed. Harry went back to filing his shirts and trousers into their places amongst his things.

The silence thickened between them.

Chapter Four

Harry fidgeted pointlessly with the last of his laundry, trying to prolong the task so as to avoid having to find something different to keep him occupied once he'd finished. He wished Malfoy would say something already; the silence was beginning to beat against his ear drums rather painfully.

Malfoy remained steadfastly quiet. He wasn't just not talking; he was resolutely silent, his back turned to Harry as he unpacked a small bag of clothing and personal effects. Every movement was stiff and bespoke unwillingness. He'd seemingly accepted the fact that he had to stay there with rather less fuss than Harry had expected.

Harry couldn't take it any longer. "Thought you were a spy," he said abruptly.

Malfoy didn't miss a beat, just calmly continued folding his trousers. Several minutes passed, and Harry thought he wasn't going to answer. He continued to fidget, even unballing a pair of socks and rolling them up again, wondering if he should bother trying to ask again.

"Who told you that?" Malfoy answered finally.

Relieved in a way, Harry shrugged, even though he knew the other wasn't looking at him. "No one. I just... guessed. I heard there was a new spy."

Malfoy took his time in answering him again. "You guessed right," he said, just a slice of sneer in his tone. "Bravo."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. His glance took in the room and counted the beds again. Six. Six people stayed here from time to time. Him. Ron. Justin. Dean, when he was around, but he was usually off somewhere in Devon. Terry Boot, on occasion. And now Malfoy. He would never fit in. Even assuming they were all there at once. "What are you doing here, then? Shouldn't you be off spying?"

Malfoy's movements slowed. "My... assignments are somewhat up in the air at the moment. Not that it's any of your business." This last was spat out at Harry, though with less venom than sometimes.

Harry ignored it. "So, you're just staying here for now, then?" he asked incredulously. "At the barracks?"

Malfoy turned his head over his shoulder then. "I *am* a part of this army, or whatever you'd call it," he said coolly. "If you have a problem with it - "

"I don't," Harry said sharply, cutting him off. "About time you got some sense. I'm glad you're not off murdering babies or whatever it is that your dad and his friends do."

That got him a reaction. Malfoy straightened up and whirled furiously about, crossing the small room in about three strides. He pushed his left sleeve up as he came, shoving the twisted, ugly form of the Dark Mark in Harry's face. "It's real, you ignorant fuck," he snarled through clenched jaws. "And I didn't ask *you* to comment on my presence. I'm not in this camp for you or your friends, Potter. Just leave me the fuck alone."

Startled, Harry just nodded. "Sorry," he managed, surprised despite himself. It came out sounding a little flat.

Malfoy just glared, went back to his bed and picked up a smaller bag. Ignoring Harry wholly, he stalked across the bunkhouse and exited it in stony silence. Harry found himself staring at the closed door and had to shake himself to remember what he'd been doing.

Right. Putting laundry away. Well, he had finished that, anyway. Harry stood very still and attempted to process what had just happened, and his own reaction to it. It was only Malfoy, for fuck's sake. Why was he acting like it was such a big deal? Harry wiped his hands on his trousers, aware that they'd gotten clammy. His heart was still beating too quickly. Not from fear, surely - he hadn't been afraid of Malfoy in *years* - not since second, at the very latest! He wasn't... *nervous* around Malfoy, was he?

No. Ridiculous concept. *It was just unexpected*, Harry told himself firmly. *I wasn't expecting to see him here, in my room. That's all.* He cast about for some idea of what to do next, but was coming up dry? What had he been planning on, anyway? It would not come to him. Harry paced about the room, trying to remember.

A slight physical reminder came to his attention. Right - he'd been thinking about Justin, hoping he might be around. Harry was dying for a shag, frankly, and still not up for a casual rendezvous with just anyone. Perhaps if he went to the main hall, Justin would be there.

Another stupid concept, Harry realized. Justin always came by to drop off his stuff before going to check on the news and so forth. Why did he want to go to the main hall? Surely not just because he suspected that Malfoy was likely there. No. He did *not* need to know where Malfoy was. It was not his job to check up on the git; it was obviously Snape's.

Harry's trousers were tight. He thought of Derek Thomas and almost considered going to see if the kid was around. He was very attractive; his short, dark curls cropped close to his head, dark eyes expressive and often rather wistful, skin like silk. He was probably lonely, too.

Harry groaned aloud and shook his head. *Not Dean's little brother!* he scolded himself. Gods. He was getting truly desperate if he was even *thinking* about stooping that low. Harry cast a rapid locking charm on the door and flopped down onto his bed, unbuttoning his trousers even as he did so. His hands slid down in a swift, familiar motion, grasping the hardness within. *Ahhh*. The much longed-for bliss of it, somehow ten times more appealing than it had been lately.

Harry let himself go, using both hands to touch himself, tug long strokes over his flushed skin, thumb rubbing over the leaking head of his cock, his other fingers probing that place just behind his balls. He kept his mind very firmly on Justin, on their last time together (was it already three weeks ago?) and came, grunting out his release. So much more satisfying than it had been the last few times he'd gotten up the energy to wank. Odd, that. Harry lay on his back, breathing hard. A faint stirring of hunger rumbled in the depths of his belly, combined with a yet-unsated desire for something even deeper than hunger, something Harry couldn't quite identify at the moment.

It didn't matter. After a minute or so, Harry got up, cleared the mess and buttoned his trousers again. It was nearly time for supper, and he was unusually hungry. Perhaps Ron would be in the main hall, unexpected as that would be. He, unlike Justin, often checked the news first, then came to the bunkhouse to deposit his stuff. Either way. Harry left the stuffy room and headed toward the food.

* * *

Malfoy was not in the hall. This bothered Harry - where else would he be, anyway? - but he shrugged it off and drifted through the food line. The offerings looked as unappealing as ever - some semblance of stew and rock-hard, tweed-rolls, as Ron called them - dinner rolls with little bits of something (possibly wheat?) that had the appearance and consistency of tweed. They were uniformly hard and always dry in a way that no amount of butter could cure. Not for lack of trying, though, particularly in Ron's case. Harry had taken to dunking the tweed-rolls into any available sauce in an effort to make them more palatable. Usually unsuccessfully.

Tray loaded, Harry turned and surveyed the hall. There was no one he knew there. He went to the side room usually reserved for overflow in the hall and looked there. Still no one familiar. Feeling vaguely disappointed, Harry went back into the hall proper and sat down by himself. His newfound hunger was undiminished and, chewing for what seemed an inordinate amount of time on a chunk of beef stew, Harry attempted to discern whether that made it better or worse that the food was as bad as ever.

Eventually it was gone, though, and who knew what his body had to go through in order to break down that shit? Harry disposed of his tray and went to check his post box, just in case he'd gotten something the owls hadn't brought. His instinct was right; there was a Muggle-posted package for him from Mrs. Weasley. Harry was elated, far more so than usual. He opened the package on the spot, discovering to his pleasure an entire packet of raisin scones and pumpkin scones both, several mince pies, a bag of dried fruit (with a note fussing about the apparent lack of fruits and vegetables in Harry's current diet), and a box of Earl Grey, Harry's favourite. Bearing this bounty back to his table, Harry decided to get himself some coffee to go with his scones.

Straightening up from pouring it, a flicker of blond caught Harry's eye. Yes - it was Malfoy. Harry wavered, not sure what to do. He went back to his own table and settled in to amuse himself by watching Malfoy's reaction to the stew. That should be good for

something, at least. Harry felt his spirits rise, his humour returning at last from a five-year sabbatical. Who knew that Malfoy could afford him such potential amusement?

His ex-rival stared at the contents of the steam trays for much longer than the girl in front of him had. There was no one behind him, fortunately. After a few moments (during which Harry was smirkingly picturing Malfoy's agonizing dilemma), Harry saw a slender hand go out to grasp the serving spoon to place a sampling of stew on his plate. Another long pause at the bowl of tweed-rolls before one of these was reluctantly added to the mix as well. Finally, Malfoy scanned the beverage offerings and chose a glass of pumpkin juice, taking a dubious-looking sip first. As he turned toward the hall, Harry quickly averted his gaze, ducking behind his box in order to escape Malfoy's notice.

Once the ex-Slytherin was seated (by himself, just across the way, in fact), Harry opened the packet of home-made scones and chose a raisin one. He got up to get himself a pat of butter and sat down again, setting into the scone with almost indecent enthusiasm. Malfoy was staring at his plate as though its contents were nothing short of horrifying. Which they were, frankly. Harry felt rather smug - the git had probably been living it up at the Manor all this time, while he and his friends were isolated, depressed, scattered all over the nation, dodging curses and often barely escaping alive, sleeping in draughty bunkhouses *and* subsisting on this sort of thing, just to add insult to injury.

A chunk of beef was selected, frowned at, and gingerly placed in the mouth. Malfoy chewed as though it might be poisonous, his expression looking pained. Harry enjoyed several minutes of watching this. When five chunks of lowest-grade beef had been ingested, he finally took pity on the other. Might as well not scare off the Order's newest convert by sheer reason of the *food*. Harry picked up his box, his coffee, the other half of his second scone, and went over to Malfoy's table. Stopping directly in front of him on the far side, Harry dropped his box and arranged the rest of his things. "It amazes me that you're even eating that shit," he said conversationally.

Malfoy didn't look up. He swallowed with what appeared to be pain and said, "Fuck off, Potter."

Harry's laugh came out as a bark. "Bit of a change, is it?"

"What did I just say?" Malfoy gave him a pointed glare.

Harry was unconcerned. He took a sip of his thick, bitter coffee - it was extra-strong today, apparently - and a bite of his scone. "I wouldn't bite the hand that feeds you," he said easily.

"If you're trying to tell me that *you* cooked this utter shit - "

"I'm not, and I didn't," Harry cut across him. "So shut it. I was going to offer you a scone, in fact," he added, watching Malfoy's expression with amusement. He'd said it almost sheerly for reaction value.

It was well worth it. Malfoy's face went from blank to startled to sneering within seconds. "What?" he said harshly. "Why would I want anything *you* have?"

"Believe it or not," Harry said, strongly tempted to laugh, "I'm trying to be nice to you. These are really good and very fresh. Molly Weasley made them, and however you feel about her bloodlines, she's a damned good cook. I'd have starved to death by now if she didn't send us food on occasion. She does most of the cooking for the people staying at Gr - at Headquarters, too."

Malfoy's sneer faded. "Grimmauld Place," he said quietly.

Harry had wondered if they'd let him in on that yet. Slightly surprised (and also slightly chagrined at having had his light verbal probe caught), he nodded. "Yeah. Lupin and Snape are both there full-time, now that term's out for Snape. Other people are there pretty often, too. Moody. Tonks, sometimes, though she has her own place. So, scone?"

Malfoy fought some sort of internal battle for a minute. Harry took advantage of the pause by nodding at the tweed-roll. "I wouldn't eat that," he recommended. "I don't know what those bits are, but Ron and I guess maybe tweed."

Taken by surprise, Malfoy let out a short laugh. "Tweed?" he repeated.

Harry gave a twisted grin. "Try it and see, if you don't believe me."

"Thanks, I'll pass," Malfoy said dryly. "What kind of scones?"

Somehow relieved, Harry told him. "Pumpkin and raisin. Not together."

Malfoy hesitated. "Raisin, then."

Harry gave him one. "Butter's on the counter by the tweed-rolls. Coffee's disgustingly strong."

"Any tea?"

"There's water, but they don't provide the tea itself." The Earl Grey would be kept back for the time being, Harry decided, feeling rather self-righteous for no particular reason.

Malfoy nodded, taking this in stride. Without a word, he got up and went to fetch himself some butter. Harry watched in further amusement as the coffee was poured and sample. Malfoy coughed and set it down. A goodly amount of sugar was added, followed by milk (which was sniffed suspiciously at first). As he returned, Harry thought of their earlier exchange in the bunkhouse and how Malfoy hadn't said anything about his murdered-babies comment.

Perhaps he was actually making an effort to be civil or something. Who knew? Malfoy buttered his scone. They ate in silence. It wasn't exactly comfortable, and it wasn't exactly uncomfortable. It was... odd. But there was something strangely comforting in having someone as familiar as Malfoy around, even if Harry hadn't seen him in seven years or liked him for any of the time they'd known each other. He was tempted to ask all sorts of questions, but decided these should perhaps wait until some more solid ground had been established between them.

It was going to be very interesting.

Once they were both finished, Malfoy rose, announced abruptly that he had some things

to do. He thanked Harry for the scone rather brusquely and left the hall before Harry could really respond.

Harry's interest was snagged in a way that it hadn't been in, oh, a very long time, indeed.

* * *

Draco looked around himself with disgust. He'd been reduced to this: hiding in a dirty army barracks, drinking sludge for coffee and eating food that could pass for livestock feed. He *had* to find some tea bags or something. Otherwise, it was simply too much to ask a person to bear, no matter what the circumstances might be. He'd only arrived yesterday afternoon, but it felt like far too long already. It was difficult to believe that this place was going to be his new home. Or at least his new home base of sorts.

It was early morning, and Draco was almost hoping to get an assignment that would order him away from here. The only person he knew well enough to talk to was Potter, and there were obvious problems with that. Despite his odd offer of food the night before, which was still rather puzzling when all was said and done. Draco had gone over it in his head several times that evening. He was fairly certain that he'd left their original reunion chat on a firmly unapproachable note, and yet Potter had gone and shared some of his no-doubt precious supply of edible food. The most pressing question was *why*.

He was probably lonely. None of the brat's friends were about. Draco must have been the lowest common denominator, nothing more. More or less satisfied with this answer, Draco had abandoned the topic and applied himself to the higher-ranking questions at hand. Namely, when was Snape coming back for him, when was he going to get an assignment, when was he going to be allowed to go home again, was he going to be able to pull this off, and so forth.

He'd almost slipped there, yesterday, in Snape's study in Grimmauld Place. He'd almost let Snape stumble into the fact that yes, he had in fact been planning to play both sides against the middle. Deliver real information to his father and his father's master. Draco's Dark Mark prickled. He winced slightly. *Not my master. Not any more. I didn't know.* And he was furious with himself for that, too.

He'd lain awake the night before, thinking, thinking, thinking. How had he possibly failed to grasp the fact that none of this was merely theory? But that genocide - wizard genocide, yet - was going on all over the continent - had been for ages - and that he was fully expected to join in as though it were simply routine behaviour? Draco recalled all those long hours in the Manor library, writing essays on Dark theory, new curses freshly translated from original languages, their implications spelled out neatly in English for his father to read and approve. And use. He knew that now. Somehow, he'd always expected his research to be used. Wanted it, even - this was war. His side needed intellectuals like himself. It was only fair; the Muggles had Granger, after all. He'd never been all that far behind. The problem was that he hadn't realized that all of his half-experimental writings on the topic were far from experiments in the lives of his father's compatriots. They were simply a way of life.

And it was one that Draco could not condone. He still felt terribly conflicted about the entire thing. In addition, there was the fact that he had no intention of betraying his father any further than he already had. If it came to a question of turning Lucius in - he simply could not and would not do it. Not his *father*. He was all Draco had left. All he had ever really had, in fact. There was Snape, true - Snape, who had been a mentor of sorts to him ever since Draco had stepped onto the Hogwarts grounds for the first time. If it came to a choice - Draco pushed this thought away. It would never come to that. No one would ever put a wand to his head and demand that he choose between his father and Snape. So why burden himself with a choice there was no need to have to make?

Draco took another sip of his coffee. It was growing tepid. A movement caught his eye and he realized that Potter had just entered the hall. He'd lingered long enough. Draco stood, caught the light of recognition in Potter's eye and neatly dodged him in the sudden crowd that had come in with him.

* * *

As it turned out, nothing got particularly interesting with Malfoy. Not immediately, at any rate - Harry received an owl during breakfast informing him that he'd been called to Headquarters for a meeting. He'd read it, put it down and stared vainly around the hall just in case anyone he knew was there, had gotten the same message. No one. He wondered if Malfoy was going, and suppressed the thought almost before it had started. It didn't matter. Malfoy was a world-class git; he knew that. Just because he'd gotten (unfairly, in Harry's opinion) even more attractive since school days didn't mean a damned thing.

Harry bit into soggy toast and hardly noticed it. He'd put a preserving spell on the remainder of the scones to save for more desperate times. Lunch, say - never a good meal at the barracks on the best of days. Malfoy had disappeared after supper the day before. Harry hadn't looked for him, but had consciously prevented himself from doing so. He knew he was just lonely, and was longing for someone better to come by so that he could stop obsessing. He was obsessing. It was just that any-port-in-a-storm thing, Harry tried to convince himself. Only, none of the other ports were so damnably hot. That was the problem.

Those pointy features hadn't softened exactly, but had grown decidedly more adult-looking over the years - a stronger jaw balanced the high forehead; deeper lines and subtle markings had deepened the facial expressions - no longer quite so two-dimensional as they'd once been. Malfoy looked more introspective, more withdrawn. Defensive, almost, but without the edge he'd always had at Hogwarts. He was taller, probably about Harry's height, in fact. The shoulders had broadened, but the rest of his body was as lithe as it had ever been. Harry recalled the glimpse he'd once gotten of Malfoy during seventh year, pulling his Quidditch robes up over his head as he'd headed off the field after a Slytherin-Ravenclaw match. That pale slip of firmly-toned belly, the slender divot of navel, and then he'd turned, affording a full view of a well-muscled back. Not bulky - Malfoy had been wiry before; now his musculature was streamlined, smooth. Of course Harry had noticed - back then, he'd noticed every little detail about most males who weren't Crabbe, Goyle, or Snape. One of the few perks of being a raging closet case, he'd figured. He got to stare and keep his observations to himself.

Now, though, it appeared that that attractive, remembered physique of Malfoy's was undiminished. Better, in fact. Those eyes were the same as ever, not that Harry had ever really had the chance to observe them as closely as he had the night before. There were other things, little things that he remembered - the particular shape of Malfoy's thumbs, the squared tips of his fingers. The way his hair fell into his eyes sometimes. Harry told himself again, grimacing as he took a too-large sip of coffee, burning his mouth, that it was just desperation. It had been a long time since he'd last -

Justin. He'd forgotten Justin entirely for a bit there. With an inward shrug, Harry brushed this off. It wasn't as though Justin was likely entirely loyal to him, anyway. They'd never even discussed exclusivity, or not having to use protective charms when there was need of them. It didn't matter. When they were together, they were. And when they weren't - they were their own people. But this particular development - this overnight

crush, as it were - was interesting. Dangerous, but interesting.

It had been a long time, indeed. If ever, in fact. Harry drained his coffee and went to the bunkhouse to get his things. According to the assignment, he'd be gone for a week at the least.

Malfoy was not in the bunkhouse.

* * *

Harry, weary beyond the point of being able to function normally, turned the knob several times before remembering that he needed his wand to disable the locking spells. It clicked and the door opened. It was empty - relief - and Harry could have cried from sheer relief.

He could have cried, full stop.

Harry dropped his pack heavily onto the floor and threw himself onto the bed, eyes dry and burning as he stared at the ceiling. There was a hard lump in his throat. And now that he was *finally* alone and free to rage or wallow in grief as he wished, all he could do was - nothing. Nothing at all. It was all so useless. What would crying solve?

Hermione had certainly done enough of it for the both of them. Ron was beyond grief; his features had registered nothing so much as a stunned shock. He hadn't grasped it yet. Maybe none of them had. Harry's shirt was damp at the shoulder from Hermione's tears, and he found himself, more than anything, yearning for that kind of release.

Why Ginny? Of all people, why her? It was the same question that came up every time someone they knew died, but it had never been one of them before, one of their insular little group. And while it had been a long time since their little - whatever it had been - during sixth year, she had still been a friend and family member both. Just untangling another group of hexes set about the Ministry's back-up headquarters, which had been discovered fairly early on in the war - in its second year sometime, if Harry recalled correctly.

He didn't care. He didn't care when the second location had been uncovered. He didn't care how many hexes were there, all around it. All he wanted to know was how and if this was ever going to end. No one knew where Voldemort was. Even the rumours were silent. Dumbledore was apparently at a loss. Snape and Lupin were researching constantly; Snape frequented too many Dark gatherings these days, desperate as the rest of them to learn something. Anything, almost.

Lupin had told him that Malfoy knew nothing, either. That the ex-Slytherin had seen Voldemort three times - first during his Marking, secondly during the rites that had followed for the next six days, and third at some point within the past two weeks, during which Malfoy had requested the shift to full-time espionage. And had apparently not seen Voldemort since, nor ever known where those encounters had taken place in the first place.

"Not in Malfoy Manor?" Harry had asked.

Lupin had glanced at Snape and shaken his head. "No. Somewhere different."

Harry almost didn't even care. He'd forgotten, in the past week, that he'd thought he might have developed an almost instantaneous crush on the git upon their re-acquaintance. He didn't even care where Malfoy was. Not here in this room; that was the important thing.

The darkness weighed in upon Harry's face. He closed his eyes and let it crush him.

* * *

Draco sat down on the grass outside his bunkhouse. He'd just come out of the main hall from supper (such as it was) and had been about to ponder how to answer his mother's owl, precisely, if at all, but he'd seen Potter Apparate through a shimmer of wards and head directly for the room. He was going to get there ahead of Draco, and something about his face and walk made Draco wary. Bad news, it seemed, and Potter did not look like he was in any frame of mind to be disturbed.

Not sure how to handle this turn of events, Draco approached the bunkhouse slowly and eventually decided to wait it out. He didn't have any letter writing supplies with him, but at least he could think in peace. No one else was about; the barracks were strangely deserted today. Snape had been too busy to find him an assignment yet; his two owls had been rather distant in tone and very hastily scrawled. Draco was partly going out of his mind with boredom and partly growing daily more anxious about the war. Anxiety was in the air here, a constant mood that hung in the air like the haze of grease above the kitchen. It was impossible not to catch, and Draco felt useless. He was privy to all of the war news now, and the owls were never good. He'd heard about Ginny Weasley three days ago when it had happened. He supposed Potter had been with the rest of the Weasleys up until now.

He was supposed to be thinking about Narcissa. Draco's mind kept straying to Potter, though - isolated inside that room, and obviously suffering in his own way. He didn't know what to make of it, nor what to do with the fact that he couldn't stop thinking about it.

Draco pulled his legs up to his chest and continued to wait as darkness fell around him.

* * *

He continued not seeing much of Potter during the next week. That night, he'd waited until someone else had approached the bunkhouse from the hall (Boot, maybe?), waited ten minutes longer, then gone in. Potter had been asleep, or feigning it well. Draco had undressed quickly and gotten into bed. He still recalled how long it had taken him to fall asleep, very much aware of the soft breathing across from him.

In the mean time, Draco's concern about the two-week mark had been growing. Finally, Lupin had owled him with a list of false (yet very convincing-sounding) information with which he was to provide his father. Lupin had also instructed him to set up a meeting, which Draco had done. Every sort of non-tracing charm known to the Order would be placed on it, then posted from the building in which Draco had originally been staying - the building with the white-walled room. It was apparently undetectable, and thus ideal. Lucius' reply had come, confirming their first meeting as agent and spy, rather than father and son. The thought made Draco rather unhappy as well as uncomfortable, but he'd make his choice. It was up to him to follow through on it now.

The night before he was to leave for the Manor, Draco woke in the small hours. Someone had arrived in the bunkhouse and was setting up camp in the bed next to his. He couldn't make out who it was, but Boot had left the day before and had been two beds over, anyway. He caught a glimmer of pale skin and dark hair, but nothing else. The figure slipped into the lavatory and waited until the door was closed before switching on the light.

Draco had gone to sleep again, but the morning brought a surprising twist of events. Draco was brushing his teeth. Turning off the water, he patted his face dry with a hand towel and opened the door. Potter, who had been extremely withdrawn since his return six days ago, was sitting on his bed, his back to the lav. He was being embraced in a rather more-than-platonic gesture by the figure from Draco's memory the night before. He had a leg curled around behind Potter as well as both arms. Potter was holding onto the arm across his chest, his head just leaning against the other's forehead. Draco stared at the profile. Finch-Fletchley, was it?

They hadn't seen him yet. Finch-Fletchley's mouth moved over Potter's cheek, down the tense line of clenched jawbone. It sounded suspiciously as though Potter was attempting to suppress his crying, but smallish sounds escaped nonetheless. The ex-Hufflepuff was murmuring soothing-sounding things, the hand on Potter's back rubbing gentle circles. Draco found himself consumed by several feelings at once - he felt left out, he felt useless - that he somehow should have been able to draw Potter out of that rut of apathy he'd been in, not that he'd even tried - and he felt (to his own humiliation) jealous. Very jealous. Of what, exactly, he wasn't entirely sure. Whether it was the fact that Potter had someone to comfort him like that and he didn't, or jealousy that Finch-Fletchley was permitted to comfort Potter like that in the first place - Draco didn't know, and felt almost ill.

Finch-Fletchley's tongue came out and caught a stray tear tracking its way down Potter's jaw. Potter's grip on the arm tightened. Draco didn't know what to do. He felt like voyeur. He couldn't stand watching them any longer. He moved as silently as possible to his bed, deposited his things and made his way to the door as quickly as possible, hating that he had to pass them. There was a moment, at the door, where Draco (later cursing his weakness of will) turned, and their eyes met. Not a word was spoken. Finch-Fletchley looked mostly surprised. Potter didn't look angry, betrayed, surprised, or any of the things Draco had expected. He merely looked utterly miserable.

Draco could not speak. He wrenched his gaze away and closed the door firmly behind him as he left.

He could not eat. All he could see was Potter's miserable, tear-streaked face. He thought of Ginny Weasley, but mostly of Potter amongst the other Weasleys, trying to comfort them and half-awkward all the time because he wasn't a genuine member of the family, was somehow outside of their grief and therefore rather isolated in his own. Coming back *here*, of all places, and alone. It was hardly the place to come to be cheered up.

Draco wondered who'd been most responsible for Weasley's death. Who'd set the particular hex that had killed her. He wondered where Granger was, why she wasn't around to comfort Potter. Unless - and Draco's jealousy flared again - Potter preferred what comfort Finch-Fletchley had to offer. He didn't like the thought. Another thing he'd obviously missed along the line - that the famous Boy Who Lived was gay. Why on *earth* hadn't he known that? Not that it would have - or *would* - make any difference, but still. What else hadn't he known all this time?

It was nine o'clock. Nearly time to go and meet his father again at last. Draco drank bitter, black coffee and proceeded to hate the world.

Chapter Five

The Manor's wards shifted to allow Draco past; he could feel their restrictive fingers straying over him in a way they never had before. Something tightened in his chest; Lucius must have reset them. Draco had never noticed the wards before at all.

As he'd guessed, the Apparition Chamber was alarmed, or else the wards were. Or Lucius had been expecting him to come fifteen minutes early. Either way, a soft step outside the Chamber told Draco what he needed to know. He consciously stiffened his shoulders and stood up a little straighter. The parchment he needed was in his pocket. That was all he need. That, and his wand.

The familiar face appeared around the corner. Lucius Malfoy, in at-home mode. Draco hadn't seen him in anything other than Death Eater robes in some time, and it was a slight shock. The sheer familiarity was disorienting. He wondered if that had been its purpose, and lifted his chin slightly. "Father," he said, formally.

Lucius was dressed in black dress robes, elegantly adorned with scripted metalwork. His hair was loose, flowing back over his shoulders as it had always done. A streak of silver glinted at either temple. "Draco." His voice was calm, warm, gentle. He smiled; whether it was a genuine smile or not, Draco could not quite discern. It seemed genuine enough, but he knew better than to let his guard down for a moment. "You're early." Just a hint of surprise.

Draco nodded. "I had to choose the best point to slip away," he explained. "They were all around. I wasn't caught, don't worry."

Lucius accepted this. "Have you some information for me?"

Draco met the cool gaze. "I do."

"Very well. Come into the library and we will discuss it." Lucius turned and led the way from the Chamber, throwing another almost-affectionate look over his shoulder. "It's been very quiet here since you left. Not that you ever made a lot of noise, but it feels quieter. Emptier."

Draco nodded again, not sure what to say to this, but it didn't matter. Lucius had already turned his head to the front again. The burst of emotion in his chest was nearly suffocating. It was strange to be here again, in his own home. Where he no longer lived and would never be welcome again if he forgot himself for even a second. His father, always the trusted ally of his childhood and youth, would be the one to sentence him, too. Draco firmly told himself to stop thinking about things like this, but it was difficult. The fumed-oak panelling lining the walls smelled like home; he'd always known that if someone blindfolded him and Apparated him from anywhere in the world, he'd know the Manor by the smell of that wood.

Trailing silently after Lucius, Draco realized that none of the elves were about. Had Lucius warned them away?

Lucius held the library door open for him and Draco went past him. Not liking having to expose his back for even a moment, but also having difficulty believing that his father would attack him unprovoked. Or without proof of his treachery, at least. The information about Draco's true position in the war was guarded with several layers of protective spells, held by Dumbledore, Snape and Lupin all, but Draco knew his father better than they did, knew what he was capable of.

"Come in," Lucius invited, moving past him again and gesturing. "Tea?"

Draco didn't hesitate, though he wanted to. "Please." Snape had taught him a spell to lend Veritaserum a scent, very faint, but noticeable if one was looking for it. And whatever his feelings for his father might be, Draco knew to look for it.

The fire was low, despite the summer heat outside. It was always cool in the Manor. Its solid stone framework and central air saw to that. Lucius was old-fashioned, though, and despite having put in the air conditioning for Narcissa years back, he still preferred a fire lit in all the main rooms. And took pleasure in the fact that it was old-fashioned.

Draco sat down in one of the high-backed, leather wing chairs in front of the fireplace. Lucius had gone to the door and reappeared almost instantly with a tea tray hovering in front of him. He set it down on the table between them and took the opposite chair. Lucius poured milk without asking if Draco wanted it; he already knew. He added sugar and handed Draco the cup.

"Thank you," Draco said, accepting it. He waited until Lucius' gaze was diverted to his own cup. His wand was in his sleeve, and he managed to whisper the spell while "accidentally" clanking his spoon against the saucer. The spell was cast. Draco raised the cup and inhaled. The slight scent of hyacinth could not be detected. Some of the tightness in Draco's chest loosened a little, and he drank.

Lucius picked up his cup and saucer, leaned back in his chair. "I cannot tell you how much pride it gives me for us to be having this conversation," he said. His features appeared relaxed, genial, and indeed proud as he regarded Draco. "I always looked for the day when my own son would outwit his father with regards to our Master. You have chosen for yourself the best possible assignment to match your skills, natural talents

and your heritage - not to mention, your considerable training."

Part of Draco felt panicky about the warm swell of pride this brought to him. It was difficult to breathe. He ducked his head in acknowledgement. "Yes, Father." He did not smile back.

"You have become the quintessential Malfoy," Lucius continued, still smiling pleasantly. "You have secrets, no doubt, that not even I may know. I understand this: it is part of a spy's work. What news do you have of the enemy?"

Draco pulled the parchment from his robe pocket and endeavoured to hold it still, willing his hands not to shake, lest his nerves or emotions betray him. Calm. "Envoys have been sent to the werewolves again," he said. "I am not entirely sure who is going, but I think we can assume that Lupin will be among them. As well, Dumbledore plans to move the army in Cornwall to Devon for a recovery period. They will have many injured people to move and will be weak."

Lucius leaned forward. "When?"

Draco met his eye. "Two weeks from now."

A slight smile. "We may have to reschedule our meeting, in that case. What else?"

Draco consulted the parchment again. "The hags have refused to join forces with Dumbledore. They prefer to stay neutral, hiding in Hogsmeade."

Lucius pursed his lips. "I wonder if we should perhaps punish them for what is essentially treachery by default."

Draco shook his head quickly. It was important that the hags' true work not be discovered. "Surely there are more important bases for our Death Eaters to be covering."

Lucius' expression grew amused, though darker as well. "No, Draco. Nothing outweighs the importance of gaining revenge. There are lessons which must be taught to those who dare oppose the Dark Lord and his faithful followers. But perhaps you are right this time. We will deal with the hags once the war is over."

Draco relaxed a little. "Along with all the other cowards who refused to take a side," he reminded Lucius.

"Of course." Lucius smiled his approval.

Draco breathed freely again; hopefully that had put a little space between the hags and Lucius' attentions. He and Lupin and Snape had discussed whether or not that tip should be included at all; it was risky, they all knew. "Just one another thing," he said. "The Ministry of Magic building is weaker than they are letting on. The hex tangles have set the curse-breakers back a fair ways. Do not be deceived by the strong front the Ministry presents."

His father's eyes gleamed. "Excellent," he pronounced. "We will attack it again, in that case. Good work, Draco." He beamed and gestured at the teapot. "More tea?"

"I'm alright," Draco said. Privately, he thought with satisfaction of the strengthening holds all around the Ministry. In truth, it was the Diagon Alley outpost of the Ministry which was particularly vulnerable at the moment. This attack might draw attention away from it while the curse-breaking teams shored up the Diagon Alley office's defences.

Lucius refilled his own cup. "And you, son? How is life amongst the dirty half-breeds?"

Draco thought of the terrible barracks food and minimal privacy, and let his natural expression come forth. "Disgusting," he said, not quite forcefully. "I don't know how I'm going to stand it for the duration of the war. I suppose it's all for the cause."

"Don't forget that," Lucius warned. He tapped two fingers against his own left forearm through the silky layers of black robe in reminder. "This is what you have committed. I know that you know this."

"I do," Draco said, feeling hollow.

Lucius relaxed. "Of course. How long are you staying?"

Draco made a play of glancing at the clock. "Not long. I must be back in time for a noon meeting."

"At their Headquarters?" The question was subtle - casual, but with a hint of suppressed drive, a keen hunger to know.

Draco hesitated. "Yes - but its location and many other facts about it are in the care of a *Fidelius* charm."

"Ah." Lucius sounded slightly disappointed. "Do you know who the Secret Keeper is?"

"No," Draco said.

Their eyes met again. "Very well," Lucius said eventually. "I'll see you out, then."

Draco set his cup down and got up. Lucius silently led the way back to the Apparating Chamber. Draco ran one finger along the oak panelling as they went, as though trying to ingrain the memory of it into his very flesh. Perhaps his clothes would pick up the scent.

Lucius faced him in the Chamber. "Try to get some leave in awhile," he urged. "Come and stay. It's too quiet here without you."

Draco nodded as something in him trembled and threatened to break off. "Yes, Father. I'll try. It will... depend on how things are going."

"Of course." Lucius' tone was gracious, accepting. He held out his hand. Draco put his

in it, to shake, but Lucius' other hand closed over his warmly. "Be safe."

"I will." Draco kept his voice steady. "I will see you in three weeks, then. After your raid."

"Same time," Lucius confirmed. "Go."

Draco pulled his hand back to himself and Disapparated.

* * *

Justin kicked him lightly under the table. "What was that, before?"

Harry squashed a blob of scrambled egg with his fork and watched the water ooze out. "What was what?"

"In the room," Justin said. "With Malfoy. And what the fuck is Malfoy doing in our room, by the way?"

"He's a spy," Harry said evasively. "On our side."

Justin paused. "So," he said slowly, as though trying to get the point across to a very dense child, "what was all that about?"

Harry didn't look up, though he could feel Justin's dark eyes boring into his forehead. "All what?"

Justin exhaled tensely. "That whole awkward thing he had at the door, there."

Harry thought back. He recalled the look of surprised - something - in Malfoy's eyes. He didn't know what it had been, but either way, he didn't feel like discussing it with Justin. It had been nice that Justin had come back last night. He'd heard the news about Ginny

and woken Harry up to check on him, see if he was alright. Which he wasn't, really, but he felt better after having finally cried about it. He was embarrassed that Malfoy had caught him at it, though. Not to mention the fact that he'd obviously seen the way he and Justin had been together. Just another thing for the git to add to his ammunition against Harry. "I don't remember anything," he said vaguely.

Justin made an impatient noise. "You don't remember how he stopped, stared at us, then basically ran out the door?"

"Not really," Harry said distantly. His eyes flicked about the hall, but Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he, anyway?" Justin asked, craning his neck to look around. "I haven't seen him since then, and I was here before, while you were in the shower."

Harry shrugged. "On assignment, probably."

"He didn't take anything with him when he left the room, not even a cloak," Justin pointed out.

Harry stood. "I need some coffee."

Justin sighed, but said nothing. Harry walked away, needing very much to be away from him for the moment. He didn't know why Justin's questions about Malfoy bothered him, but they did. How was *he* supposed to know what was going on with Malfoy? It wasn't like they talked or anything.

He held down the spigot of the coffee urn and watched the dark liquid stream into his cup, almost waiting too long before shutting it off. The cup was very full and he stood at the table, blowing on it and sipping it with his back to the rest of the hall, including Justin. He didn't want to go back, really. Justin didn't really rival any of his own friends, no matter how nice it had been to have someone - almost *anyone* - be there with him earlier. But he wasn't someone that Harry could really talk to. Now that the question of Malfoy's odd behaviour had been raised, he wanted to go and think about it by himself.

He's probably just shocked because you're gay, Harry told him resolutely. Perhaps it didn't even need thinking about. He went back to the table.

"How can you drink that stuff?" Justin asked, playing with a black currant teabag.

Harry had no idea whether Justin was planning to make tea with it or just going to play with it all morning, but both that and the question annoyed him. He shrugged and said nothing, taking another sip.

Justin studied him. "I'm leaving today," he said flatly. "I'm on a new team and we're being assigned to the Diagon Alley Ministry office late this afternoon. It could well be attacked."

His tone was slightly defensive, as though he knew Harry was annoyed with him and wanted to provoke him into remorse over the potential dangers of Justin being hurt or worse. Harry didn't enjoy being provoked, but said, dutifully, "Be careful, then."

"We always are."

So Hufflepuff, always thinking in "we" terms like that. Harry took another sip of his coffee. "I don't know when I'm getting my next assignment."

"Are you on compassionate leave or something?"

"I don't know. I just know that they haven't given me anything since before." Before what, Harry didn't say. Presumably Justin wouldn't make him say it.

He didn't. "I'm going to get some hot water," Justin said, getting to his feet.

Relief. Harry stood, too. "... I've got some stuff to do," he said, hardly mustering the energy to mask his indifference to Justin's presence. "Laundry and so forth. I'll see you at lunch, maybe."

Justin nodded, also looking slightly relieved. "Right. See you later, then."

Harry drained his cup and set it on the cart for dirty dishes on his way out.

* * *

He was lying on his back in the middle of a field full of stubby clumps of grass. The wind was not strong, but enough to take the edge off the heat of midday. Lunch had been awkward, but it was over now. Harry, devoutly grateful, had made a similar escape and had come out here to think.

What was wrong with him, anyway? Why did he always resist Justin like that? And if he wasn't happy with it, then why not try someone else? Merlin knew there were enough people interested, apparently. No one interested him; how fair was that? Just another spectacular example of the imbalances of the universe. He wanted something, perhaps even someone, but didn't know what. Whereas everyone else apparently wanted something they didn't know. An icon of supposed heroics. Pity no one actually knew the empty, critical, pessimistic person that Harry Potter truly was.

A failure at the tender age of twenty-four who barely cared whether he lived long enough to see twenty-five. That's what he was.

He mostly felt tired now. Still drained over Ginny's death, and more drained at his utter lack of ability to do anything for the people he loved who were also in pain about it. He had nothing to give back, no support, no sympathetic tears, no assuring words of wisdom, and hardly even the decency to return the hugs people kept trying to give or elicit from him.

Last year, when Harry'd tried Muggle antidepressants, they'd only made him more tired and apathetic than he'd already been. Snape had tried giving him things. Potions and the like. Harry had insisted that drugs were not going to make the war go away, nor his responsibility in it. Lupin had been sitting by his bed sometime after the shower incident and said, very gently, "I know that, Harry. I just wish there was a way to make it easier to deal with."

Harry's hands had still been wrinkled and pruny from overexposure to the water. "There isn't," he'd said, staring at them.

Lupin had nodded, wordless. "But sitting in the shower for ages isn't the way to go about trying," he'd said, still gently. "Just what were you trying to do, Harry? Drown yourself?"

Harry had closed his eyes. "I don't know."

"Well, think about it. And please don't do it again."

For Remus, maybe he could do that. Harry had nodded, eyes still closed. Sometime later, he'd fallen asleep. Lupin hadn't moved, had still been sitting there when he'd woke up again.

No one talked about that time any more, and Harry had all but forgotten it. Now he remembered. What *had* he been trying to do? Madam Pomfrey had reluctantly admitted that Harry was right - it wasn't a chemical imbalance; it was merely the oppressive truth that was weighing Harry down. They'd stopped giving him things to try.

Harry opened his eyes. The sun was blinding. He shielded his face and sat up, only to see Malfoy walking from the main hall toward the eighth bunkhouse. Curious. Where had he been, then? Off spying? For half a day? Malfoy turned then, and saw him. Harry was caught staring. He gave a feeble wave. Malfoy just looked at him for a long moment - they were too far apart to speak, even in raised voices. He didn't wave back, just turned away and went into the room.

Harry didn't follow him.

* * *

Harry didn't know whether it was just his imagination, but the overall speed and urgency of the war appeared to be increasing. There were outbreaks of open battle; the Infirmary

was half-full all the time now. Ron had been injured again, and Harry had spent an anxious night at his side. Hermione had been re-posted to York - her work as an Unspeakable had always been mysterious, but Harry was at a loss to explain York as a placement. He missed her rather dreadfully, but was still unable to write interesting letters in return to hers - generally one to every three of those which he received from her. Ron had been different, somehow, ever since Ginny had died. Quieter. More determined. They had fewer nights in the pubs, more just around the barracks grounds. It was getting less and less safe to venture outside the wards.

Harry's assignments had been dwindling, but now he'd finally gotten one - a rather more dangerous one, too - with Ron. They were sent to some back end of London, an area Harry didn't know, had never seen before and was hoping never to see again. Several hours and an unexpected duel with a lot of masked figures later, they stumbled back to the barracks. Harry was bleeding openly from the upper arm; Ron from the nose. They deposited Susan Bones in the Infirmary, signed her in and went to find bandaging and the like for themselves. Leaning against a wall, Ron held a wet flannel to his face and said thickly, "I don't know, mate. This is all getting pretty hopeless, don't you think?"

Harry was tired, but slightly less apathetic than he'd been the week before. He was busy studying the jagged tear in the skin of his arm, swiping at it with the alcohol pad. "We are sort of outnumbered," he agreed. "But I thought we did well. We didn't lose anyone."

Ron snorted. "'Well'," he repeated dubiously. "Meaning no one died. But I think it's obvious we're losing the war, Harry."

Harry looked up sharply. "I know that!" he snapped suddenly, blood pooling in his cheeks. His heart rate soared, likely along with his blood pressure. "If that's your subtle way of trying to tell me to get on with it - "

"Harry - " Ron stopped, a new voice cutting across his hurt in a sneer.

"Potter, shut your mouth. Even I can tell that Weasley didn't mean it like that." Malfoy stood in the open doorway to the Infirmary. A hand was pressed to his ribcage, but apart from looking a little tired, he didn't seem badly injured.

Harry experienced an odd flutter of emotion. He hadn't seen Malfoy since that day when

he'd waved at him and Malfoy hadn't waved back. By the time he'd gone in, Malfoy was in the shower. When he'd emerged, he'd taken one look at Harry, hung up his towel on a peg and left the room without a word. He'd been gone ever since, and Harry had been eaten with curiosity to know where he'd been.

"Malfoy," he said. "What are you doing here?"

The sneer didn't budge. "What do you think, Potter?" Harry didn't answer, and Malfoy's expression faltered a little. "Need to see someone," he said in grudging admission. "I think I triggered a hex."

"What have you been doing?" Ron asked bluntly, unable to curb his curiosity. He'd known Malfoy was apparently on their side now, but had never really believed it.

Malfoy glared again. "Still working at the Diagon Alley Ministry office, where I've been all week," he said. "It's too far to Apparate here every night, so we've been sleeping somewhere else."

"Who's we?" Ron demanded.

Malfoy shrugged. "My team and I. Have you seen any of the Healers?" He managed not to look at either of them as he asked.

Harry was annoyed. He wanted Malfoy to notice him, talk to him. He wasn't going to analyze the reasons why. He just did. "There's one in the ward toward the end," he said, jerking his head in the appropriate direction. "What happened?"

"It's none of your business," Malfoy said coolly, though Harry noticed his pale hand gripping a little tighter.

Ron gave him a scrutinizing look. "Damage to the ribs? Was it one of those purple, flashy things?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Eloquent as ever, Weasley. Yes, it was one of those."

Harry cleared his throat. "I actually have some antidote for that - I kept getting hit with it at the Diagon Alley entrance way, so Snape gave me some. It's in the bunkhouse." He watched Malfoy, waiting.

Malfoy was obviously torn. He cast a glance in the direction of the Infirmary, but it was rather apparent that there weren't enough staff to deal with the less-than-fatal injuries at the moment. "Okay," he said finally.

Ron looked at Harry, raising his eyebrows. "I was going to go to the hall and see if I've any letters," he said, "but - "

"It's fine, Ron," Harry said firmly. "Go ahead, I'll meet you there."

Ron hesitated. "Maybe I should - "

"Go on, Weasley," Malfoy said, his sneer returning. "Potter's a big boy. He'll be okay without you baby-sitting him for five minutes."

Ron opened his mouth, but closed it again at Harry's look. "I'll see you soon," Harry said quietly.

Ron sighed, shrugged in a helpless sort of way, and went. Harry glanced at Malfoy and nodded toward the door. "Let's go then. You alright?"

Malfoy grimaced, but actually answered him. "I'll be fine. Let's just not dawdle."

"It hurts, I know," Harry said. "I've gotten that one quite a few times before."

"So you said," Malfoy said boredly.

Harry suppressed a sigh and gave up trying to talk to him. They arrived at the bunkhouse in silence. It was empty. Something suspiciously akin to butterflies made a nervous appearance in Harry's belly for whatever reason. He ignored it, went to his pack and brought out the little bottle of antidote. It was a topical potion. Harry handed the bottle over and pointedly averted his gaze.

Malfoy took it from him without a word, turned slightly away and began parting his robes to expose the skin covering his ribs. His shirt pulled up, Malfoy looked down, trying to survey the damage. "Fuck," he muttered.

Harry waited a moment. Then - "What?"

"I don't suppose you have a mirror."

"Nope."

Malfoy said nothing, just went into the lav. "Shit," he said, coming out again. "It's not low enough and I can't really see well enough to put this on. Could you just tell me if I've got all the bruised area?"

"I guess," Harry said, not particularly graciously.

Malfoy turned to him, his t-shirt pulled up above his nipples. Harry swallowed something. A chanced glance at the abdomen showed an even-better toned belly than the glimpse Harry recalled from Hogwarts days. It was very pale and appeared very firm. The bruising from the curse spread well over the right side of Malfoy's torso, however, and looked quite painful. Some of the internal bleeding had begun breaking through the skin; the curse was essentially corrosive and continued to work on its victim until treated. Malfoy began to dab the potion on, wincing as his fingers touched the skin.

"A bit lower," Harry said, hardly breathing.

If Malfoy noticed anything odd in his tone, he didn't comment on it. "Have I got it?"

"Yeah. Now more to the inside," Harry said, watching fascinated as those long, pale fingers rubbed small, gentle circles over the bloodied, purpling flesh. Malfoy's ribs were just visible and Harry rather wanted to touch them. Rub his thumbs - or his tongue - over those nipples, feel them harden under his touch - *It's just a physical reaction*, he told himself firmly. *Just stop it.*

"Is that - "

"I think that's it." Harry tore his eyes away, feigning disinterest.

Malfoy gave him a long, measuring look. "Thank you," he said finally. He turned away, toward his own bed, leaving his shirt up for the potion to dry. He didn't say another word.

Harry fought a small inward battle, then got up and silently left the room.

* * *

Draco listened for the snick of the latch catching behind Potter, then pulled off his robes and t-shirt both. The potion was sticky and he didn't want it on his clothes. He wasn't sure how he felt about being back here - the bland, white-walled room in the other building (wherever it was; he *hated* Apparating to a set of coordinates) had been dull, but this was depressing. And he especially didn't know how he felt about Potter in general. Mind, Potter had always been a confusing topic; there was no reason that should change now. But Draco rather wished that he could just go about his business without Potter having to be a part of it for once.

It had always been the same. Potter would always be there, always overshadowing him, always showing up his inadequacies. Draco lay gingerly down on his back and stared at the ceiling until he was certain that Potter and Weasley would have finished eating and returning to the room. Thus, he deliberately continued his carefully engineered avoidance of the entire, uncomfortable subject.

It had always been Potter.

Wars would come and wars would go, but Potter was evidently a constant. The permanent reminder of Draco's ongoing personal failure even by the tender age of twenty-four.

Chapter Six

The action had been steadily getting thicker, more intense. The Infirmary was constantly full to overflowing; the Healers were at a loss as to how to cure everyone quickly enough to satisfy the demands of the turnover. As well, several layers of dormant cursing in and around St. Mungo's had been activated, so that resource was no longer safe, either.

They were losing.

Harry was heavily aware of this fact. And fact it was. He had no idea where Voldemort had gotten so many followers from, but they appeared to be increasing dramatically. Perhaps, as Wormtail had once said, the public believed that there was nothing to be gained in resisting what they presumed would be the victorious side. And perhaps they were right. Harry, passing the Infirmary on an almost daily basis, could not help but feel that anyone who had any faith in his abilities was a damned fool. Including himself. How was he to rival power of this magnitude and breadth? Voldemort *was* taking over everywhere. Resistance was fatal, for the most part. The casualty lists had been growing as dramatically as the numbers of Voldemort's ranks.

Hermione, at least, had been transferred back to London at last. Every ounce of power the Order's side knew of was being recalled to London. The situation was growing desperate. It was very good to have her about - calming in her own way, ever competent, if as bossy as always. She and Ron generally wore quietly troubled looks and pointedly avoided the topic of the war whenever possible in Harry's company. He appreciated it to a certain extent, but knew better.

The other bonus, in a way, was that their own ranks had also increased significantly. Since the last outbreak of fires all over London (and Harry had no idea how the Aurors were explaining *that* one to the Muggles), a number of recruits, volunteers and conscripts had joined the army. The trouble was that the spells holding up the considerable number of wards around the barracks were at their maximum and could only support so much physical space. And as no one was willing to compromise what was rapidly becoming one of the only safe places left in Britain, compromises of another sort were made. Specifically, sleeping space. It was now common practise, if

uncomfortable, for the bunkhouse beds to be shared. Those responsible had come around and enlarged them all to roughly the size of double beds; there was no more room if they were to get in and out as well, and also store their belongings somewhere.

Harry generally slept in the same place, leaving the half nearest to the door empty, should someone come to claim it. This was almost the worst part of the war, in his opinion. He treasured his privacy (such as it had been) and always breathed a sigh of relief on those rare nights when circumstances had permitted him to fall asleep without some stranger snoring beside him, or woke up without anyone sprawling onto his half of the bed. Nights at Grimmauld Place became a rare luxury - not to mention the food.

Hermione had told both he and Ron about food rationing in Britain during the second Muggle world war, and had adjured them to be grateful for the slop they were served in the main hall each day. Harry recalled having exchanged an extremely dubious look with Ron at this juncture, but remarkably, neither of them had said anything. Sitting time had also become precious; it was difficult to get a seat at meals; one had to queue for both the food and then a seat or an empty space of floor for ages. When it was possible to secure three spots together at a table during the occasions that all three of them were there, both Harry and Ron knew better than to waste it by arguing with Hermione. Much simpler to just let her have her way, really. And she had mellowed some, anyway. Fatigue was taking its toll even on Hermione, it seemed.

Her work involved St. Mungo's. Always inside, working at removing the spells over the particularly vital wards affected by the curses. Ron and Harry roved as they were assigned - though as always, Harry was routinely given the least-dangerous assignments. He'd owled Grimmauld Place repeatedly, requesting meetings with Dumbledore, but all anyone would tell him was that Dumbledore was constantly busy. With what, precisely, no one could ever tell him - or else those three or so who could, didn't. Not a visit or meeting at Grimmauld Place went without Harry's grilling of the two men who lived there, as well as Professor McGonagall, when she happened to be about. Snape just gave him dark looks and ignored him, while Lupin gave him kindly looks and said nothing. McGonagall simply sniffed and changed the subject.

It was useless. Harry was simply going to have to find a way to win this war by himself, or not at all. This was growing intolerable.

* * *

There were other aspects of his life that Harry was finding intolerable as well. His appetite had shrunk considerably, even if some of his physical appetites had not. But Harry was beginning to wonder if, should the war ever end, he would still be capable of digesting proper food. As well, he suspected that he'd developed something of a caffeine addiction. His hands shook when he'd gone without it all day, and he grew increasingly irritable. Not that *that* was necessarily any indication - Harry was constantly irritable these days.

A fortnight after the incident with Malfoy and the incident with the potion, as Harry privately called it (though there was no "incident" as such), Harry left lunch early and returned to the bunkhouse. He'd been about to go in when he thought he heard a sound from behind the small, wooden structure. Hand lingering on the doorknob, Harry paused to listen. Yes, there was definitely something. He went back down the two uneven steps and quietly made his way around to the back.

His jaw fell open in - not shock, exactly, but certainly a good deal of surprise. There were two people behind the bunkhouse, one leaning up against the narrow bole of a tree while another, on his knees, sucked him off. The one on his knees was young, blond - Harry searched mentally for the name - Alex Smith, that was it. The person standing was Justin Finch-Fletchley.

It wasn't that they'd ever made any sort of commitment. They hadn't. Nothing had ever been said - or done - about being exclusive. To be honest, Harry didn't particularly have any strong feelings toward Justin one way or another. But he'd come to expect that when they were both there at the barracks, they were somewhat together. Not this. He hadn't been expecting this.

Their eyes met instantly. Alex, with his back to Harry, didn't notice his arrival and continued what he was doing. Justin made no move to stop him. The moment grew awkward. Harry realized what a fool he must look, standing there, jaw agape, watching the blow job. Justin looked unhappy about the fact that he was there, as well as rather awkward. Well, as awkward as one *could* look in such a position; it was rather obvious that he was enjoying the proceedings greatly.

"Harry - just go," Justin panted. "I'll talk to you later."

Alex made an alarmed sound and jerked away to turn around, eyes startled and wider than Harry's.

"No, don't stop," Justin told him, trying to smile - though it came out as more of a grimace of pleasure denied. He gently pulled the blond back to himself, urging him to continue. "I'll deal with that later. Sorry."

He was speaking to Alex. Harry came to his senses, shook his head. "No," he said harshly. "There's nothing to deal with."

Justin managed a shrug, panting. "Suit yourself, then."

Harry turned and stumbled away, his face burning with anger and humiliation. He knew that he hadn't exactly been great company lately, but he rather thought it was justified behaviour on his part. He was Harry Potter, and his side of the war was losing. He'd lost a good friend not a month ago. His one military advisor was too busy to spare him a passing word, and he had no direction, no tactics, no guidance. He was miserable, and it showed.

But he still hadn't expected this, this perfidy - from a Hufflepuff! Harry guiltily allowed himself a moment of self-righteous House pride. No Gryffindor would have done that - gone sneaking around behind people's backs like that. Harry thought of Peter Pettigrew with sudden violence, and cancelled his previous thought.

Malfoy came to mind - sneaking around, with supposedly Gryffindor purpose. Interesting contrast, that. Harry opened the door to the bunkhouse. It was empty, save for a lone figure lounging on a bed across the way. Speak of the devil. It was Malfoy.

"Oh, gods," Harry groaned. "I can't deal with you right now." Without waiting for a reply, he turned right back around and opted for his favourite bit of field instead, pulling the door closed behind him quickly enough to have been termed a slam.

* * *

Draco watched the coffee pour into his cup and wondered that it didn't come out in lumps, it was so strong and thick. Disgusting. He moved away from the counter, eyes drifting automatically over the available seating with little to no hope of finding a seat. No. Everywhere was full. He stifled a sigh and took the coffee outdoors.

Not that it would have changed anything, but he'd have liked to know that the situation was going to be like this when he'd signed on for staying in this place. At least it was good for giving false information - there were so many people here that he could easily drop a name and a location and not have it be his fault that it didn't come true. He could claim lack of organization, which certainly wasn't untrue. It was a wonder these people were even *hoping* to win the war. It was ludicrous, even.

"What am I supposed to say?" Draco had demanded upon his last meeting with Snape. "There's nothing I can tell him that won't betray us, and I have to give him *something* to go on, or else he'll know. I've given too many false leads now."

Snape had leaned back in his desk chair and sighed, the lines in his face made darker in the yellowing light of an incandescent bulb in the lamp standing beside the desk. "I know. I spoke to Dumbledore yesterday, and got virtually nowhere."

"Where is he?" Draco asked intently. It was the question going around the camp, not that he spoke to anyone on any sort of regular basis. It was difficult not to overhear rumours, though, in crowded queues and bunkhouses.

Snape gave him a stern look. "It is strictly impossible to say, Malfoy. When he is even physically present, his location is protected by *Fidelius*. I cannot reveal it."

"You're his Secret Keeper?"

"I am." Snape lifted his snifter of scotch and drank. "Please do not ask me again."

"Of course not," Draco said, immediately deferential. He knew when he'd gone too far, pushed the barriers a little too hard. He changed tacks. "What's the latest on St. Mungo's?"

Snape frowned. "How long has it been since you were last at the barracks?"

Draco thought. "I was at the Manor last night and the night before, I was here. Wednesday, then."

Snape pushed a pile of parchments around, searching for something. "Here." He'd found it, was thrusting it at Draco. "Thursday morning's bulletin."

Draco took it. He scanned quickly, mouth opening. "The *Healers*?!"

"So it would seem." The tone was as grim as Snape's weary face. "About an eighth of the staff, they presume. Turned on the other Healers and some of the more able-bodied patients both."

Draco was actually shocked. "That violates all of those strict medical oaths and layers and layers of protective spellwork, and - "

"I am aware of this," Snape cut in, his voice hard. His eyes glittered with that trace of something he'd never quite lost since he'd learned of Draco's Marking. "You of all people should know what people are willing to go through and do for their loyalty to the Dark Lord."

Draco was stung. "I'm hardly in the middle of it all," he said stiffly.

"You bear the Mark. That is enough," Snape said, not quite dismissively, but close enough.

Draco swallowed and battled down his emotions. "Was that a condemnation?" he asked, unable to keep quite all of the bitterness from his voice. "Am I wasting my time here?"

Snape looked him in the eye. "You tell me."

Draco opened his mouth, closed it again. There was a slight pressure at the base of his throat, and made speaking difficult. "No." It felt like a lie. He didn't even know if it was one or not.

A long moment of silence passed. Finally, Snape nodded toward his still-full glass. "Drink your drink," he said. Not as roughly as he could have. "I rather think you could do with it."

Draco didn't look at him. "It's always going to be like this, isn't it?" That pressure was still there, still driving into his throat like an iron collar. Bitterness collected within him; beneath his tongue, on the surface of his skin, against the backs of his eyes.

Snape didn't answer. After a moment, Draco picked up the glass and drained it. It was too strong, and yet not strong enough. It tasted dreadful.

* * *

Draco lay back on his - the "his" being a very loose and continually shifting term here - bed and passed the time trying to think of creative new lies to tell his father. The fact was, however, that he was rather distracted by the fact that he was lying on a bed and therefore somewhat automatically thinking of activities that went along with being in a bed, at least sometimes. He was horny as hell and craving just about anyone right now. Anyone male and halfway attractive, at least.

His most recent wanking fantasies he'd kept deliberately shifting and faceless. It was never ideal to get too attached to one particular face, he'd decided. Besides, one never knew what one's mind would come up with, given the freedom to do as it pleased. Draco had already ruled out getting involved with anyone until the war was over, should he live that long. And getting involved with anyone *here* was virtually unthinkable. So, for the duration, it would have to be his hand. It was familiar, and had no mouth to open to go spilling his secrets, anyway.

The trouble was timing. The shower was about it, and they only got five minutes to the second now, anyway; there was always such a long wait for the showers as it was.

Draco was sure that most of the other men staying in the bunkhouse did exactly as he did - washed his hair and scrubbed over the rest of his body as quickly as possible, so as to enjoy as much of the hot water and privacy as possible in more pleasurable pursuits. Some days, it was all that kept him sane, or so he felt.

Seven years spent more or less in the Manor library had taught Draco the art of self-sufficiency, if nothing else.

Now, though - he was alone. Everyone else would be in the hall, trying to eat dinner. His cock was hard in his trousers. He *could* go to the lav, technically, and get himself off there, but he was comfortable where he was. It was close to the beginning of the supper hour, and surely most people would be in the hall. Having come from Grimmauld Place, he'd eaten with Snape and returned here, rather against his will. Draco kept his eyes on the door and began to massage his cock through his trousers. It hardened further, pushing against the material of his boxers. He pushed it flat to his body and rubbed along the underside, slowly, firmly. The added layer of his trousers was not bad at the moment - and would afford him some measure of privacy, should the door suddenly burst open.

Which it did, no sooner than he'd thought that. Startled, Draco scrambled into a sitting position, picking up a book (he'd been trying to read earlier) and holding it just in front of himself, open. It was Potter, who had apparently not even seen him, or else was ignoring him. He was muttering to himself, sounding rather belligerent.

"... lecturing me about eating those goddamned carrots. They were fucking freeze-dried; I'm not eating that shit. Besides, if she wants to lecture someone, that's what her *boyfriend's* there for, not *me*. I - "

"Gods, Potter, put a cork in it," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "I'm trying to read here."

Potter nearly jumped out of his skin. He whirled around. "I didn't know that you - that anyone was in here!"

Draco just sneered. "Granger giving you an earful about eating your vegetables, Potter?"

Potter's cheeks flamed. "Shut it. I was talking to myself, not you."

"So it would seem." Draco returned to his book, or made it look like it, at any rate.

Potter shifted his weight, awkward. "Why aren't you at dinner?"

Draco sighed, not particularly subtly, and looked up. "I ate at Grimmauld Place."

"Was Dumbledore there?"

"No. And he's being protected by Snape's *Fidelius*, so good luck ever finding out where he is," Draco said bluntly.

Potter looked angry. "Damn it! I need to talk to him!"

"I have no doubt that you do," Draco said dryly. "In the meanwhile, I'm trying to read, as I said, so - "

"Oh, shut up!" Potter snapped, as irritable as ever. Although he'd been particularly irritable since the week before, and Draco had noticed with especial interest that Finch-Fletchley had been in a rather bad mood the week before as well, and had spent next to no time in the bunkhouse before leaving for his next assignment again.

Draco wouldn't admit that he was pleased they'd broken up, if they had. He just figured that if he had to suffer in sexless gloom, everyone else should, too. He shrugged.

"You're the one making noise, Potter."

Potter huffed about a little longer, then left, slamming the door behind him. Also as per usual. There was something about his rage that was apparently rather appealing. Draco found himself harder than ever - but refused to admit that Potter had anything to do with the incredibly hard, fast jerking off he performed on himself almost the instant the door had closed - his hand down his unzipped trousers, his cock sticking out for anyone to

see. It was just the rage he liked; it had nothing whatsoever to do with Potter. And if it did, well then, that was just his own weakness. It wasn't as though he was ever going to do anything about it. Draco came with a groan, watching his come arc up to land between his legs on the blankets beneath him. There was perspiration on his face. He fumbled for his wand to clean himself and the blankets, then staggered into the lav to wash his face and hands.

* * *

Another week passed. The news of the Diagon Alley outpost being taken had hit and faded already, leaving another numb wake of disbelief behind. Harry could hardly even register bad news any more; there was simply so much of it. Dean and Derek Thomas' father had been killed, posted out in East London near where they'd lived growing up. Seamus' crotchety mother and eldest sister had been killed in Cork, during a wave of firebombing. The lists were long, and came out daily. Sometimes more often.

Harry had been sent back early - he was at the Ministry, with everyone else who wasn't somewhere equally important - Diagon Alley in general, Hogsmeade, St. Mungo's, Hogwarts. It had gotten too dangerous, Lupin had told him firmly. Dumbledore's orders. Harry's oath bound him to obey, so he'd gone. Leaving Ron, Hermione, Dean, Neville and countless others he'd gone to school with, trained as an Auror with - and he was leaving them instead of saving them. He changed, hating the world and himself most of all, and got into bed. And still felt selfish enough to hope that no one else would come to claim the other side. Even if he happened to belong on the floor.

As it got later, the battle apparently ended for the night, and people started to come back. The cracks of Apparition all around the fields went off regularly. The eighth bunkhouse filled rapidly. Every bed but Harry's was doubly occupied. There had been a great deal of hustle and bustle and lights being turned on and raised voices - or worse, loud whispers - and Harry reflected grimly that it was just as well that he hadn't been able to sleep yet. Eventually, things settled down. People began to fall asleep.

As always, once it grew dark and quiet, some people inevitably cried. Bunkhouse eight was all men, men who'd been brought up to believe in the policy of the stiff upper lip - but war was different. They all knew that. Muffled crying was tactfully ignored by all and sundry, as well as muffled everything else. Depressed beyond anything, Harry was still somehow restless, craving human contact but feeling too wretchedly unworthy of it to be able to ask for or probably even accept it, at the moment. He lay with his back to the

door (he always left the door side of the bed empty, in case there was going to be a new arrival) and slid his hand into his pyjama pants. They were all he was wearing.

In the closeness and dark, he could just see the outline of the stranger in the next bed's face, half-buried in a ragged bit of pillow. He was sleeping, and that was the main thing. Varied snores filled the small room, providing an often obnoxious but much-needed background noise. Harry's fingers slid past his cock, settled gently on his balls and began to rub the thumb of his other hand over the slit of his cock. Ah. Relief. Stolen moments in the dark - he'd gotten very quiet during his third and fourth years at Hogwarts, before Silencing spells had been taught. And even then, one never trusted them completely. Not for this. Harry had learned to be discreet.

He was just getting into a rhythm when a door opened. *Damn it.* There was only one space left, and that was the one in his bed. One of the night watchers had delivered whomever it was; her voice was mercifully quiet, her torch shining into the room. It was past one in the morning now. Harry's hand stilled, and he held his breath.

"This one, here," the female voice whispered, exuding briskness and efficiency. "Yes, right by the door. No complaints, now - everywhere else is full up. It's this or the floor in the main hall, and you know early things get going in there. Good night." She left, the door pulled quietly closed behind her.

Harry listened to the newcomer strip off his clothes, shove shoes under the bed (otherwise they'd likely get kicked out the door come morning). Harry felt the blanket - each bed was only given one, a fact that had been complained about loudly, especially from the men, but nothing had been done about it - being lifted, and someone slid in. His curiosity bested him. Harry turned over and looked, his knees raised to hide his state of painful erection.

A pair of wide, contemptuous eyes met his. "Malfoy," Harry whispered in disgust. "Gods. What did I do to deserve this?"

"Shut the fuck up, Potter!" Malfoy spat, though in a whisper. "It's this or the floor. You heard her. I'm not sleeping on the floor. Shut up and turn that way, please. Much as I'm sure you'd love to fall asleep gazing at my face, you're hardly the sort of bloke I dream of."

Harry froze. *Blake? What the fuck?!* "Right," he said, hardly hearing himself, and did just that. *Malfoy's gay. Why didn't I know? Why didn't I know???* It wouldn't have changed anything, but somehow it seemed so important all of a sudden. Probably just because it was late and Harry was in rather extreme need of release at the moment. Release which he wasn't going to *get*, obviously - not with someone else there in the bed, particularly *Malfoy*.

Although that thought wasn't helping any. Harry tried to think about other things, but he'd never been so aware of the fact that there was another person in the bed with him. Malfoy shifted minutely, and Harry's entire body was aware of the fact. True, he despised him on a personal level, but - he was aching with need, and Malfoy was extremely attractive. It was late. He knew that. But it was that dangerous hour when fantasies roam free, and strange possibilities occur to the mind. A flood of them, all involving Malfoy, danced through Harry's feverish head, each less probable than the one preceding it, and all extraordinarily arousing.

The silence grew. The snores settled into regular rhythms. Harry had never been more wide awake. His erection hadn't dimmed any, and it had been ten full, long minutes since Malfoy had gotten into the bed.

"Are you still awake?" he finally whispered, barely audibly.

Malfoy shifted again. "Yes."

"Were you at the battle?"

A movement of impatience, as though Malfoy had fidgeted in irritation. "No. I was... at my father's house."

"Telling him lies, I hope," Harry said, without malice.

"As always." Malfoy sounded very weary.

Harry suddenly experienced a gleam of sympathy for the other. It couldn't be easy, doing that. He couldn't understand the attachment to Lucius Malfoy, of all people, but it was still Malfoy's *father*. It would be hard.

"Was it bad?" Malfoy whispered finally.

"The battle? Yeah. Although I wouldn't really know, given that I always get sent home early when the goings get particularly rough," Harry answered bitterly. "But yeah. Casualties, definitely."

"Oh." Malfoy fell silent. They lay there a while longer, and the silence grew uncomfortable.

Harry fidgeted. "Malfoy, I - "

"*What*, Potter? I'm actually trying to sleep here."

Harry, thrown back upon himself, lashed out. "Never mind, then!"

He settled into a huffy silence himself, and waited for sleep to carry him off. It wasn't happening. Damn it, why wouldn't it? The fantasies came back, and his cock throbbed. Maybe he could just - just a little, *really* quietly. Harry gripped it through his pyjama pants, but didn't rub. Malfoy would hear it, or at least feel the movement. Harry imagined Malfoy accidentally rolling over in the night, rolling up against him, and he would be hard; his cock would touch Harry's leg, and within seconds, they'd be humping each other frantically, or maybe Harry would even fuck him. The last time he'd had sex had been over three weeks ago, the last time Justin had been at the camp before now. Things were obviously still rather awkward, but Harry wasn't even thinking of him now.

He was lying on his back, his left hand secured to his cock, his right lying on the bed beside him - between him and Malfoy. Wondering how far over the other was, Harry quietly slid his fingers over a little, just looking for the edge of Malfoy's pants or something.

What they touched were fingers. Startled, almost panicking, Harry turned his head and saw Malfoy looking at him. The silence could have been cut with a knife. The moment lasted perhaps less than three seconds, but the tension was palpable. Their fingers were touching. Harry's entire arm was on fire, or so it felt like. Then the moment snapped - Malfoy suddenly flipped Harry's hand over, palm up, fingers clamping around his wrist. "Not a fucking word, Potter," he breathed, and moving like lightning, was just as suddenly *there*, with a slight rustle of blanket, on top of Harry.

He was wearing pyjama pants, too, and it was instantly apparent that he was as hard as Harry was. Harry could hardly breathe; it had all happened so fast - Malfoy was lying on top of him, palm still pinioning Harry's wrist to the mattress. His other was shoving Harry's pants down and then his own, bringing their cocks together. Harry couldn't have spoken had a hundred wands been pointed at his head, had they been naked as the days they'd been born in the middle of the field outside. All he knew was that it felt so good and that it had been too long and that it was Malfoy, who for the moment stopped being anything other than his body to Harry.

Only, that wasn't exactly the case. Had it been *anyone* else, Harry would have felt almost instantly guilty. He didn't, now. Not with Malfoy. It was different. Malfoy's slender body was sliding against his, his eyes open and intense, boring smouldering grey holes into Harry's, their hips grinding together. Their cocks were forcefully rubbing against each other, slick with pre-come and damp heat. The fact that Harry couldn't move his right wrist at all somehow only heightened the entire experience. He finally remembered the existence of his left hand, and settled it on the hard curve of Malfoy's arse, just hungry to get that body closer to his, as close as possible or closer. Malfoy made a small sound when he did that, a small, needy sort of sound. Neither of them smiled or groaned or anything - there was just silence, except for the sounds of their bodies moving together and soft, suppressed breath.

Now was hardly the time to ponder what in hell's name Malfoy thought he was *doing*, or *why*, but Harry wasn't particularly interested in thinking at all at the moment, anyway. It felt incredible. He couldn't see it, of course, but Malfoy's cock felt as good as Harry'd been daydreaming it would. Malfoy was speeding up, his breath coming in soft puffs through his nose now. His right hand curled around both their cocks and jerked at them, hard. Harry was gritting his teeth, his mouth wanting to form a silent scream as the pleasure grew to nearly unbearable proportions. He was coming then; he'd been so close already, and it would have been impossible to resist Malfoy even if he'd tried. His hand, still gripping Malfoy's arse, didn't let go its hold, but tightened and pulled Malfoy harder against him, his cock trapped within Malfoy's fist against his own. And then Malfoy was coming, too; come sprayed wetly onto Harry's chest and belly. Malfoy's

breath escaped in a half-gasp and his hips relaxed against Harry's.

Only for a moment. As soon as his presence of mind had recovered itself, or whatever the hell that had been, Malfoy rolled off him. The rapid casting of spells could be heard, and Harry was mostly clean and entirely dry again. Malfoy turned his back on Harry immediately. "Just don't say *anything*," he said, his whisper both husky and menacing. "Don't make me hex you."

Harry nodded, still half-dazed, forgetting that Malfoy wouldn't see it. "Right," he said automatically. He fell asleep within about thirty seconds, resolving to actually think about it all come morning.

* * *

Morning came, and Malfoy was gone. Harry had woken when the noise of the room forced him to. It was perhaps eight in the morning. He moved slightly, and remembered the night before with a rush. It was strange enough to have been a dream. Harry was alone in the bed, though. Remembering - he bent over the far side of the bed. Malfoy's pack was still there. It had been real.

Harry's head swam. What on earth was he supposed to make of that? The very memory was uncomfortably arousing, given the bustle of the room, but the everything else about it was merely confusing. Or perhaps it didn't need to be. Perhaps Malfoy had just been looking for a way to get off, too. He obviously knew that Harry was gay, thanks to Justin, and perhaps the omnipresent tension between them was what got the git off. Although Harry had to admit that the very same tension had very likely fuelled his minute crush on Malfoy.

It wasn't a hard scenario to comprehend. It was attraction to the unattainable, nothing more. Malfoy was very fit, and Harry, being young and alive, had noticed. Malfoy had been the one to instigate whatever that had been last night; Malfoy could explain it if he wanted to. Harry resolved not to say a word.

The queue for the shower was oppressively long. Harry sighed, rolled over, and tried to go back to sleep.

* * *

Draco had woken at dawn, instantly remembered what he'd done, and got out of the bed all in less than ten seconds. The shower was free, so he used it and fought himself and his treacherous body all the while. After, he crept out of the room to go to the main hall - perhaps he could contact Snape, persuade him to get him a new assignment quickly and get out of there.

At the door, Draco paused and inadvertently glanced at Potter. He was still asleep, lips parted slightly, face troubled. Too many conflicting thoughts. Potter. No. Draco refused to think about it. He closed the door and stole through the misty dawn to the hall.

His ploy worked. He received the hoped-for new assignment by return owl, sometime during breakfast. Draco went back to the bunkhouse in dread, hoping that Potter was either still asleep or gone already.

His things were still there. Draco grabbed his own and stared for a moment at the closed door of the shower room. Potter had to be in there. Briefly, he contemplated what Potter must be thinking at the moment, and what he would think when he found that Draco had left without a word. Draco took a deep breath and reverted back to his original plan of not thinking about Potter. He made his way to the edge of the Apparating field and departed.

Chapter Seven

Harry emerged from the shower room, towelling his hair dry. The room was mostly empty; he'd been one of the last ones into the shower. Returning to his bed, he found a shirt and pulled it on. He was at something of a loss as to what to do immediately. Definitely on the agenda was finding Ron and Hermione, making sure they were alright. But Malfoy - he was still at a loss to explain what had happened last night. It must have

been a freak occurrence; Malfoy was probably cursing himself for having let it happen. Harry wanted to see him, though, just to see how Malfoy was, how he would act, how things would be between them. It would certainly be difficult to go back to the same sort of hostility they'd always enjoyed before.

Harry admitted to himself that he'd rather have last night than any amount of hostility, but whether he would admit that to anyone else, particularly Malfoy, was the real question. True, Malfoy's personality left much to be desired. He was judgemental, he was Marked, he was a snob. He was rude and arrogant and devastatingly attractive, too. Harry took a moment to appreciate the fact that he'd become utterly shallow, apparently, and shoved all thought of Malfoy aside. It was time to go and find Ron.

At the door, he paused. Malfoy's pack was no longer there. He must have come back while Harry was in the shower, of all the convenient timing. Harry swallowed down his bitterness. Right. So Malfoy was gone. Something burned in the center of his chest. Needless to say, he slammed the door behind him as he left.

* * *

Later that day, an elbow jostled him at the food counter. Harry glanced over, ready to retort, only to see that it was Justin. "Watch it," he said sharply.

"I heard you last night," Justin said bluntly. "With Malfoy."

Harry glanced around. "Shut the fuck up, would you?"

"I saw him come in, and I heard you," Justin continued relentlessly. "So I hope you've gotten off your high horse now."

Harry picked up his tray and moved to the coffee counter. "My high horse?" he repeated, the sarcasm thick. "I thought we were seeing each other. I thought that if we were seeing other people, we were a little more discreet about it."

"Behind the bunkhouse is hardly common territory," Justin retorted. "No one asked you

to come back there. Besides, I thought that it was open-ended."

Harry, pouring coffee, gave him a dark look. "Open-ended is one thing. Fucking around with other people right here in the barracks is another."

"So it's okay if I just keep quiet about it?" Justin demanded. "Or if it only happens somewhere else? What difference does it make?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "None. It doesn't make any difference. I thought I said as much before. Can we stop talking about this now?"

"Harry, wait. Stop being a prick and listen to me for a second," Justin said.

Harry stopped walking and glared at him. "No, you stop. I'm done with this conversation."

"Just wait," Justin insisted. "All I wanted to say was that it doesn't have to be over. We could still - you know."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "What? Fuck?" He made it sound as distasteful as it was: an arrangement, nothing more.

"Well - and other things," Justin said lamely. "And you could - with other people, too, I mean. We always used protection anyway, right? So -"

"I'm tired of the arrangement," Harry said coldly. "I didn't realize I was such poor company that you had to resort to getting off with other people while I'm around. I don't know why I thought it was such a big deal. It was never anything in the first place, so never mind."

Justin looked both hurt and angry. "It was never 'nothing' to me," he said. "It was just open, that's all. I didn't mean for you to get all *hurt*."

"I'm not *hurt*," Harry said, his teeth gritted. "Just never *mind*. You bore me, anyway."

Justin's cheeks reddened. By now, other people were waiting to get to the coffee, so Harry moved away. "There's no need to get nasty about it," the ex-Hufflepuff said, obviously upset. "I just thought - "

"Well, you can stop 'just' thinking whatever it is," Harry cut him off. "Go find yourself another boy-toy. I'm done."

Justin followed him doggedly. "Is that why you were with *him* last night, then? To get back at me?"

"It had nothing to *do* with you," Harry spat, his own face flooding with colour. "It had nothing to do with *anything*, so shut up about it! And stop following me!" He whirled away and marched toward the far corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting. There wasn't an empty chair, but they would probably double up and share one to let Harry sit down. Justin didn't follow this time, to his devout relief.

It was hurt pride, he realized, steadying his wobbling coffee cup. Nothing more. He really *hadn't* had any significant feelings for Justin, and didn't really mind not having him around any more. All he would miss was the physical element of their "relationship", if one could even call it that.

Ron saw him coming and got up at once. Harry felt a subtle lightening of heart - friends were more important than anything. After Ginny had died, he'd made more of an effort to drag himself out of his hole of depression to be there for Ron a little more, and Ron had soaked it up like a sponge, so clearly needing Harry that Harry couldn't help but feel somewhat gratified by it.

* * *

Draco crouched in the long, late-afternoon shadow of some nameless building. His cloak pulled tightly around him, he double-checked the time and assured himself that he was still alright. As long as he Apparated back to Grimmauld Place before nine,

everything would work out just fine. St. Mungo's visitors entrance was guarded by four people, probably Aurors. Draco memorized their faces and determined that he knew none of them. All the better. Careful not to get close enough to trip any security spells that they'd surely set in place, Draco eased back around the corner. It was something. Something *real*. He spent a little more time in the area, learning, watching, then Apparated away.

* * *

"Father."

Lucius, as always, was waiting for him. A cool nod was all he got today. "Draco. Welcome home."

Draco inclined his head slightly. "Thank you."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," Draco said, truthfully.

"Dinner is nearly ready. Come." Lucius led the way down the fumed-oak passageways, neither of their feet making any sound on the thick carpeting. Draco followed in the now-familiar, half-nervous silence.

He was ushered into the dining room, where Lucius indicated that he should sit next to him, rather than at the far end of the table where he'd always sat of old. "Here, near me," Lucius said. "It makes conversation easier."

Whereas conversation had never been encouraged during meals before. They had always eaten in relatively companionable silence. Or tense silence, if Lucius had been displeased with him. Either way. Draco took his new seat feeling like a guest, rather than his father's son.

His serviette was hovering beside him; Draco took it and set on his knee. "Different view from here," he said lightly, trying to act as though he were not slightly disoriented by the new arrangement.

Lucius smiled as though they were sharing some sort of marvellous inside joke. "Indeed. Wine?"

"Please." It was poured, and Draco was careful to sip it slowly, lest his nerves betray him. His hands were steady enough. Good.

"I thought we might as well combine your report with dinner," Lucius explained. "I know you haven't much time. When are you expected back tonight?"

"Actually, no specific time," Draco said. "Just not too late, I suppose." Yesterday, he'd met his nine o'clock meeting time with Snape and Lupin with time to spare. Tonight, they knew that he had little control over the situation and would not levy as precise expectations.

Lucius raised his eyebrows. "How unusual. They must trust you, then."

Draco nodded over his glass, swirling the gentle merlot against the candlelight. "I've worked hard to gain their trust."

He was served. The soup was French onion, his father's favourite. The rich aroma of onion and mozzarella rose and he inhaled it appreciatively. It was a far cry from the soups the barracks kitchen produced for lunch some days. Draco slid his spoon past the thick layer of melted cheese and spooned up a bit of saturated French bread. It was delicious. Draco wiped his mouth and realized that Lucius was watching him, an odd expression on his face.

He would not be shaken by it. Draco raised his eyebrows in question, deliberately calm, carving out another spoonful of bread and cheese.

"Draco," Lucius said slowly, his voice very cool and very deliberate. "I must ask whether

you have been perfectly honest with me all this while."

The dreaded, expected question. Draco swallowed without tasting. "Yes, Father," he said evenly, meeting the steel-grey gaze.

"Really." It was edged in doubt, and just a little bit of challenge. A dangerous combination, considering with whom he was dealing.

"Yes Father, really," Draco said quietly. There was no doubt about it; he would have to share the other bit of information he'd collected earlier.

"A lot of false leads," Lucius said. His soup was untouched as yet, but here he took a sip of wine, eyes never leaving Draco's face.

Draco nodded, trying to stay relaxed. Or *to* relax, rather. "I know. I'm sorry. It's hard to get you news before it outdates itself. I have some new findings for you, though."

"Current findings?"

Some of them. "Yes," Draco said. "First, there are Aurors gathering in Edinburgh this weekend. I couldn't catch where, exactly." Not true; he knew *exactly* where they were meeting, at what time, and for how long. "What I heard was late afternoon on Sunday." They should be gone by then.

"Sunday afternoon, Edinburgh," Lucius repeated thoughtfully, brow creasing. "I wonder if they would use the old church where they used to do some of the training."

"I don't know," Draco said. He reached for his water glass, raised it, and froze. There it was, the faintest trace of hyacinth. He'd cast the spell, but not actually had a chance to check the water yet. The wine was not an issue; alcohol neutralized one of the key elements in Veritaserum. He had not yet drunk any of the water, but needed to now. Draco, feeling Lucius' carefully averted eyes upon him, made a split-second decision. He would forego the other "facts", tell his piece of truth, and hope that he hadn't drunk enough water for the Veritaserum to last long. He took a small sip.

"What else?" Lucius asked, almost too quickly.

Draco looked him in the eye. "There are four Aurors constantly guarding the St. Mungo's visitors entrance," he said, wincing inwardly and wondering how much damage his words would have. On defenceless patients, too. "The guard changes precisely every twenty minutes; the new guards come from inside the hospital."

"Excellent," Lucius said, eyes narrowed, his soup utterly forgotten, the slice of viciousness just a little too present in his voice for Draco's comfort.

Draco watched him for a moment and despised everything he truly believed in. But it was not possible to hate his own father. He wished he could. "They are often vulnerable," he said, just to add a little emphasis of personal commitment to the endeavour, and tasted his words like ash in his mouth.

Lucius' eyes came back into focus. "Excellent," he said again. "Well done, Draco." He gestured toward Draco's bowl, inviting. "Eat. Please. They surely are not feeding you as well as this. Eat, and talk to me. Tell me how you are."

His face was kindly now, pleased that Draco had passed his test. The obvious answer surged to Draco's lips almost before he could prevent it. *Confused. Angry.* He didn't say it. "I am... troubled, at times," he said, which was as close as he could get to not telling the truth at the moment. He hoped fervently that his tiny sip of the Veritaserum-infused water would wear off soon.

Lucius finally began to eat his soup. "Troubled? Why?"

Draco shrugged. "You know how it is. Living in crowded quarters, surrounded by people I don't know and don't particularly like." He paused, and forced the truth a little, feeling the resistance of the potion. "It's good to be - home." There was a tiny pause there, but he was somewhat glad to be here, but he no longer considered it his home. He was homeless.

Lucius was instantly sympathetic. "Of course," he said. "I know how difficult this must be for you."

Too sympathetic. Draco told himself to stay on his guard. This comment seemed to require no comment, so he didn't answer, but contented himself with finishing his soup.

The next course was served then. Draco didn't know what it was, but a delicious, savoury odour was rising from the covered dishes on the elf's tray, and he thought of the dread and relief that going back to the barracks after the night at Grimmauld Place would bring. And there were so many reasons for his dread.

* * *

That night, Draco lay wakeful in his bed at Grimmauld Place, tossing and turning. He stayed somewhere on the fourth floor, a small room beneath the attics with a window facing whichever direction meant he could see the moon. It was full, and Lupin was nowhere to be found. Snape had let him into the house in his dressing gown, tiredly asked if Draco needed anything and, when Draco had declined, taken himself to bed. He'd been waiting up for him, Draco realized then, and was somehow rather touched. No one had ever waited up for him before.

Now, though, sleep eluded him. Rather than being consumed by thoughts of his father and all the time they'd spent together since his Hogwarts graduation, Draco's thoughts wandered to Potter and would not be convinced to just leave it alone. Why had he *done* that, two nights ago? It was insane! A moment of weakness. He wasn't even attracted to Potter.

In the dark, all alone, Draco quietly conceded that this was a lie. Alright, so he was attracted to Potter. Physically. That was all. He'd just been lying there, horribly frustrated about having missed an entire battle while sitting in the quiet peace of the Manor library reviewing curses with Lucius (a random idea of his which Draco hadn't been able to rationalize a way to turn down). He knew Lucius had kept him there precisely *to* keep him having to "avoid" the battle front with the Order as well as with the Death Eaters, but it didn't help that Draco himself also felt some measure of relief. There would come a point, he knew, where he'd be stuck in a battle situation and be forced to fight openly on one side or the other. But as long as he could postpone that moment, the better.

Potter had been lying there, tense and obviously wrought up over something, and Draco had been consumed by the need to touch him, extort physical comfort and satisfaction from him in some way. Potter could be trusted to keep his mouth shut about it; he never told anyone anything - he was famous for it. And he didn't want anyone else. That was also the truth. Draco was still wrestling with what exactly that meant, but this bit about it being a purely physical thing was less completely true than he wanted it to be.

He didn't like Potter. He couldn't like Potter. He wasn't in a position to get involved with anyone, not with these mixed loyalties, and even if he was, he and Potter would hardly be compatible. To even entertain the concept was ridiculous. Potter was a half-blind git who'd survived this long purely thanks to a series of unbelievably good luck, nothing more. He had terrible taste in friends, no concept of class whether in the wizarding or Muggle realms, and to top it all off, he was everyone's favourite and had done nothing to deserve it except break a lot of rules.

Draco lay on his bed and inadvertently thought of that instant. Potter could hardly have been more surprised that he'd been himself, when he'd grabbed his wrist. And once Draco had done that much, he had to go through with it. Just a quick, stolen moment of indulgence, lust, and certain confusion. But what a moment. He wondered what Potter thought of it, if he wanked to the memory of it like he did. Draco's hand silently gained speed, and he brought himself off with the quietest of gasps. A puff of breath in the otherwise breathless house.

No more. He'd resolved not to think about it, and here he was, thinking about it again. Draco rolled over again and forcefully closed his eyes. He could sleep now; oh, he knew that much. But he would do it without thinking about Potter. And he would learn how to do it without - the other - one day, too. He didn't need him. He didn't need anyone but himself. All in all, he was managing nicely so far. Potter would only complicate things, if Draco permitted it to go any further. It could not continue.

Continue? Nothing had been started. It was just an isolated incident. Surely even *Potter* had to know that.

* * *

Harry lay on his back and stared at the clouds. There were no shapes to be found, only

high, thin bits that looked like stretched cotton. The sky was faintly blue, but there was nothing comforting about it. Harry wished it would rain, storm until the earth was drenched and no one could go outside. That, at least, would match his mood.

He was miserable. Even more so than usual. Hermione, of course, had noticed and urged him to either talk about it or write in his journal. That was what he was meant to be doing out here. Writing. So far, he'd been out here for an hour and accomplished nothing.

Not that he'd tried. Harry sighed and rolled onto his front. He cracked open his journal, which hadn't been written in since before Ginny's death. He thought awhile, then began to write.

3. July.

The war has gone to hell. There's no fucking way we'll ever be able to win. I don't know how I ever thought we'd be able to do this. It's clearly impossible. That git Malfoy is a spy for our side now, or so they say, and I think I have a crush on him. He ended up in my bed the other night because it was the only one left, and this weird thing happened. I don't know why, but he just sort of, I don't know what to call it. We ended up getting off together and it was really good. I can't stop thinking about it, and he's not even around. I want to talk to him or something and find out why he did it. He can't possibly like me. He would never go for me at all. I only even found out was he gay that night. Now I can't stop thinking about him. I'm sure it'll be all awkward when he gets back here next, and I don't even know how I should try to be. Like if I should pretend it didn't happen, or something.

Everything else is too shitty to even talk about. There isn't room for everybody here, and all the people around here all the time are starting to make me crazy.

Harry stopped writing and surveyed what he had so far. It wasn't much, but it was more than he'd expected to write. It didn't half summarize how frustrated he felt about Malfoy's absence. He was at the point of having anxiety attacks about it; every time a door opened, his head snapped around to see if it was Malfoy. His thoughts were constantly full of hypothetical conversations they might have, or potential situations that might arise. He didn't even *like* Malfoy, not that way. He was hot; that was all. But it wasn't as if he actually had *feelings* for him or something, perish the thought. Harry was at a loss to explain why he felt so tormented about the whole business.

Perhaps it was just sexual withdrawal. He'd found a candidate to replace Justin as the fount of meaningless sex in his life, so now he was missing it. That was it. That was all it was.

Somewhat satisfied with this, Harry picked himself up, brushed the grass off his jeans and went back to the bunkhouse to return his journal before going to the main hall to find Ron and Hermione. He felt much better, in fact. He knew where things were with himself now. When Malfoy got back, he would just be casual, not expect anything, and see how the land lay with Malfoy.

Harry reached the bunkhouse. As he reached to open the door, it opened from the inside. He stopped short, his heart in his throat, beating wildly and seemingly trying to choke him. He couldn't speak, swallowing dryly and trying to summon something other than a nervous stammer to his lips. But for the life of him, Harry could not figure out what to say.

Malfoy stared back at him, frozen in the doorway, and seemingly just as unable to come up with anything to say.

* * *

Potter looked stricken. Draco had no idea what to say. His instinct told him to shove Potter out of the way and just get past him. His better sense told him that this was not really a viable option, that Potter would just stop him somehow, make him explain. He knew that Potter craved an explanation. He had to. And Draco had none to give. The necessary words continued to elude him.

Finally Potter broke the silence. "You're back," he said. And he said it very intensely. The instant he spoke, Draco experienced an odd feeling, a strange tightening in his chest. *Stop it*, he told himself sharply.

"Very good," Draco said, his mouth strangely dry. "Brilliant grasp of the obvious."

Potter's face took on a look of determination. "We have to talk," he said firmly.

Those eyes were mesmerizing. "No we don't," Draco found himself saying, and wondered where the words had come from. He felt his control spinning away, his resolution dissolving.

"What do you - " Potter started, but didn't get a chance to finish.

Draco grabbed him by the front of his shirt, swung him around (something in the back of his mind registering the fact that Potter had managed not to fall over the step leading up to the door) into the empty room behind him. What was he *doing*? Potter, perhaps bewildered, perhaps something else, didn't manage to say anything, and Draco was determined not to give him the chance to. Draco pushed him up against the nearest convenient wall, manoeuvred the door shut with his foot and slammed their faces together.

Of all inconceivable things, he was kissing Potter. Rather violently, at that. Not to mention, Potter was kissing back just as violently. Draco's hands found their way under Potter's shirt; he was touching smooth, hard belly and back and their tongues warred furiously. Draco shoved his hips against Potter's, felt the answering hardness there. He kept expecting Potter to push him back, demand to know what was going on - which Draco was dreading, as he had absolutely no answer for that whatsoever - but he didn't. Perhaps he was as afraid of interrupting this as Draco was. For his own part, all Draco knew was that he wanted it and wanted it *badly*. At the moment, at least.

Potter actually ripped Draco's trousers in trying to open them, and Draco actually didn't care. His own hands were tearing at Potter's jeans, just needing to get in there as soon as humanly possible. Or sooner. Potter was breathing heavily into his mouth; Draco's

chest was heaving, too. They were touching each other with hard, fast strokes - needing nothing more than to get off, and for whatever reason, with each other. The sensation was almost overwhelming. Almost. Draco had to pull his face back, turn his head away just to breathe and focus on thrusting into Potter's hot hand. Trapped against the wall, there wasn't much Potter could do but push his hips against Draco's, his thighs pinned in place by Draco's, too. Anyone could walk in at any moment; it added an unnecessary edge of tension - the entire, ludicrous situation had enough tension of its own already.

Potter was sounding needy, his breath rasping. Draco felt lips and tongue on his neck and fingers digging into his arse, beneath his trousers but not his pants. It was enough; he was about to come. Potter came first, though, his cock hard against Draco's palm and erupting in streams of warm fluid. Draco squeezed his eyes closed and felt his body reciprocate. Not having had a lot of exposure to sex of the two-person variety, it didn't really take all that much. Or so past experience had indicated. He bit his lip, every muscle clenched, every nerve ending flooded, tingling as Draco forgot everything but the rush of climax, spilling over into Potter's hand.

Potter's hand. *Oh, gods.* Draco slowly came to his senses and opened his eyes. What the *fuck* had he just done? Again!?!

Potter's face was two inches away; he was still breathing hard. Draco could suddenly hear his own breathing, filling the room, could feel his clothed chest against Potter's, the other's heartbeat thudding against him. They stared at each other, wordless. Potter let go of his cock. "Wh-what was that?" he panted, still managing to sound a bit nervous.

Draco shook his head, trying to regain control of himself. "I don't know."

Potter's face was far too serious. "Let's do it again. Not now. Sometime."

What?! Draco shook his head again. "No."

Anger. And confusion. "Why not?" Potter demanded, still breathless. "You obviously - "

"I obviously nothing," Draco cut him off. "I don't know what I was thinking. Either time."

"Well - " Potter was trying to protest. Draco needed to distance himself from it.

He stepped away, pulling out his wand with his clean hand. "*Scourgify*. I don't think we should. We can't."

"Why can't we?" Potter wanted to know. "What's to stop us?"

"Everything," Draco said flatly. He stuck his wand back in his pocket and made for the door. What a complete and utter idiot he was.

"Wait," Potter said anxiously, coming after him.

Draco turned around, his hand on the doorknob. "What?"

"I want this," Potter said, cheeks red, but sounding determined. "I want to keep doing this."

Draco gave him a hard look and thought of the time he'd broken Potter's nose. The memory gave him a brief flare of something he couldn't put a name to, though he suspected it had something to do with triumph. "I don't." He went through the door and closed it firmly behind him.

* * *

Harry watched it close, feeling helpless and furious and lost at all once. He had no idea what the fuck had just happened, but he knew that it wasn't over. Not if he had anything to say about it. Which apparently he didn't. Problematic, that was.

He looked down at himself. His hand and part of his jeans were dripping in Malfoy's come. Grimacing, he went to his bed (only a few meters away) and picked up a clean pair of trousers and went to the lav to change and wash himself. It was all so confusing. Malfoy wouldn't talk to him, but he would do *that* with him. And claimed he didn't want it

to happen again. He'd probably told himself the same thing last time, Harry thought, but it didn't help. If Malfoy found more resolve, then maybe it really wouldn't happen again.

He wanted it. He wanted it badly. The instant Harry had seen him, besides the initial panic he'd felt, he'd also felt the incredible level of both tension and chemistry between them. How had he never seen it so obviously before? Harry became instantly aware of the denial he'd surrounded this feeling with and admitted to himself that his old preference for blonds had had much to do with Malfoy. And always had.

The git wasn't really likeable, but Harry liked him anyway. He didn't know where his true loyalties lay, but he craved him.

Harry had a vision of Ron being told that Harry was dating Malfoy and winced slightly. Ron would not like it. He might deal with it for Harry's sake, but he wouldn't like it. It would probably create a real rift between them. There was that to consider. Harry exited the lav and looked at the place where it had happened. And knew that he would do nearly anything to make it happen again.

* * *

He saw Malfoy in the hall later, sitting by himself and staring out into space, his features gloomy, his food untouched. Harry was sitting with Ron, Hermione and Neville, though, and didn't say or do anything. He kept losing track of the conversation, but Ron and Hermione in particular had been used to him doing this for a long time already.

"Gran's still safe," Neville was saying. "I don't think that anything could kill her, to be honest."

"Where's she staying?" Ron asked.

Hermione elbowed him. "He already said. The Solstice in London. You know. Expensive wizards' hotel."

"Right." Ron remembered. "Well, that's *something*. Wish everybody was as lucky as

your Gran."

"So do I," Neville said unhappily. Too many of their circle had lost loved ones lately.

Harry was in another world. Malfoy glanced up, caught him staring and scowled, looking away. Harry excused himself to get some coffee. It was unusual that even four of them should be here in the barracks, and he knew he should be enjoying their company, but all he could think about was that afternoon. The moment when Malfoy's hand had come out, unbelievably, and dragged him inside. He'd been utterly bewildered, but excited at the same time, afraid to say anything that would make Malfoy change his mind.

His coffee overflowed and burnt his hand. He'd lost track of what he was doing. Cursing, Harry dropped the cup, released the spigot and pulled out his wand to heal the burn (covered in basic training, as so many hexes and curses caused burns). He magicked the spilled coffee away, picked up the unbroken cup and set it on the table to pour a new cup. He had to learn to pay attention. Harry carried both cups to the dirty dish rack to deposit the first cup, then went back to his table.

He could feel Malfoy's eyes following him, but when he looked up, the other looked immediately away.

Harry sat down, face suddenly burning, but with what precisely, he couldn't have said.

Chapter Eight

Draco stared at the white ceiling of his room and tried to gather his thoughts. He was to meet with Dumbledore at last, with Snape in attendance, in under thirty minutes. He had to get a hold of himself. His thoughts were anything but gathered; scattered every which way. Especially the Potter way.

He'd seen Potter burn himself, staring off into space at the coffee urn at dinner. And known then that he needed to get out of there. Figure out something resembling self-control, which he'd apparently lost all traces of. For gods' sake, what had he been thinking? Once was bad enough, but twice?! Every time he thought of it, Draco felt his cheeks burn in humiliation and shame, aware that below the waist, the rest of his body was reacting differently. Which only added to the shame. He couldn't look himself in the eye in the mirror.

He was a double-agent. There was no getting around it. He, Draco Malfoy, was not someone that anyone could trust. Not his father, not Snape - he'd lied to both of them, now - and not himself. And certainly not Harry-fucking-*Potter*, of all people. Draco swallowed and sat up, got up and paced around the small room. How had he gotten

himself into this situation? Why was it that he was lying to everyone, again? The answer came back to him with the force of a physical slam: because he was trying to cover his bases. Protect the two people he particularly cared about. Honesty with Lucius was not an option. And complete honesty to Snape would get him killed. Besides, he had almost never lied directly to Snape. They were lies of omission. Facts he'd told Lucius, which he hadn't warned Snape about. While others, he had. They'd consulted, discussed over and over again how much truth Draco could mix into his reports, how much fiction they all thought he could get away with.

But Draco knew Lucius best. Could best gauge how much he really *could* get away with. That last visit had proven it: his father was starting to suspect him. The cool welcome, the Veritaserum in his water, and the harder questions had all added up to confirm his theory. But people had died for it. Draco knew they had. Or would. It didn't matter. It was blood on his hands, in the end. He just wanted there to be as little blood spilled as possible.

It's a war, he told himself, still pacing. *People die*. It still didn't sit right, though. Draco sat down on the edge of the bed, agitated, and thought back again. To the day he'd realized who and what his father was, though never as fully as the day he'd been given his first solo assignment as a Death Eater. He remembered lying in his bed and hearing the prisoner's screams finally crack through the Silencing spells all around the dungeon, and wondering who in this realm could possibly help him not to become that man. Not be forced into becoming that man.

He'd had too much pride to go to Dumbledore. To go to Snape had been hard enough. To knowingly, willingly go to a man he'd known to betray his father and his father's master both and ask for his help in secret - it was enough to make anyone sick, even a Slytherin. Draco had fought his own mind over the question of whether or not he should for nearly two months before he'd made his decision. And he'd known then, with the war on, what making it would cost - both himself and others in the war.

Even if he had any feelings for Potter, which he didn't, Draco knew better than to draw anyone else into this wormhole of deceit he'd managed to lose himself in.

Potter was nothing but an attractive body. And Draco was a Slytherin and used to wanting - no, actively *seeking* - the forbidden. It was that age-old lure, nothing more. He could convince himself of this in his mind, but it was difficult. He'd fully expected to shove Potter or hit him or anything but *kiss* him in the bunkhouse, earlier. And yet, the

memory did nothing but make him feel hotter, flushed with desire and consumed by the thought of it, of Potter's hot flesh hard against his palm, of the warmth of Potter's, circling him, their chests and thighs pressed together - or rather, his pressed into Potter's, who'd had nearly no choice about it, though he hadn't resisted in the least. It had almost been as if Potter had known Draco was going to kiss him, or was planning to, himself. Which he couldn't have been. Even *Potter* should be capable of staging a better seduction than that.

No, he had been taken by surprise. As Draco had been. He almost felt as though he'd been temporarily possessed, losing all control over his own motions. It was a blatant weakness, the sort he'd always sworn not to acquire. Lucius would have been disappointed in him. Still would he, if ever he found out.

A sharp knock at the door. Startled, Draco stood and went to the door. Not opening it, as was standard here in this place of secrecy and spies, he asked quietly, "Yes?"

"Looking for a Mr. Malfoy. Wanted in a meeting downstairs." A cool, neutrally-toned female voice.

He'd forgotten the time. Draco inwardly cursed himself. "I'll be right there."

"Thank you."

The sound of footsteps died away, and Draco opened the door. He had his wand. He'd be back later, to sleep. Perhaps they would let him stay, though it was quite doubtful. He was hardly the highest-ranking person to stay in this building, and the barracks were likely considered quite good enough for him. If they put Potter there, they'd certainly put Draco there. He shook himself and resolved once again, this time even more firmly, to bloody well stop thinking about Potter and his mistake - mistakes - and focus on the task at hand.

He was an adult. A spy, playing both sides against the middle, to a point. It would only serve to get him killed, and rapidly, should his control slip like that again. It would not happen. Draco made himself a promise there on the spot, turned the doorknob of an unmarked door, and entered the room.

* * *

Harry composed himself, outwardly at least, and worked hard to make the façade permeate down into the rest of himself. Malfoy was gone again. He must have engineered it; it was too coincidental, otherwise. Harry felt sick, felt the world around him spinning as he walked from the bunkhouse to his favourite bit of field. There was something about Malfoy that he couldn't resist, even looking past his by-now-obvious crush. As though the other's presence had an effect like Veritaserum on him, as well. Harry had most certainly not been expecting to find Malfoy in the bunkhouse. No more had he expected Malfoy to grab him and drag him inside like that.

If he'd been expecting anything by that point, it was to be hit, not kissed. But it had been the second, and Harry could not have resisted had the bunkhouse been on fire. It had been a split-second realization, that Malfoy's face was in his, that sudden awareness that it was going to be passion of a different kind. No less violent than what Harry might have guessed, but after the evasion tactics following their previous, equally bizarre encounter, Harry had not been prepared for it.

A surprise attack, then. And it had obviously surprised Malfoy, too. Harry sat down under one of the few, scraggly trees withering under the July sun. Malfoy was attracted to him. Or else Malfoy was horny and simply suspected Harry would serve as a suitable outlet for his needs. No. Harry drew his knees up to his chest and denied this vehemently. No. Maybe the first time. Malfoy had sounded very odd about having missed the battle that day. Conflicted. Even upset. If he'd been looking for comfort sex, then, Harry was the obvious candidate that night.

But this afternoon had been different. Malfoy could just as easily have pushed him aside and gone on ignoring him. But he hadn't; he'd been unable to resist the chemistry between them, and had somehow given in. Betrayed by his own icy exterior, succumbing to a few moments of intensely heated passion.

Harry's mouth tingled in the memory of Malfoy's on his; his ears were full of the sounds of Malfoy's breath, laboured and needing, straining toward climax. Harry bowed his head in shame, his cheeks burning at the following scene. Malfoy, opening his eyes and the horror in them, pushing away and withdrawing into himself again. Becoming cold and colourless again, leaving as quickly as possible. And Harry, drawn to him like a moth to an open flame, needing, at the point of begging. His subsequent rejection.

Harry, elbows on his knees, groaned aloud. It hurt, damn it. Malfoy had hurt him. And what else should he have expected from him? It had been a mistake to admit he'd been attracted to him in the first place. He should have found someone else first, someone to channel out his frustration and desire in place of Malfoy. But he hadn't, that was the truth of the matter, and now he was here.

"I will not fall for the git," Harry muttered through clenched teeth. The wind caught his words and blew them away.

Harry stood and paced awhile longer.

* * *

Draco Apparated out of the equally-blank canvas of the empty conference room. Snape and Dumbledore stood close together, watching him go, and Snape's dark eyes were the last thing he saw before the dark of the Apparating field at the barracks. His surroundings materialized around him and Draco headed for the main hall to find a bed. Just not bunkhouse eight, that was all he was asking. Though who he was asking was a little more nebulous.

The check-in witch glanced at him. He recognized her, sort of. Penny something, a Ravenclaw from a few years above his at Hogwarts. "Name?" she enquired mildly, sounding bored and hardly looking at him.

An, anonymity. "Draco Malfoy," Draco said quietly.

"Malfoy, Malfoy..." she scanned her list of those secured to stay. "Ah. There you are. Right. Let's see, three available spaces... one in bunkhouse two, but that spot is usually semi-reserved for any staff or Order members staying - the other two are both in bunkhouse eight. Can you find it on your own? Like a guide?"

Draco gritted his teeth. "No," he said. "Just tell me which beds have free spaces and I'll find one."

Another check. "The bed second from the door has only one occupant," Penny said.
"And also this one, by the lav - "

"That's mine!" a new voice cut in, rushing up beside Draco. Boot. Right. His traditional space, indeed. "Please, Penny, can I have that one? Do you mind, Malfoy?"

Draco sighed. "It doesn't matter," he said. At least it wasn't Potter's bed. Perhaps he could sleep on the other side of whomever he was sharing with tonight, on their left. A barricade of sorts between himself and Potter. Though he did wonder, in passing, with whom Potter was sharing tonight. It was not a welcome thought, and he cast it aside. He picked up his pack and began the walk toward bunkhouse eight. Boot exited the main hall a few minutes later, his footfalls soft on the gravel path behind Draco. He was close enough that courtesy might demand that Draco wait for him to catch up, but he didn't care. He and Boot had never been friendly. Why start now?

Draco reached bunkhouse eight and opened the door. It was completely dark and very quiet; just sleep-filled breathing. Good. Draco stole his way through the darkened room to the second bed and went to the far side of it. No luck. Longbottom's face loomed like a new moon in the dark; he was sleeping soundly and directly on the very edge of the bed. Draco cursed the universe and went to the other side. As luck would have it, Potter was, as usual, sleeping on the left side of his bed, facing away from the door. Standing in the two-foot space between the beds, Draco was practically on top of him. A watchful eye over his shoulder, halting when Boot came in, Draco undressed with his back to the door and got quickly, quietly into bed. With Longbottom. Fate was cruel.

It was unthinkable that he face Longbottom. Besides which, the latter was terrified of him and would probably scream if he woke during the night and saw Draco's face. There was nothing for it. He would have to face Potter. Draco did so, but closed his eyes firmly, shoving his wand beneath his pillow. It took him a long time, but eventually, he fell asleep.

* * *

He dreamt of Lucius. He couldn't have said what he was dreaming of, but Lucius was there. Strangely enough, Granger was also in his dream. The details were all very foggy

and unclear; Draco could not have recalled a timeline or plot if his life had depended on it. Somehow, he'd managed to disappoint Lucius'; his face was dark with anger. And Granger was screaming. Draco woke with a start.

He was panting, filled with adrenaline but strangely enough, the terror of his dreams had faded already. Draco swallowed and sat up, his feet hitting the floor as he ran fingers through his hair and thought, straining after the elusive threads of the dreams.

"Are you alright?"

Draco nearly jumped. He should have known. Potter's eyes were wide open, watching him. "Why are you watching me?" he snarled, voice just above a whisper.

Potter pushed himself up onto one elbow. "I just heard you, that's all," he said stiffly. The intent gaze didn't leave Draco.

He was annoyed, but distracted from his annoyance by thoughts of the dreams. Perhaps if he ignored Potter, he'd get the hint.

"I used to have a lot of nightmares," Potter said. Apparently not getting the hint, then. "Still do, sometimes."

"Potter, you're the last person I'm going to discuss my dreams with," Draco muttered, scowling, glancing at the window to gauge the time. "We are not talking about this."

Potter made a frustrated-sounding noise. "There's not much you feel like talking about, is there?"

Good, he'd pierced the ego at last. "Not with you," Draco said shortly, though the truth was really just a simple negative. He didn't talk about much, full stop. With anyone. It was best that way, really.

Potter said, "Fine," sounding something between hurt and angry. He let himself drop

again and closed his eyes, still facing Draco. Two scowling lines remained between his dark brows, but he didn't speak again.

Draco slowly lay down again, still facing away from Longbottom, which meant that he got to stare at Potter. He told himself to close his eyes, but somehow didn't. He found himself stealing a long, uninterrupted look at his former nemesis. Funny. Over the years, Potter had finally grown into his jaw, the rest of his face as strong and determined as that arc of too-adult bone that had always been too large for his adolescent face. The corners of his mouth disappeared into cheeks that had hollowed out over the past seven or eight years; Draco remembered having noticed this, somehow, back during their seventh year.

Back then, he'd been struggling with the fact that he was most certainly not as straight as a true Malfoy heir should be; in fact, probably not straight at all. The fact was that he was troublingly attracted to his own rather than the opposite sex, and Lucius would surely kill him if he knew. Well, force him to marry and produce an heir first, and *then* kill him. Transfer any and all goods and benefits to the new heir. He loved his father, but he knew him too well. It would be that way. Better not to tell him. During his seven years of study with Lucius, Draco had fobbed him off with claims to not being interested in dating until after the war. He wanted to focus. Stay single-minded. Lucius had admired his devotion and let him be.

But on occasion, those rare solo trips to Diagon Alley - a chance encounter here or there, eyes that lingered too long, knowingly, a hand that stayed on his too long when handing back change or a receipt - Draco's perceptions were sharp and it was not difficult to tell when one knew what to look for. Never more than once with the same person, and he always Obliviated them afterward. The joys of coming of age at last and not having his wand movements traced by the Ministry. He could spend an afternoon in the Leaky Cauldron's creaking rooms, indulge in a quick trade of blow jobs or hand jobs or even sex, after he'd gotten bored of the first. Not that *bored* had ever been the term, exactly. But he wanted more. Some missing element that wasn't there. Draco did not fool himself into thinking that it was some mistaken form of sentiment that he was after, but he did crave excitement.

He hadn't been able to afford excitement. Not with Lucius watching his hours out of the Manor unaccompanied. Draco nearly always had to fabricate a story about long queues in various shops, or the difficulties in choosing new robes. But since he'd signed on with the Order, his had been a life of fair abstinence. As he'd known it would - should - be. Until Potter.

Potter's eyes opened then. Draco found himself staring back, unable to say a word. The moment stretched out, past the point of awkwardness. It had to be around four in the morning; it was still very dark out, but he knew he'd been sleeping for at least a few hours already. Potter's eyes, colourless in the dark, were wide awake, their expression unreadable. Draco felt somehow naked under that stare, but could not make himself move.

* * *

Harry stared back at him. He'd known that Malfoy hadn't gone back to sleep yet; his breathing was the same - fast, shallow: awake. And he'd been thinking that this was dangerous. Conversations with Malfoy in the middle of the night, when a person was liable to say anything, do anything. The imagination ran wild. The attraction was most definitely still there. Malfoy's face alone, being that close, could put Harry back in the memory of yesterday afternoon in a trice.

He opened his eyes and caught Malfoy staring at him, his face expressionless. Neither of them spoke for a long time. Harry was acutely aware of time passing, of not knowing what to say and feeling the pressure building to say something. Eventually, he decided to say nothing, force Malfoy to speak first. But the moments stretched out and out until they must have spent five full minutes in utter silence. Malfoy was resolute. He was not going to speak first.

If Harry spoke, he knew that Malfoy would tell him to stop almost immediately. But he couldn't take it any longer. He finally worked something out in his head. "It doesn't have to be what you're thinking," he whispered at last.

Malfoy's eyes widened slightly in surprise. "What do you think I'm thinking?" he whispered back, an edge of challenge there.

"You're thinking I'm trying to lure you into some sort of - of romantic thing," Harry said, still whispering. "Aren't you." He stated it like a fact.

Malfoy's lips tightened. "Well, if you're not, then I don't - "

"I'm not," Harry assured him. "Haven't you ever heard of casual sex?"

Malfoy's laugh was soft, just an exhalation through his nose. "Give me some credit here, Potter. What makes you think I would want to have it with you?"

Harry rolled his eyes and smirked. "Because you can't keep your hands off me."

Malfoy sat up so quickly that Harry was almost startled. "Fuck you, Potter," he spat, just above a whisper again.

Harry glanced at the rest of the room, still slumbering. "Shh! Calm down, for fuck's sake. I just want - "

"I *know* what you want, Potter, and I already said no," Malfoy shot, still angry.

Harry sat up slowly, trying not to scare Malfoy off again. When they were face to face, knees almost touching in the narrow space between them, he felt the power balance shifting between them and said, "I'm asking you to reconsider. Just sex. Nothing more."

Malfoy looked to be at something of a loss, looking at their knees. "No. I can't. I have too much to deal with as it is - "

Harry laid a hand on Malfoy's wrist, stemming the flow of speech. "No one has 'too much to deal with' to do with a good lay every now and then, Malfoy. I'm offering. You're attracted to me. Why turn it down? I'm not asking you to tell me anything, where you go or what happens when you're away. It doesn't even need to be exclusive." Saying that gave Harry a twist of jealousy, hard in the gut, but if it would help convince Malfoy, then

-

Malfoy looked at Harry's hand. "You're touching me," he said pointedly.

Harry grinned, though it was almost grim, and slid to the edge of his bed, one of his knees sliding past Malfoy's, between them. He released Malfoy's wrist and dropped it to the other's crotch before he had a chance to protest. "That's the whole point," he said. Malfoy was half-hard, growing rapidly harder.

His jaw clenched, and there was a moment of agonizing conflict, Harry could feel it. Finally, though, a small sound of need escaped between gritted teeth, just an edge of moan, and Malfoy's hand clamped down over Harry's on his erection. "Fuck, Potter - why do you do this to me?"

It didn't seem to necessitate an answer, so Harry didn't give him one. He did bend forward, though. "Let's go outside," he whispered. "Too many people in here." He stood, fully expecting Malfoy to follow, but also displaying a full-blown tent in his own pyjama pants directly in Malfoy's face. Harry edged out from between the two beds and went to the door.

There was a moment of hesitation, but then Malfoy did follow. Triumphant, Harry grinned at the night sky and listened to Malfoy close the bunkhouse door behind him.

* * *

It was as fast and hot as it had been the time before. This time, it was Harry who grabbed Malfoy and slammed him into the side wall of the bunkhouse, trapping him with his hands, their hips crashing together. The thin cotton between them did little but add a slender layer of friction as two very hard cocks drove together. Harry, trying to keep things unromantic, wanted to kiss Malfoy but didn't. Instead, he slid down, dragging Malfoy's pyjama pants down with him. From his knees, Harry glanced up. "You return this, or I'll *hurt* you," he threatened.

Malfoy just smacked his head. "Get on with it," he commanded, though his voice was a little breathier than usual.

He must really want it, Harry smirked to himself. He was no novice to the art of giving head and gave his full attention to the task. First, though, he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. The night was warm, and the Aurors patrolling the edges of the ward fields would not hear them here. Harry sat on his knees, spreading them, and ran his hands

up Malfoy's slim thighs, which were trembling. Just a little. Harry gave him a twisted grin, teasing. "You really *can't* resist this, can you?" he asked, and slid his lips over the head of Malfoy's anxious cock before the other could manage a retort. Or even to back out, which was always a possibility.

He'd been right - Malfoy *needed* it; he didn't just *want* it. He was shaking, making almost no sound at all, just suppressed, sucking breaths, a soft clunk as his head collided with the wall behind him. His long fingers were gripping the wall, too, and that was just fine - Harry, leery of this "just sex" arrangement, himself, acknowledged to himself the fact that while he might have preferred more touching, he certainly didn't need Malfoy grabbing his ears and choking Harry with his cock. Harry resolved to make it worth his while; it was almost his audition of sorts, to convince Malfoy to go with this. There was something wonderfully ego-boosting about how gloriously needy Malfoy was at the moment, powerless to resist Harry's mouth, the slow suck of his lips and tongue, the heat of his mouth. His hips fought beneath Harry's hands, and later, when he was further gone yet, Harry would release him and start using his hands for better things. But for now, Harry was satisfied with their arrangement. All of it was soothing something that still hurt in him, something to do with being cast off in favour of slim, young blonds who would get off with anyone who looked at them twice. Harry was not accustomed to being thrown aside, and this was so very much better, anyway. He'd never been this aroused sucking someone off, but every sound that escaped Malfoy's reluctant lips went straight to his cock.

Harry could feel it, the tip sticky and wet against his pyjamas, and he could hardly wait to feel Malfoy's mouth around it. He let go of one hip very briefly, just to grab around the base of his erection, making sure he didn't, not too soon - Harry tightened his lips and felt unaccountably sexy for no particular reason. Or maybe it was just that he'd daydreamed about sucking Draco Malfoy off under a full moon, perfectly alone and wanting each other so badly they'd claw each other's skin off if necessary.

Harry knuckled that place just beneath Malfoy's balls and his other hand fisted around the shaft of Malfoy's cock, meeting Harry's mouth as he sucked. Malfoy was nearly there; he could feel it. Just another moment, and yes - Malfoy's gasp split the night, and he poured himself down Harry's throat, hips arching off the wall even as his nails dug into its wood.

Malfoy shivered and slid down the wall into a sitting position, breathing hard. "Holy *fuck*, Potter. Still waters and all that."

Harry laughed, almost out of sheer relief. "I'll take that as a compliment. Come on, you're not done here." Malfoy, sitting there and looking thoroughly debauched only made him even hornier. He pulled down his pyjama pants. "Any time now."

"Shut up, Potter," Malfoy mumbled, and got onto his knees. Harry put his hands on his hips and waited. Another fantasy come true. It was brilliant. He was more excited than he'd been in years. Malfoy gripped his arse with one hand and took only the very head of Harry's cock into his mouth. That alone was almost enough to undo Harry right there, but he bit his lip and focused, determined to draw this out for as long as possible. Looking down at Malfoy's head, silver-blond in the moonlight, Harry was suddenly struck by the fact that Malfoy had gone along with this at all. It was very surprising in many ways. The force of the other's attraction to him must have been stronger than he'd even realized earlier. Well, he wasn't going to argue with it. It would be a perfect arrangement. Harry could simply channel out this silly crush into as much of this sort of thing as Malfoy was willing to go for, and it wasn't as though Malfoy wouldn't be getting anything out of it.

An arrangement. How unromantic. But then, romance didn't really seem to be possible for him. He was Harry Potter, after all. A marked man with a bad reputation for people he loved getting killed. This was probably as good as it would ever get. Malfoy's mouth was suddenly around more of Harry, then, and he stopped thinking about anything except for how incredibly good at this Malfoy was. The hand on Harry's arse was going to leave marks, it was holding so tight, forcing Harry closer, rather than holding him off as Harry had done to him. Malfoy inhaled through his nose, closed his eyes in concentration, and Harry could feel the soft/firm skin of his sinfully warm throat all around him. He came without even thinking about it, without even necessarily knowing that he was going to, lost in a whirlwind of sensation.

He also hadn't realized that one of Malfoy's fingers had slid right *into* him, didn't realize until it was removed. Malfoy sat back on his heels and smirked at him. "Speechless, Potter?" His voice was raspy, but he paid it no heed.

He must have been expecting it to be like that, Harry realized, and was momentarily consumed by another bolt of hot jealousy. He didn't want to know who else Malfoy had deep-throated. He shook his head and pulled Malfoy to his feet, smiling. "You wish."

Malfoy stared at him, then remembered, smiling reluctantly back. "That was a long time

ago," he said, then turned and headed for the door.

"Wait!" Harry called.

Malfoy stopped, one foot on the step and just looked at him expectantly.

Harry caught up. "So - do you want to - you know, keep doing this, whenever?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Open-ended?" he asked carefully, eyes boring into Harry's.

Harry hesitated, only for a moment. "Of course."

Malfoy sneered. "You know this won't work if one of us has a silly, schoolboy crush on the other, right Potter? You'd damn well better be sure."

"I am," Harry said firmly. "Open-ended."

"I assume you use protection."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Give me some credit," he said, throwing Malfoy's own words back at him.

Malfoy's smile was cool. "Good. I'll see you around, then."

They both got silently back into bed and there was no further conversation between them that night.

* * *

Hermione leaned forward. "Harry? Are you alright? You look rather tired."

Harry suppressed another yawn. "Didn't sleep very much last night. Not nightmares," he said, wearily suppressing the immediate concern. "Just... didn't sleep much."

"I hate sharing beds with random blokes," Ron said vehemently. "Some of them kick, or hog the blanket, and that's not even counting the snoring!"

"I know," Harry said, thinking absently of Malfoy. Who didn't snore. And who was nowhere to be found, but his things were in the bunkhouse. As long as they were there, Malfoy was there and Harry was satisfied. Sort of.

"Are you any happier than you have been lately?" Hermione asked, sounding tentative. "It's just you've been very depressed lately, Harry. We - I - worry about you."

Ron looked apologetic. "So do I, mate."

Harry shrugged. "It's no worse, no better, really," he said. He took a sip of his coffee, which was already too cool for his liking.

They exchanged a look. "Have you been seeing anyone lately?" Hermione tried again.

Harry gave her a humourless smile. "Well, I was sort of seeing Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said, "but that didn't quite work out."

Ron recoiled. "*Him*?! Oh, no, Harry!"

"Relax, it was just sex," Harry said bluntly. "Honestly. It was never supposed to be anything more. We were hardly even friends. I mean, he was nice enough - was - but it was totally open-ended, uncommitted. Just sex. Really."

They were both frowning. "But you used protection?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"What do you take me for? Of course." Harry frowned right back at her.

"What happened?" Ron wanted to know.

Harry shrugged. "Guess he got tired of me," he said bitterly. "I caught him with someone else last week, that's all. I just thought that if we were both around, then we were together. I didn't care what he did when he was somewhere else, just - I don't know."

"Have you talked to him about it?" Hermione's eyes were round with worry now.

Another shrug. "What's to talk about? I'm fine with it being over. He wants it to continue, but I'm not interested anymore. Besides," Harry said, then stopped. Perhaps now was not the time to tell them about Malfoy.

Ron cleared his throat. "What about that Alex kid, then?"

Harry scowled. "No."

"Why not - "

"I don't want to talk about it."

They were used to Harry clamming up, but it still annoyed him that they had to exchange those looks. "You know how it is," he said, trying to placate Ron and get him back on his side, rather than on the side of "Harry's being unreasonable again" with Hermione.

"Right, mate," Ron said, staring at him rather as though Harry had grown an extra set of ears. "Need more coffee?"

Harry nodded and handed his cup over, forgetting about the whole thing as he absently

remembered that last time he'd eaten with Ginny, when she'd offered to get him coffee in much the same way. Ron held his hand out in just the same way she did, or perhaps Ginny had learned it from him. Either way, it was similar, and something about the memory or Ron made his throat close a little.

"Harry?" Hermione sounded concerned. "You alright?"

Harry focused on her. "Yeah," he muttered. "I just - never mind." Hermione was still grieving over Ginny; it wouldn't do to bring it up.

Hermione stirred her tea for lack of anything better to do. Her eyes on the spoon, she said, "You know you can tell me anything, don't you, Harry?"

He nodded too quickly. "Yeah. I know. Thanks."

Hermione's eyes cut up to his, serious. "Is there anything you're not telling us?"

Us. She was an *us*, and always would be. She wouldn't understand this arrangement. Harry shook his head with a slight smile. "Nothing important. I'm fine, Hermione. Stop worrying about me."

Ron came back then. "Here you are, mate. One completely black coffee." He wrinkled his nose and thumped it down in front of Harry.

"As long as it's completely hot," Harry said. "Thanks."

"Not a problem, mate. So." Ron looked back and forth between them, expectantly. "What do we have planned for the afternoon, then?"

Hermione looked at him, rather tenderly, Harry thought. "I have to leave after supper," she said, reminding him. "I thought it might do to do a little reading in preparation."

Ron groaned. "Oh, gods, Hermione. You *must* have read everything there is to know by now!"

"Not everything," she said, frowning. "For instance, there's that one ward spell that I still can't figure out how they're breaking, unless..."

Harry tuned them both out, his thoughts sliding back out of focus.

* * *

Night again. Harry was out in the field, watching Malfoy send an owl. He wanted to know where it was going and what it was carrying, but knew better than to ask. Though he apparently *didn't* know enough not to follow him.

Malfoy turned around and began walking back toward the bunkhouses. He ignored Harry, though he must have been aware of his presence, Harry thought. When Malfoy passed him without a word, Harry's intestines knotted. "Malfoy - !"

Malfoy stopped, then turned around very slowly. "What do you want?"

Harry, wordless, took three very quick steps toward him. "I - " He stopped, cleared his throat and tried again. Focused on *not* asking Malfoy what he'd been doing, it was difficult to know what *to* say.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Right," he said, and started walking away again.

Harry caught up to him. Grabbed his arm and spun him back, to him. There was a moment of struggle, and then their mouths were together, Harry's hands on Malfoy's face to keep the other from breaking free. It was hot, furious, wet - Malfoy's defences slipped only for a moment, though, and then he was shoving Harry with all of his strength, their teeth clacking as their mouths were forced apart again. "Good *night*, Potter," he said, sounding disgusted, and whirled away, pulling his robes close to himself.

"Malfoy, wait!" Harry was equally furious now, with both of them. He'd only meant to find out whether Malfoy might be interested in something, since they were both still there. What had he been thinking? He'd basically promised to keep it business-like - to both of them.

Malfoy didn't stop, but when Harry caught up again, he was ready. He grabbed Harry, features white with fury, and dragged him off to the far side of the bunkhouse and there, onto his back. Harry didn't resist it in the slightest; this was precisely what he wanted. Malfoy yanked Harry's robes open and his own, and Harry scrambled to get his trousers out of the way. Malfoy tossed his robe to the side and was on him in an instant. They rolled, moaning, thrusting against each other, in the underbrush separating bunkhouse eight from bunkhouse nine. Twigs and bits of rock dug into Harry's back, his robe tangling around both of them, but then Malfoy was beneath him, his eyes closed as though still furious, refusing to even look at Harry. It didn't matter. Harry was moaning, determined to wring this satisfaction from Malfoy.

Malfoy's face was contorted with need. His hand found Harry's cock and his own, forced them together and he thrust into the circle of his hand. Harry was gasping, his jaw clenched, arse lifting off the rock to push against Malfoy's cock. His left hand found Malfoy's around them both and squeezed, his other arm tight as a bar across Malfoy's back. Harry came first; Malfoy only seconds later.

Chest heaving, Malfoy pushed himself off Harry, staggering a little in his dizziness, brushing bits of dirt, leaf and whatever else off his clothes. He fastened his trousers and went to find his robe. Harry got up and did much the same thing. The silence was thick between them, only breath breaking it. Malfoy had his back to him and appeared to be studying his robe. "I needed that," Harry said, watching him.

A snort of laughter. "I know you did, Potter," Malfoy said, without spite. He glanced over his shoulder very briefly. "Good night."

Harry smiled, but Malfoy had already turned away. "Good night."

Malfoy didn't answer; he was walking away. It took Harry a long time to fall asleep that night.

Chapter Nine

Draco had managed to get himself a bed on the other side of the bunkhouse, but his sleep was no easier. He touched his back gingerly and felt a small divot worked into the skin, likely from some bit of stick or rock from his earlier exertions. He had no idea whether Potter was awake or not, across the room, but it was time he stopped thinking about Potter and just thought about himself. The warning bells in his head were clanging rather loudly, making sleep impossible. That, and his racing nerves.

The edges of panic lit every thought in his head, and his pulse was too fast. What on earth was he doing? Draco, rethinking the past two days, was at a loss to explain his own thinking, or lack thereof. Last night. He'd woken up from a nightmare. He'd been disoriented and confused. But could he get away with blaming his decision to actually go outside with Potter on that? Along with that, there had been that long period where they'd just stared at each other. He should have had the strength of will to look away and end the foolishness. But he hadn't. Another failure on his part.

Draco thought with annoyance of Potter's rather phenomenal oral skills. It might have helped the cause had he remained ignorant of that little fact. Of course, by that point, he'd already agreed to this crazy plan of having casual sex with his least-favourite person, apparently whenever said person wanted it. After sending his owl to Snape the night before, Draco had contemplated confronting Potter for having followed him out to the field - he'd been aware of it from the start, but hadn't made up his mind what to do about it. He didn't know whether or not he believed Potter, either in terms of his interest in Draco's activities, or his actual feelings. That first day here in the barracks, with that ridiculous incident with the scone - what had that been? A peace offering, Draco had assumed, thinking it over later. But why?

Either Potter was trying to get Draco to trust him, at least enough to lower his defences and to talk about his missions as a spy, or else he had some other ulterior motive going on. Nothing was simple these days. Bottom line, Draco decided, staring into the darkness above him as some unknown person snored gently to his left: Potter was either trying to get close to him because he didn't trust him in terms of his allegiances, or else Potter had feelings for him.

He'd denied that. He'd gone along with Draco's insistence on it being an open-ended arrangement - which he'd suggested in the first place. Not that Draco necessarily meant

to pursue anyone else; he already had enough on his hands with Potter alone. It just complicated things. He was better off without friends, and this little arrangement might compromise him even further. As Potter had called out to him, earlier in the field, Draco had stopped, closed his eyes and wondered why the git wouldn't just sod off and die already. He either wanted information or sex, and Draco was in the mental mood for neither. He just wanted to be left alone. He'd kissed Potter angrily, hoping his terse response - sarcastic body language, as he thought of it - would chastise Potter into leaving him alone when it was obvious he wasn't interested. Only, that wasn't really true. Potter had this odd power over his body, apparently, and he could go from completely uninterested to completely interested within seconds around him.

His cock throbbed gently. Draco firmly ignored it. This could work. But only if it stayed a purely physical thing. He resolved not to so much as speak to Potter, except when strictly necessary. And he would keep him occupied enough that Potter wouldn't have time to go looking anywhere else, either. Draco was very clear on that point: he wanted the freedom to do what he liked, but he damned well didn't share. Especially not *that* mouth, that body, those hands, that heat - gods, it was useless. He was harder than ever. Draco got up and went to the lav, Silencing the room from inside. He leaned against the far wall and closed his eyes, gripping himself and feeling the stones digging into his back again.

* * *

Harry woke slowly and blearily. What day was it? What time was it? He sat up. His bedmate, whomever he had been, was gone. He looked across the room and saw Malfoy. They were the only ones in the room. He opened his mouth to speak. "Hey, wh -"

Malfoy put a finger to his lips and cocked his head toward the lav door. "Shh. Wait."

He busied himself with packing and Harry watched him numbly, disoriented from sleeping, but aware of the one, penetrating fact that Malfoy was leaving again. The lav door opened and Justin emerged. Harry had the sense to immediately close his eyes and feign sleep before Justin could notice that he was awake. He slid down under the blanket just a little and waited.

Justin had returned to the bed he normally occupied, beside Malfoy's. Harry

thought, *Open-ended, my arse. If they so much as touch each other, I'll kill them both.* Justin had his choice of the younger boys, apparently - Harry would be *damned* if he got Malfoy, too. Malfoy was *his*. Not officially, but the very thought of him being with anyone else made Harry raw with jealousy. "Malfoy," Justin said neutrally.

"Finch-Fletchley," Malfoy returned coolly. "Leaving?"

"Aren't we all?" Justin asked, as though it were rhetorical.

"St. Mungo's, then?" Malfoy asked casually.

"Naturally. Where are you off to?"

A slight pause. "The same."

"Delightful," Justin said coldly.

Another slight pause. "Look," Malfoy began, tersely, but Justin cut him off.

"No, *you* look." His voice was low. "I don't know what you think you're pulling, with - " He left off, and Harry imagined he'd been indicated somehow - "but I don't like it." His voice lowered even further. "He's really vulnerable right now, emotionally, I mean, and I don't think you have any right to be screwing around with him, and if you're really on our side, then it's in your own best interests, too. But if you're just trying to weaken him or something - "

"Shut the fuck up," Malfoy said sharply, interrupting. "You don't know what you're talking about, *Hufflepuff*. Stay out of matters you can't understand."

Harry couldn't chance looking, but wanted to. He imagined that Justin's face would be bright with anger, as it always had been. Justin had very fair, typically English skin, but it turned a mottled red when he was upset. "Look, I *heard* you the other night," he hissed. "And never mind that I can't even believe you *did* that here in a crowded room like this,

but - "

"I'm going to get angry in a moment," Malfoy said, his voice hard. "We are not having this conversation. You need to leave."

"Well, then, so do you! I - "

"I do not." Malfoy cut through his words relentlessly. "I have to check in at Grimmauld Place first. Off you go, then."

Justin hesitated. "I don't like leaving you alone with him."

"Piss off, Finch-Fletchley. I'm not going to kill him. I'm packing. Comprehend?" Malfoy was rude, but Harry rather wanted Justin to go, too.

Justin mumbled something which Harry didn't catch, and then Malfoy said, almost as quietly, "Besides, I thought you two had broken up."

"What would you know about that?" Justin sounded stung.

Was that a shrug in Malfoy's voice? "Just don't see you with him any more, that's all."

"Nothing to see," Justin said stonily. "It wasn't anything significant, anyway. Just sex, I guess."

"Oh." Malfoy sounded surprised, and not entirely happy. "Fine, then. I suppose I'll see you at the hospital later."

"Right." Justin still sounded unhappy, but departed. The door closed behind him.

The silence lengthened. Harry waited for Malfoy to speak, but was ready to interject

should Malfoy try to go without talking to him at all.

"Just sex there, too?" Malfoy said, finally. "I think I'm insulted."

Harry sat up at once. "Why should you be? It happened before you were even here."

"It was still going on when I got here," Malfoy said, not looking at him.

Was Malfoy actually *jealous*? Harry couldn't help but feel pleased. "Well, it ended when he started getting head from other Hufflepuffs," he said, his voice hard. "It was nothing, Malfoy. And besides, we're open-ended, right?"

Malfoy fiddled with a snap on his pack. "Right." His voice was still rather cool.

Harry watched him. Those long fingers - he remembered admiring them in Hogwarts days already, and now that he knew what they felt like on him, he wanted it all the time. "You're leaving?"

"Have to." Malfoy looked at him. "General directive for everyone but you. Otherwise, you'd've been woken by now, I imagine."

Harry fought down a sick wave of... something. "Everyone in the barracks is gone?"

"Gone, or going," Malfoy agreed. He looked a bit grim, as well as a touch uncertain.

Harry felt like a fool. "I wonder what I'm supposed to be doing while you lot are all out there, dying," he said savagely. He sat up and drew his knees up to his chest, pulling the blanket up with him.

Something subtle happened in Malfoy's expression, but quickly disappeared again. "We're not *all* going to die," he said shortly. "I certainly don't intend to - not that I imagine that's such a huge comfort to you. You'd find someone else to fuck."

This last line came at Harry with the effect of a punch in the stomach. His jaw dropped and he stared at Malfoy. "How can you say that?" he snapped. "Do you think I - " Harry stopped short, horrified at what he might have said.

Malfoy's grim expression deepened. "Precisely," he said, sarcastically.

Harry didn't know what to make of it. Was Malfoy trying to betray him into giving away his - supposed - feelings for him? Or was he wanting to know that Harry *had* them? Or did he just want to know that someone would care if he did die? "Malfoy," he said slowly, after several moments had passed, "I don't want you to die. And if we're just talking about finding people to fuck, you'd be hard to replace."

Another beat passed. Neither of them moved; Harry was waiting for Malfoy to react. Malfoy's shoulders finally twitched, lowered a fraction of an inch, and he gave a tight smile. "That's true enough," he said, in a faint ghost of his old drawl.

Relieved, Harry smiled back. "Leaving right away?" He tried not to sound anything but casual, but also guessed that he would fail. He was right.

Malfoy's eyebrows arched. "Needy little git, aren't you?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not the one who keeps *attacking*."

Malfoy's lips tightened. He shrugged in return. "You haven't complained so far."

"No, I haven't," Harry said. With Malfoy eyes on his, he got out of bed and went to stand in the middle of the room. "Everyone else is gone?"

Those grey eyes flicked down Harry's body - quickly, but not quickly enough that Harry didn't catch it. "Yes," Malfoy said. The shirt he'd been folding slipped forgotten from his hands. "I suppose you can't just sit around and brood, anyway - "

Harry licked dry lips. "Doesn't help anything."

"I suppose not." Malfoy stayed where he was, though, looking hesitant.

Harry went to him. Malfoy was already dressed, in robes, trousers, shirt - all but shoes. He, on the other hand, was wearing pyjama pants and sporting a hard-on. He was in front of Malfoy now, and they were both nervous. There was a tense moment, during which all Harry could hear was his heartbeat pounding against his ears. *He* knew damned well that Malfoy was more to him than a random person to get off with. He had to guard against that, keep it a secret, or else he would lose even this.

* * *

Draco's breath was caught in his chest, frozen. He couldn't believe he was so nervous. What was wrong with him, that he had no problem grabbing someone and wrestling him to the ground, or meeting for a casual hook-up in a seedy hotel room, but felt so incredibly... insecure... doing this with full consent, spoken agreement? He watched, transfixed, as Potter's hand - connected to that well-muscled arm which was attached to that *chest* which made Draco weak in the knees - watched it land on the edge of his robes, and that did it. The catch was released; Draco grabbed Potter's wrist. There was another moment - a half-scared, half-confused look in Potter's eyes that said he didn't know whether Draco was going to hit him or fuck him - but somehow he was holding both of Potter's wrists and pushing him back out from between the two beds.

They tumbled ingloriously to the floor. No words, just a silent understanding of what needed to happen. Potter's hands untucked his shirt and unbuttoned it rather quickly. Their crotches were already in contact, and that was the main thing. Draco realized that he was craving skin-on-skin contact as well, though. It had nothing to do with Potter, and everything to do with getting off *properly*. No point in doing things by halves. They rolled and Draco was above him now. Potter reached for his trouser button, and Draco caught his wrist.

"Do *not* rip these ones," he snarled.

Potter gave him what could only be called a glare. "I wasn't *going* to."

"You ripped my other pair, and I happen to be rather fonder of these trousers than I am of *you*," Draco said coolly. "So if you don't mind - "

"Shut up!" Potter said, clearly annoyed. "I said I wasn't going to rip them!"

His annoyance made Draco even harder, and he sneered down at Potter. "I'm going to fuck you," he announced. He expected Potter to snarl something back; he expected anger: he wanted it. He fed off Potter's negativity like some sort of twisted life form that dies with exposure to light of any kind. He craved Potter's darkness, his raw wrath and the lust that came from within its bounds.

He hadn't expected Potter's eyelids to flutter shut, or for him to moan. It was... unexpected in the extreme. Draco knew a moment of uncertainty, before the physical response hit. Potter *wanted* to be fucked. Potter wasn't struggling against the fact that he was currently beneath him, in the naturally submissive position. It was highly arousing, in fact. Draco stopped hesitating and got on with things. "You like that," he said, his voice rough. But looking for confirmation, too. Permission, even, though he wouldn't have called it that aloud.

Potter opened his eyes, and there was a smirk there to rival Draco's own. "Yeah," he said, his voice lazy, almost casual. "I want it. Fuck me."

Gods. Draco swallowed, then stood up, found his wand and locked the door, then removed the rest of his clothes properly, all but his tie. He liked the thought of it fluttering in Potter's face and annoying him even as Draco fucked him senseless. And it would also save him needing to tie it again later. Though why he was wearing a tie to what was likely to become a battle later on anyway was anyone's guess. Habit, was his answer.

Potter had stayed where he was, but wriggled out of his pyjama pants. Draco went and stood over him, hands on his hips. He was very confident about his body and knew no qualms, despite the raft of butterflies in his belly caused by the sight of Potter, stretched out and fully nude. "I'm not *that* uncivilized," was all he said, and pulled the blanket off Finch-Fletchley's bed. "Here."

Potter gave him an odd, half-smile, and stood up to spread it out on the floor. "But a bed would be too - never mind. Come here."

But he moved to Draco first. His move was bold and neared violence; a hand clamped over Draco's wrist and yanked him closer. And that was enough. Draco shoved a tube of lube into his hand. "Here. Prepare yourself. I'm not going to."

Potter took it and ignored him, grabbing Draco's cock and beginning to fist it roughly. There were no words once again, and no affection of any sort, either. Everything was distinctly ungentle; hard hands against hard cocks, pushes rather than caresses, and then it was time - they were on the floor again, and Draco was shoving himself between Potter's legs and fucking him as though Potter were nothing but a glory hole in some filthy pub. Or a chance acquaintance lingering in the Leaky Cauldron's pub, now in the rented bed upstairs. He kept his eyes closed, just waiting for the feeling to take him, devour him alive. It had been an embarrassing number of months since he'd actually fucked another man, and Potter's body left nothing to be desired, really. Somehow, that skinny orphan in rags had become this lean, cynical, muscled man, and Draco's desire for him seem to grow with every encounter.

For his body. Draco kept his eyes closed. Potter was breathing hard beneath him and jerking at his cock, his body trembling or shivering or shuddering at the edge of climax - and then he was doing it, coming, his fingers digging into Draco's shoulder in what would have been pain if he hadn't already been so damned aroused. Draco hissed through his clenched teeth and poured himself into Potter's body, *take it, Potter*, and he was gasping and trembling, himself.

It was over. Potter's green eyes stared up into his. His chest was heaving, but he managed to pant, "Easier with your eyes closed, was it?"

Draco could have slapped him, but didn't. "Yes," he said shortly, and pulled himself out of Potter. He stood and turned his back on Potter, went nude to the lav and washed himself with the door open, still facing away. He could hear Potter moving about behind him, near his own bed. The murmur of cleaning spells uttered, the soft rustle of clothing as Potter got dressed. Ignoring the other, Draco went back to his clothes and redressed himself. Potter was - who knew what he was thinking. Draco didn't care. He realized that he hadn't even noticed whether or not his tie had bothered Potter as he buttoned his shirt beneath it, so absorbed in the act itself had he been. This concerned him, but he

put the thought aside. He was about to go to battle. After Snape had given him his instructions, should he be sighted by the other side. The plan was that he work in the ward-casting center in attempt to shore up the hospital's wards once again.

Good, something to focus on. Draco fastened the last hook on his robes and bent to tie his shoelaces. He found a comb and ran it through his hair, then straightened up. Time to do the cool, casual goodbye, perhaps even a quick thanks for the (admittedly quite passable) sex. If he was feeling magnanimous. Draco pocketed his wand and picked up his pack. He would shrink it at Grimmauld Place, or leave it there. He turned to face Potter across the empty room, and saw why Potter had been so conspicuously quiet.

He was sitting on the bed, fully dressed, and staring at the floor.

Draco found himself at a loss. Brusque words weren't quite right any more. What could Potter be thinking? The answer came to him: he was thinking about his stupid friends and feeling inadequate, as usual, because they were in the battle and he'd been left behind once again. Once upon a time, the brash git he'd gone to Hogwarts with would have rushed in to foolishly play the hero part for which he was so ridiculously under-qualified. Someone must have taught him some common sense in the interim; the Potter *he* had known wouldn't have let anyone boss him around. He had to say something, but what?

Potter shifted, and became aware that Draco was watching him. "Going now?" he asked, his voice precisely even and devoid of emotion.

"Yes." Draco paused. "If I see Dumbledore at Grimmauld Place - "

Potter's head snapped up. "Could you tell him that I need to see him?"

"That's what I was going to say," Draco said. He hesitated yet. "I'll tell him. Don't... " The right verb eluded him. Worry? Freak out? Do anything stupid? He trailed off and could not finish the admonition.

Potter's eyes met his steadily. "I won't," he said, and it was strong and steady. "I'll just... stay here. Wait for news, I guess."

Draco tried a light smile. "Good shag."

Potter actually returned it. "Yeah. Thanks."

"Not a problem." Draco shouldered his pack and went to the door. "See you."

"See you," Potter echoed, and Draco closed the door behind himself.

Stopped outside it, shaking his head to clear it. Extraneous emotion. It was dangerous, and he knew it. He consulted his watch and realized that he wouldn't have time to eat breakfast before leaving for Grimmauld Place now. He went to the field to Apparate, and put Potter firmly from his mind.

* * *

Apathy overcame Harry, and he lay back on the bed once the door had closed, his feet still on the floor. He let it swallow him, felt its teeth graze the edges of his mind. It felt like the entire world was out there, fighting, and he was here. The one person who actually had the power to save them, and he was here. Under orders, or the conspicuous lack of order to join the battle, more precisely.

Harry curled into a ball on his side and tried not to think about Malfoy. He hadn't realized that actually having sex with him would make him feel like this. Even worse, in other words. He could still feel the echo of Malfoy inside him, feel the ache of flesh that hadn't been stretched like that in weeks. Besides which, Justin had never been particularly gifted at locating the correct place inside him. Harry had only bottomed occasionally because of it, and when he did, he got off mostly thanks to himself, not to Justin's efforts. Malfoy had found it on about the second stroke, and Harry had been a quivering, shaking, coming mess of strained need and desire. Malfoy had so much power over him.

Even when Harry had finally started noticing him as something other than a complete git back at Hogwarts, and rather as the rather wank-inspiring individual that he was, he

hadn't had power like this over Harry. Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and shivered at the thought. *I am not in love with Malfoy. I could never be in love with Malfoy.*

Was it a lie? Some small part of his mind rather suspected that it was. Harry was miserable. Of all the likely candidates - he could have chosen someone who would adore him, like Derek. Or someone who would just admire him while sucking his cock, like Alex. Or someone who didn't *really* give a damn, just didn't want anyone else moving in on what *had* been his territory after a fashion, like Justin. But no - Malfoy, who was worse than the worst traits of all of the above put together, and by a fair stretch. Malfoy, who would flee this convenient arrangement the instant he figured it out.

It might be better. If Harry was thinking with his head instead of his cock, he would head in the opposite direction at once. Never touch Malfoy again, never be touched by Malfoy again. Painful as that thought was, he knew it would be for the best. Before he got in over his head.

Harry reached for the edge of the blanket and pulled it over his curled form, never minding that half of it was beneath him, still. After a little while, he fell asleep.

* * *

Someone was shaking him. Harry, startled, shot out a hand and clenched the wrist of the person touching him in a vice-like grip. "What?" he demanded, his voice hoarse.

Derek Thomas looked frightened. "Message for you," he said. "From Draco Malfoy."

Harry's stomach was in his throat. Or was it his heart? He felt sick and nervous at the same time. "Is Malfoy still alive, then?"

"Y-yes," Derek said nervously, but didn't try to pull his wrist free.

Harry noticed then and let go. "Sorry. What about Ron and Hermione?"

"Still fine," Derek said. "Hermione wasn't even on the lines, and neither was Malfoy. Ron was, but he got through. It wasn't a very big attack - more intimidation than anything, but the Death Eaters have a lot of the patients held hostage right now."

Harry raked his fingers through his hair and sat up, somewhat tangled in the blanket. "What's the message?"

Derek looked rather relieved. "Malfoy said to tell you that Dumbledore would like to see you at Headquarters tonight at eight. Malfoy said you'd want to know as soon as possible, so I volunteered to - to tell you."

Cheeks flushed slightly at this admission, but Harry paid it no mind. "Thanks," he said absently, thinking of Malfoy procuring this message - possibly even the meeting for him. Well, not for *Harry's* sake - everyone wanted the war to end; few people knew the means to make it do so, that was all. Malfoy must know about the Prophecy; he was on the inside, after all. "Thanks," Harry said again. "That's good to know. Thanks for coming."

Derek nodded and grinned. "Sure, Harry. Um - I'll just - I'm going to the hall, there's still some food being served, because most people missed lunch - "

Harry realized that he was very hungry, not having eaten yet. "I'll come in a bit," he said, and gave the boy a genuine smile. "Thanks," he said again.

Derek seemed to realize that he was being dismissed. "Yeah," he said, and made his way out of the bunkhouse.

Harry got up and gathered his things in case he was spending the night at Grimmauld Place, then went to the hall. Maybe Ron and Hermione would be back.

* * *

They were, and it was a huge relief to see them both. They were full of news, and

seemed surprised (though grateful) for Harry's apparent good mood. Hermione had been trying to figure out how to break down the spells sealing off the parts of St. Mungo's being held by the Death Eaters in order to get to the patients being held inside, but from a study somewhere. She'd said that Malfoy had been working on other spells - well out of the way of harm, Ron had added snidely.

Hermione gave him a sharp look. "We need people to do that, too," she told him. "It's just as important as what you were doing."

"Or as what you were doing," Harry added to her, in agreement. He looked at Ron. "You're sure you're okay?"

Ron shrugged. "Oh, sure. A couple of wayward hexes, but nothing I haven't gotten before. Though I *did* get my favourite, the slashy, purple thing. Since we were in St. Mungo's and all, though, somebody had some of the potion on hand. I'm fine." He stopped, and Harry guessed that he was restraining himself from asking what Harry had done while they were gone. And knew that he would hate being asked, and so, didn't.

Harry was grateful. What was he supposed to say? *Well, nobody lets me do anything, anyway, so I had a great, if confusing shag, and then a long nap. Wonder what's for supper?* He looked away in embarrassment and unthinkingly took a bite of his chicken. It was tough and stringy, an over-cooked leg joint covered in slimy, goose-pimpled skin. It appeared to have been baked entirely without the benefit of flavouring agents, and the result was unappealing in the extreme. He opened his mouth to complain about it, then closed it again. He'd just avoided the most recent battle of the war. He still had a bed to sleep in and food to eat. What right did he have to complain?

Ron poked at the skin he'd peeled back with his knife. "It looks a bit like human flesh, doesn't it?" he asked cheerfully, though his nose was wrinkled in fascinated horror.

"Ron! Don't, that's disgusting," Hermione said, looking like she was going to be ill. "That's *incredibly* - ew, just stop doing that!"

Ron gave her a macabre grin. "If you wanted it, all you had to do was say."

Hermione's face sickened further. "I can't take it," she said weakly. She turned her plate around so that the chicken leg was closer to Ron, and covered it with a paper serviette. She began to eat her (hard, if it was anything like Harry's) baked potato and tried not to look at it. Ron laughed at her.

Harry watched them both and smiled a little. It was nice that there were still people who were genuinely happy together. It was hard not to feel a little wistful and a whole lot idiotic. But somehow, knowing that Malfoy had gotten that message to him was really... he didn't know. It was something that made him peculiarly... something... for no explicable reason. Sort of half happy, half even-more-anxious-about-the-entire thing. His gut twisted every time he thought of Malfoy, but at least it was something.

Later, they went to the Infirmary until it was time for Harry to leave. Mentally, he'd already gone; he was thinking of his meeting and what to say. He was actually very excited about talking to Dumbledore - the last time he'd seen the man had been back in April, early-ish. It was July now. Harry left them and went to Apparate.

* * *

Twelve Grimmauld Place was exactly as it had always been, with the exception of Kreacher's presence, which no one missed, not even Hermione. Lupin answered the door and seemed very pleased to see him, which was gratifying. Harry allowed himself to be hugged, even accepted it rather gratefully. "Remus," he said. "How are you?"

Lupin looked grim. "As well as can be expected. You?"

Harry gave him a wry look. "I'm going mad, Remus. I need to *do* something."

Lupin chuckled mirthlessly. "I figured you'd say that. Come on, Albus is down in the kitchen."

Of course the kitchen. The scene of so many pre-war and early-war meetings. Now, Grimmauld Place tended to be reserved for the inner circle of the Order only, or special circumstance people. Everyone knew about it, of course, and it was always a fall-out shelter of sorts, but in terms of coming to stay or even visiting required an invitation,

otherwise. The army had gotten too large once the war had broken out. Lupin retreated upstairs for some other, unmentioned business, and Harry went down to the kitchen.

Dumbledore was waiting, his chair clearly visible through his robes. "Harry," he said warmly, his elderly voice dry and sounding more weary than Harry had ever heard it sound. "Come in, come in." And yet, still the gentle, genial Headmaster that he'd always been. The grandfather figure, even if some of Harry's illusions about him had been rather badly shattered during his fifth year, only just recovering in time before his death.

He sat down in the place across from the old wizard. "Hello," he said, feeling like a schoolboy again.

"Tea?" Dumbledore was already pouring it. Harry thought absently about the fact that he'd never seen another ghost actually pick things up and manipulate them, but surely Nearly Headless Nick had known how to pull out his chair and so forth; it was just that he'd never taken note of the fact before. "How have you been, Harry? A little impatient, I suppose." It was not a question.

"A little," Harry said dryly, accepting the cup and saucer. "Thank you for meeting with me. I haven't seen you in so long."

"Few people have," Dumbledore agreed. "I have been on the move. I happened to encounter Mr. Malfoy quite recently, and again today, and he mentioned that you were rather anxious to see me."

Harry's stomach did odd things, and he suddenly didn't really want to swallow his tea, but made himself do it, anyway. "I appreciate it," he said, meaning both the request and its granting. "Where have you been?"

He hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation, but Dumbledore didn't take it as one. "Everywhere," he said, and the lines in his face seemed to deepen. "You may have guessed that I have been searching for Voldemort."

Harry leaned forward, tea forgotten. "And?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his image wavering slightly. "If I knew where he was, Harry, I would have told you by now. I swear. The instant I know a way to get you to him, I will make it happen. But I do not know. I cannot find him. I have sent Fawkes. I have tracking spells and traps, alchemical procedures and crystal balls - in short, everything. And everything has failed. Even my old instincts, which are failing me at the moment."

Harry slumped in his chair. "I can't believe it," he said dully. "He has to be *somewhere*. Could he be possessing someone?"

A grim chuckle. "Every other person who walks through these doors is forced through Lupin and Snape's defensive spells," Dumbledore said. "We have devised a potion, Severus and I, to detect the use of polyjuice and other shape-shifting spells. If he is among us, we will find out. If he is among the enemy - there is little hope that we will know before it is too late."

Harry's frustration swelled within him, but there was no point in taking it out on the old man. "I just wish there was something I could *do* - I *hate* being left behind at the barracks while everyone else goes to battle. It's not *right*. By the Prophecy, I should be the one stopping the war, not hiding from it! I know it won't do any good if Voldemort's not even there, but if he isn't, then can't I fight?"

Dumbledore raised silver brows. "And if he is indeed concealed amongst the Death Eaters?"

Harry saw the point, and deflated. "Right," he said glumly. "I *hate* this."

"I know you do." The sympathy in Dumbledore's voice was genuine. "I will try to think of something to keep you a little better occupied, shall I?"

"Please," Harry said.

The interview seemed to be over. Dumbledore gestured toward his cup. "Drink your tea," he said gently. "And I hope you will stay the night. I'm sure it could be a nice

change from the crowding in the barracks."

Harry nodded and thought of Ron, who'd been through a battle today and would sleep in a packed room full of snoring boys, uncomfortable next to a strange bedfellow. It was so backward that it boggled the mind, but he was nodding anyway. He'd expected to stay the night; he'd brought his things, after all.

"Are you hungry?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not really." Not true; supper at the barracks had left *much* to be desired, after all. But not now. His guilt would choke down any appetite he had in him. "Thanks, but I think I'll just go up to my room - can I stay in my old room?"

"Of course." Dumbledore smiled sadly, perceiving, probably, what he was feeling.

Harry couldn't even bear the sympathy. It was almost easier with Malfoy, getting the mistreatment he deserved. He left the kitchen and ascended two flights of stairs leading up to his room. He dumped his things on the bed and stared around the small room. For many years, this had been his home-between-homes. Since Hogwarts, it was the closest thing he'd had to having a regular place to stay. Ron stayed in a room of his own now, when he was here, and Harry had claimed the room.

Harry heard the floor outside the door creak, and turned around. Lupin, perhaps?

He was wrong. In the doorway, looking both surprised and uncertain, was Malfoy, of all people. Watching him.

Harry, as usual, was at a loss for words. "You're here," was all he could say.

Malfoy just nodded.

Harry suddenly smiled. "I'm glad I'm not the only one here. Is Snape upstairs?"

Another nod. "Talking to Lupin about something."

Harry hesitated. Was there any point in trying to talk to Malfoy like he was a friend? He could help himself; he was lonely. "Come in," he said. "Tell me about this afternoon. About the wards and that."

He held his breath, waiting, but Malfoy did come in, closing the door behind him. He sat down on the bed that had once been Ron's and began to talk. Harry listened to him, and realized that he'd never actually really had a civil conversation with Malfoy before. Some small part of him felt ashamed, while another part felt relieved for the same reasons - he didn't even know Malfoy; how could he mistakenly think he might be in love with him? It was just attraction, after all. Harry sat down on his own bed and relaxed, listening to Malfoy describe the spellwork the team he'd been assigned to had been doing. And felt some of the tension in his shoulders drain away at last as he managed to forget. Just for a little while.

Chapter Ten

Harry couldn't sleep. He wished Malfoy had stayed in the room for the night, but of course he hadn't. He'd gone back upstairs to the room assigned to him after a few hours had passed. They'd talked, and they'd exchanged hand jobs before Malfoy had gone. After, Harry had tried to persuade him again, but it was like trying to argue with a rock. Malfoy had simply given him a bit of a sneer, declined with a rude, "I don't think so, Potter," and taken himself off.

It wasn't as though Harry had expected him to sleep *with* him, just in the room, that was all. Malfoy wouldn't have any of it, though. Despite the surprising ease, generally, of their conversation. They'd talked mostly about the war. No sensitive topics. Not sixth year or its events. Not Snape. Not Lucius. Harry was very much aware of the fact that Malfoy's arm was far from bare - he'd noticed the Mark again that morning, peripherally - but was actually beginning to think that Malfoy was more or less committed to the Order's side. Not that that amounted to trust, exactly, but it was something.

Harry sighed in the dark and turned over yet again. His body was far from satisfied. A shag with Justin had always done him for a good while. Supplemented by the

occasional wank when he'd had the energy, Harry had been fine during their longer separations, for the most part. Malfoy was having an odd effect on him, making Harry crave sex all the time now. He couldn't get enough of it. Added to which, Harry had stopped wanting it with anyone else. Alright, so perhaps he wasn't in love, but he couldn't deny his crush or - Harry thought the word to himself, alone in the dark - obsession, even - any longer.

Another gusty sigh. Another fruitless attempt to get comfortable. It was past three before Harry managed to fall asleep.

* * *

Lupin knocked on his door around nine. "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily and stifled a groan. "HmMMM?"

Lupin opened the door just far enough to stick his head inside. "I'm making breakfast. Just checking to see if you'd be interested."

Harry turned over and sat up. He was very hungry, actually. He and Malfoy had gone down late the night before to make toast, but that seemed ages ago now. "Alright. Sure." He hesitated. "Is - is anyone else here?"

"Well, Dumbledore's gone - not that he would've eaten, anyway, obviously, but Draco is still here. Snape's off somewhere, left quite early," Lupin said. "Otherwise, it's just you and me. And Draco."

"Right," Harry said, his heartbeat increasing. "I'll be right down."

"Take your time," Lupin said. "I haven't started yet. Ten, fifteen minutes, perhaps? See you then."

He closed the door, and Harry was galvanized into action. He showered very quickly,

with ninety percent of his time under the water spent wanking to unabashed thoughts of Malfoy, and dressed equally hurriedly. He felt like he was dressing for a date, though that was obviously not the case. It was just breakfast with Lupin, probably - who knew if Malfoy would even come down - especially if he knew that Snape was gone? Harry rushed down the stairs regardless.

Lupin was alone in the kitchen, scrambling eggs and frying bacon. Harry was very much disappointed not to see Malfoy, but not all that surprised. He went to take the boiling kettle off the range and made the tea. They were clattering about like this in companionable silence when the door opened. Harry nearly dropped the teapot. They both turned around.

Malfoy was standing in the doorway, looking rather ill-at-ease.

"Good morning," Lupin said immediately, with one of his mild smiles. "Come in. We're nearly ready, here."

Malfoy did as he was told, closing the door behind him. "Is there anything left to do?"

Lupin looked around. "No, I don't think so, actually. Harry's just made the tea and I think most of the rest has taken care of itself. Here." He gave Malfoy a large platter of scrambled eggs to set on the table. "If you could just - thanks."

They all sat down. Lupin poured himself tea and passed the teapot to Malfoy, who poured and silently passed it to Harry, who was sitting across from him with Lupin at the head of the table. Where Sirius used to sit, Harry recalled, though the recollection had long since stopped being a gaping wound and was now more of a fond memory. He sensed the inherent awkwardness of the current situation and wondered what Sirius would have thought of this strange arrangement of people. He picked up the bacon and silently offered it to Malfoy. He got a nod in return for it, though no word was spoken.

Lupin cleared his throat. "So, Harry," he said. "What's next?"

"I don't know," Harry said, the sinking feeling returning. "I was hoping to talk to Snape, actually. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"A few days, I think," Lupin said. "You're more than welcome to stay."

Harry nodded and sipped his tea. "Thanks. I think I will, then."

"Draco?" Lupin turned politely to him. Harry knew that Lupin was essentially Malfoy's direct supervisor, along with Snape, but took a moment to respect Lupin's kind treatment of his charge. "We've gotten word that the barracks is rather overcrowded at the moment. You may stay here as well, if you wish."

Malfoy's carefully-neutral expression betrayed a flash of surprise - pleasant surprise, Harry thought - before it was hidden away again. "I have to - " he glanced at Harry - "report on Thursday."

"Of course." Lupin picked up the teapot and refilled his own cup, checked Malfoy's, which was still full. "Today is Tuesday. You have a little time. Take it off; no one will be able to go back to St. Mungo's until they get the basic wards back up."

Malfoy poured himself a glass of pumpkin juice from the jug. "I thought they were still moving the other patients out."

"They are, but the task is being adequately covered," Lupin assured him. "They have mostly Healers and Healer's apprentices doing the moving, for obvious reasons."

"What about their protection?" Harry asked. Both Malfoy and Lupin looked at him. "The people doing the moving," Harry clarified. "They're being covered, right?"

"Of course," Lupin said, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"Well, those people will need relieving every so often," Harry said. "Won't they? We could be doing that, Remus."

The other was already shaking his head before Harry had finished speaking. "No, Harry. Absolutely not. Both of you are rather too valuable. Draco can continue his research on the wards here. You can help if you like, but I know that's not your favourite activity."

"I don't give a *shit* about my 'favourite activities'," Harry snarled, suddenly angry again. "I just want to be *doing* something."

Lupin sighed. There was a moment of awkward silence. Harry felt a little silly, arguing like that in front of Malfoy, but he was sick of being left out of everything. Although he was also afraid that Malfoy would think that he just wanted to be around him, which was more true than either of them wanted it to be. "Fine," Lupin said. "Research wards. Go crazy. Do you even know where the library *is*?"

Harry opened his mouth, then realized that he didn't. "No."

"I don't know either, actually," Malfoy said quietly.

Lupin relented, giving Harry a half-apologetic look. "I'll show you both once we're finished."

Malfoy gave Harry a long, scrutinizing look, but his expression was quite unreadable. Nobody said another word for many minutes.

* * *

The research was quite a bit less boring to Draco. Lupin showed them where the correct section of books were and explained to him where to find everything else. Potter was already looking off in other directions, and Draco felt a stab of annoyance. If he wasn't even going to be permitted to work alone, then Potter could damned well make himself useful. They sat down on the long, lone table in the center, which was in desperate want of a dusting spell - Potter managed *that*, at least - and began looking through stacks of books. The silence lengthened.

Draco couldn't take it any more after about ten minutes of it. "Do you know what you're

looking for?" he asked, his patience quite strained already.

Potter looked up. "Not really. You said last night that they were variants of the *Contego* and *Custodius* wards. I was just going to look for stuff on them and going from there."

Not an altogether bad plan, then. And he was actually rather impressed that Potter had retained the names of the warding spells. "Okay," Draco said. "You find general information on them, and I'm going to look for Dark versions of spell puncture, hopefully on wards in particular."

Potter paused. "Can you tell me which ward is for what again?"

The table was about two meters wide and covered with books, but Draco could see his face between the stacks. "The *Custodius* wards are for the building itself, and for the edges of departments. The tea room would be under those ones, as well as the lobby and the lifts. The *Contego* wards are more complex, and would be layered around the patients' rooms - you can add different varieties to support each other, and some of them have individual properties."

"Like what?"

Draco absently trailed a finger tip through the dust on the book cover nearest him. Potter watched it. "Like having built-in alarms to notify the staff about people entering or leaving the room. Detecting blood loss, or temperature changes. The really specialized ones can even detect changes or shifts in magical aura and signature. Those ones are mostly used in the mental ward and for patients with particularly bad spell damage."

"Did you know all this before?" Potter asked.

Draco wondered if he'd actually been listening. "No," he said, a bit sharply. "I just learned it all yesterday."

"During the battle."

"Of course during the battle. I was trying to figure out how the Death Eaters had broken through the finer layers of the *Contego* wards in particular. It wouldn't be that difficult to break through the *Custodius* wards, but for the others, you would have to know the precise combination of wards in order to break through them, and even so, lots of them are supposed to be unbreakable except by the caster. For the sake of the Healers on staff as well as for the future protection of the patients, I'm trying to find out if there even *are* magical methods of identifying and breaking those wards without knowing exactly what they are. Or else we have to face the fact that over half the Healers on staff are Death Eaters or spies."

Potter made a face. "Not good."

"No," Draco agreed dryly. "Not good at all. I'd much rather believe there's a magical way to do it. If we can find out what it is, then we can start figuring out magical solutions, or finding new wards. That's also part of what I'm doing."

"You learned *all* of this during the battle?" Potter sounded rather incredulous.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "It was a six-hour battle, Potter. All I did was research."

Potter shook his head. "Better you than me," he muttered. "Well, let's have at it, then."

Silence, at last. Draco returned to his reading, jotting down notes here and there. Neither of them spoke for about forty-five minutes. After awhile, Draco got up and stretched. And caught Potter sneaking a look at the strip of belly he'd inadvertently exposed. "What?" It was terse, but then, it was meant to be. He had to make up for the odd friendliness of the night before.

Potter was caught off-guard. "Wh - oh. I, uh, oh, I had a question, actually."

Draco sat down again. "What?" he repeated.

Potter turned his book around and slid it across the table, pointing at a particular section. "Here, it says that the *Contego* wards only have a few variants, and that they're all basically magically coded in the same way. So doesn't that mean that if you figured out how to break one, then you could just break the rest the same way?"

Draco noticed those damnable eyes. They were mesmerizingly beautiful, in fact. He blinked and looked down at the book, following Potter's finger. Scanning the passage in question, he said, "It still doesn't solve the problem of how the Death Eaters would have known how to break even one of them, though."

"True," Potter said, and waited for him to finish reading.

Draco felt his forehead crease. "They're supported by the *Faveus* reinforcements? Why didn't I know that already?" He glanced at the cover of the book, confirming that it was not one that the St. Mungo's library had had in stock. "Well - maybe if you took out the support spells, it would weaken the *Contego* enough that you could just batter it down."

"Should I look into that?" Potter asked, deferring entirely to him.

Draco spared him a quick glance. "That would be good."

"Sure." Potter lapsed into silence again, and the research continued.

After a bit, Draco abandoned his own book. He was hungry. It had to be nearly time for lunch by now. Or perhaps it wasn't hunger, exactly. He watched Potter across the table for several minutes, wondering how to word his... request. Or whether Potter might have a fortuitous attack of hormonal need and spare him having to make the request. He could detect the faint aroma of Potter's natural scent, and it was extremely enticing. He shifted slightly, entirely unsure as to how to go about this. It was easier when he didn't have to say anything, or when Potter made the first move.

Potter looked up all of a sudden. "Why are you watching me?" he asked, suspicious. "I know what I'm doing!"

"I'm sure you do," Draco said, not caring, and stretched again, hoping to attract Potter's attention to less academic regions.

It was working. Potter didn't respond immediately, and when Draco looked again, Potter's eyes were stuck on Draco's chest or thereabouts. "That's very distracting," Potter said, biting his lip.

Draco smiled. Perfect. "It was meant to be."

A fleeting look of surprise, then Potter smiled. Gave a soft laugh, just an exhalation, nothing more. "Oh. I see."

"Do you, Potter?"

Those eyes turned wicked. "Yes. Are you - do you - ?" Potter stumbled.

Draco forced himself not to stutter. "I want you to suck me off again."

A surprised laugh followed this, too loud due to nerves. "Here?"

"Yes. Here. Now," Draco specified, smiling.

Potter glanced at the door. "What if Remus comes back?"

"What if he does? You'll be under the table," Draco said, with a smirk.

Potter hesitated. "Okay. But if I do, then I get to fuck you, after."

The words went directly to his cock. Draco shifted again, his trousers extremely tight. "Deal. Get to it."

Potter got off his chair and crawled under the table. "Patience, patience," he admonished, his voice full of laughter.

Well, that wasn't a hard sell, Draco thought, and it caused him to smirk to himself again. Potter wanted him badly. That much was obvious. It was only fair. He hadn't been able to sleep the night before for thinking about Potter's body, his *mouth*. Much as Draco hated to admit it, Potter's skills in that regard were more than phenomenal. The memory of the blow job outside the bunkhouse had seemed to grow in his mind. Perhaps this would dispel his opinion of it, puncture the memory, which was probably enhanced by the full moon and his own lust for sex in any form. Perhaps Potter was only adequate, after all. There was no time for further thought; Potter's fingers were on his flies, one hand cheekily rubbing his erection through the wool blend.

"Want it much?" He could hear Potter's smirk.

"Shut it, Potter," Draco spat. "Hurry up." Oh, that was much better - so much more satisfying when they were both angry. Easier, somehow.

"Well, you could be helping me here - wait, never mind."

"Potter," Draco said, the threat in his tone hopefully masking his growing desperation, "why are you still talking? Shouldn't your mouth be - *ahh* - yes, *there* - " His own speech was suddenly an issue. Potter, ignoring him, had managed to free Draco's aching cock and gotten his trousers sufficiently out of the way to get it into his mouth. The fluttering touches of his fingers had just about driven Draco mad at the last moment, but it was all okay now. And *oh gods*, it was every bit as good as it had been. It wasn't just that he was desperate, which he was, frankly, but he'd *had* blow jobs before and they'd never been this incredible, this satisfying. Potter's tongue was strong along his cock, rubbing sinuously as the tight ring of his mouth moved back and forth along his length. Draco could feel himself shaking, could feel the pressure rising to the point where he would fly about, helplessly out of control, and he craved it. He'd never craved that sort of helplessness before, ever - but it was a feeling beyond what he could give himself, and it was a helplessness he trusted Potter with. He couldn't help that part, either - so far, Potter had proven himself eminently trustworthy - that he could meet Draco's needs more than adequately and *would* show him the way to that sort of climax and release. At this very moment, Draco trusted him implicitly. His finger nails whitened as he gripped the table. It was fortunate that he'd put the quill down; he'd have snapped it by now.

Potter's chin rubbed lightly against his balls, the light scratch of stubble more erotic than anything else, and now those hands were on his hips - not holding them back, but pulling them forward. Draco let himself be moved, let his back arch as he sought the dark heat of Potter's throat. He felt the slow give of muscles relaxing there, even as the pressure of Potter's tongue stayed consistently strong. It was enough - more than enough - Draco heard his own gasp, sounding shocked as his body exploded into Potter's throat. He was coming, felt the liquid heat shooting out of himself, and Potter's hands were rubbing his thighs, his throat swallowing even though his mouth was still full, stretched wide around Draco's cock. It was more than just a blow job, Draco was thinking dazedly as the last of it emptied from him, it was like being taken care of more in a less perfunctory way than that. Potter had ensured that Draco would know that he not only *could* come, but that he was very much welcome to do so. His gentleness spoke volumes, and Draco was at a bit of a loss to interpret those volumes. He opened his eyes, grateful for the fact that Potter was under the table and not somewhere where Draco would have to look him in the eye. Part of him was trying to feel embarrassed for some reason, but he pushed this unwelcome feeling away and reminded himself that it was an arrangement. Potter would take it all back when they fucked, later. Yes. That was it. Draco felt better.

Potter reappeared on his chair and, uncharacteristically, didn't say anything. He just smiled a bit and said, "Should we do a little more research, then?"

Draco just stared at him for a second. "Alright," he said, but hardly heard himself. He noticed Potter quietly casting a *Scourgify*, his wand aimed at his body, not his hands. And given how fully Draco had come in his mouth, the need for the charm was rather mystifying - until he realized that Potter must have come in his trousers during the blow job. Startled by this, he continued staring at Potter, whose cheeks were faintly pink as he returned to his book. Potter had come while sucking him off, without even touching himself. Draco happened to know that those hands had been occupied the entire time, that Potter couldn't have been jerking himself off simultaneously. How curious.

Well. It was just a mark of how attractive he was, then. Draco hid a little smile and tried to gather his thoughts into some semblance of order and began taking notes again.

* * *

Harry caught the little smile out of the corner of his eye and, embarrassed as he was by his own lack of control, he fought down his own little smile. They worked in silence for another hour or so, until Lupin came to call them for lunch.

* * *

Lunch was finished. Lupin had cleared the dishes, which were now washing themselves in the sink. "Anything else? Coffee? Tea?"

"No. Thanks," Harry said. "Unless you want any."

"No," Lupin said. "I actually have some errands to run. I'll be away from the house until Friday, in fact. Would it be possible to ask you both to stay here until I return?"

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was looking as carefully neutral as always. "That's fine with me," he said, shrugging.

Lupin looked at Malfoy. "It's your call, anyway," Malfoy said. "As long as it's fine that I go and report on Thursday, that is."

"Of course. I hadn't forgotten." Lupin's face was grave. "Do you have enough to report?"

Malfoy gave him an even look. "This time," he said, and the temperature in the room dropped a bit.

Harry's stomach dropped; he felt cold. Right. Best not to forget that Malfoy was a spy, and that no one should ever trust a spy. Not that he trusted Malfoy in the slightest. He'd just - forgotten, temporarily, who they both were. Not a mistake to be making. Malfoy glanced at him, just a cool, fleeting look.

"Good," Lupin said, just as coolly. "Owl me if you have any problems. If anyone comes to the house, the word is that Dumbledore won't be available again for a few weeks. These visits are very energy-draining for him, though he hides it well. I will not be able

to owl back, but if it is a serious concern - and I'm talking to both of you, here - then I will come back."

"Will you be able to?" Harry asked.

"I should be," Lupin assured him. He rose and looked around. "I'll be leaving in about ten minutes. I apologize for not having mentioned this at breakfast, but it's a rather last-minute plan. Minerva came by this morning with word from Shacklebolt. I'm needed, and believe me, I will enjoy being out of the house!"

"Of course," Harry said automatically. "Well, good luck with whatever you're doing, then. Come back, will you?"

Lupin waved this off. "I'll be fine." But he smiled and Harry stood to exchange a quick hug. Lupin patted him briskly. "I'll see you soon. Draco." He extended a hand, and Harry watched with some surprise as Malfoy actually took it and shook.

"Take care of yourself," Malfoy said, surprising Harry even further.

Lupin took it in stride, though. "I will. Er - don't kill each other, either."

Harry exchanged a quick, guilty look with Malfoy. "We won't," he said quickly.

Malfoy just smiled, a tight little smile that gave nothing away. Lupin went upstairs to pack. Malfoy looked at him. "So," he said, a bit of challenge in his voice and eyes. "Library? Or - ?"

Harry smiled. "Ten minutes, did he say?"

Malfoy's eyes glittered. "Ten minutes," he confirmed. "I suppose the research can wait a little longer."

Malfoy was actually proposing this? Harry had been willing to bet that the other would purposely forget their deal, or else continually postpone it until Harry forgot, himself. Harry looked at him, not even trying to hide his curiosity. "You really do want this," he found himself saying.

Malfoy looked uncomfortable. "I'm hardly alone in that. At least I didn't - "

"Shut up," Harry said, his face flaming. So Malfoy *had* noticed. Damn. The git was leaning against the kitchen doorframe. Harry went to him and knocked his hips up against Malfoy's. Malfoy was halfway hard again already. Harry put one hand on his hip and, looking down at their bodies rather than at Malfoy's face, said, "I didn't know if you'd be the bottoming type."

A slight catch. "There's a first time for everything," Malfoy said, looking to the side.

Harry had been not-so-subtly frothing against him, and Malfoy had been more subtly allowing it, though not moving at all himself. "You've never bottomed before?"

A quick, defensive shrug of shoulder. "No. Not really my style." The grey eyes came back to his, piercing. "So you'd better make it good, Potter, or I won't indulge you like this again."

Harry smiled. "I know you think I'm an incompetent git," he said, his voice low and sultry, his head close to Malfoy's ear. "But in case you hadn't noticed, I've had a bit of time to hone my... skills. You won't regret this. I hope." The last rider had slipped out without his meaning it to, but then, people's first time on the bottom was always a bit dicey. He made a mental note to prepare Malfoy *really* well for this.

"You'd better - uh - "

He could hear the slight edge of fear in Malfoy's voice and cut through it confidently. "I will. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried." Malfoy was putting up a good show, his voice calm again.

They both stopped; footsteps could be heard from upstairs, descending to the main level. Harry pulled himself reluctantly off Malfoy and went up to the foyer, hoping the deep shadows would disguise his erection. Malfoy trailed after him, and they saw Lupin off. "I'll be back on Friday," he repeated. "It shouldn't be too dangerous. Don't worry."

"Friday," Harry repeated. "Take care, Remus."

A fond smile. "I will. You two, too."

He was gone. The house was suddenly much more silent. Malfoy moved forward, put his hands on Harry's waist from behind. "Upstairs," he said in Harry's ear. Harry nodded and practically bolted up the single staircase to his room. "Here," he said. "It's closer."

Malfoy was right behind him. He slammed the door shut despite the house being empty but for themselves, and they both began stripping off their clothes at once. Harry, trying not to stare at Malfoy, located his supply of lube. "Uh, are you okay with me doing the preparation, or would you rather - ?" He didn't mean to embarrass Malfoy, and for himself, it was always something he hated discussing, but it seemed rather necessary at this juncture.

Malfoy's lips compressed slightly. He walked past Harry and got onto his hands on knees on the bed that had once been Ron's - knowing the other was Harry's, of course. "You can do it. Just - "

"I'll be careful," Harry said. He was actually beside himself with nerves all of a sudden, as well as excitement. He was actually going to fuck Draco Malfoy. He had never thought he'd see this day. He touched Malfoy's arse, rubbing it, and prodded his legs a bit further apart. "That's it. Try to relax; you're all tense."

"Sorry." It was short. Harry imagined Malfoy's eyes clenched shut, just waiting for the invasion.

That wouldn't do. "No, don't be," Harry said, wondering what he was saying. "It's - it's

okay to be nervous about it, but I want you to feel good." He knelt between Malfoy's knees and ran his hands over that long expanse of smoothly-muscled back. "Breathe." He massaged a bit, but mostly just rubbed. Some of Malfoy's tension slipped away beneath his hands, and Harry slid one hand between Malfoy's legs from behind, onto his cock and began to rub. He knew Malfoy would prefer it if he didn't talk, so he didn't. Harry could feel the arousal returning, overtaking the nerves, and managed to get the lube cap off one-handed while distracting Malfoy with the other. He got a large glob of it out and slid a finger into Malfoy's arse. It was tight and very warm, but Harry was positive that Malfoy had at least fingered himself before. He went slowly, silently waiting for Malfoy's body to give him permission before he went on every time, until he had three fingers inside. He slid them out, and deliberated asking whether or not Malfoy was ready for this.

Harry didn't ask. He went slowly, though it was killing him and precome was dripping steadily from his cock. An inch, and Malfoy had sucked in his breath. Two inches, and Malfoy was rigid. "Try to relax," Harry said again, his hand on Malfoy's unflagging erection moving again. He pushed slowly, slowly, watching himself disappear into Malfoy, and felt more powerful than he'd felt in a very long time. With Justin, neither of them had been each other's first in either sense, so it had always been fast and furious. Well, not furious in the sense that sex with Malfoy tended to be furious. Just fast. Just another fuck. Harry caught himself. Wasn't that what this was supposed to be? He'd taken people's virginity before. Why was this so different?

The answer was obvious, but now was not the time to ponder it. Malfoy's breath was shuddering, but his cock was hard against Harry's palm. "Good," Harry breathed, shaking at the edges of his control. "That's really g - "

"Would you shut up and fuck me?" Malfoy demanded, his voice raw with pain and desire both, cutting him off.

Harry's mouth snapped shut. *Fine*, if that was what the bastard wanted - so much for being *gentle*, then. He began to do just that, to fuck Malfoy in long, hard strokes. It felt so very good - Harry focused hard on not coming, on prolonging it, making himself wait. A little voice in his head reminded him that if he wanted to continue doing this, though, then he really had to think of Malfoy. Harry made himself slow down, then shifted a little, looking for that - there, he thought he'd found it - a particular, spongy-feeling nub inside Malfoy - yes, that was it. Harry listened to Malfoy's startled gasp with satisfaction. He didn't say anything, but moved very slowly against it, deliberately provoking Malfoy's pleasure. He hadn't let go of Malfoy's cock yet, and it throbbed in his hand.

Oh, you like that, don't you, Harry thought viciously, and resumed his mercilessly fucking - merciless in the sense that he was going to make Malfoy believe that he was indeed very talented at this, so that Malfoy would *beg* to be fucked again. Personally, Harry loved it both ways, if the topper was generous and made sure he was getting what he needed. Malfoy's incredible body was shaking, about to lose control again, and Harry was delighted with himself. He let himself go, delivering a series of incredibly rapid, hard thrusts, moaning aloud in the mind-blowing pleasure of it - he felt Malfoy come all over his hand and commanded his body to let go completely, breath ragged in his throat as he came, flooding Malfoy from the inside, hips snapping against Malfoy's firm arse.

His sense of sound returned more clearly, and Harry heard himself panting, heard Malfoy panting in echo. He pulled himself out and fell over onto his side. "Fuck," he said, heart pounding.

Malfoy let himself down onto his side, avoiding the sticky pool of his own come. "Indeed," he said, voice breathy.

Harry stretched out a hand. "*Accio* wand!" It flew to his hand, still one of the only spells he could master without it. That and *Lumos*. "*Evanesc*o."

"Thanks."

"Figured you wouldn't want to lie in that," Harry said.

Malfoy fidgeted. "Uh, the rest of it, I meant."

Harry grinned, once again taken by surprise. "Are you okay?"

"More than. Can I use that?" Malfoy held out his hand for Harry's wand.

Harry gave it to him and tactfully looked away as Malfoy cleaned himself magically. He

performed the same spells on himself and put his wand down. "Well. I suppose we should get back to it."

"I suppose so," Malfoy agreed, his eyes drifting shut. "I'd much rather have a nap."

Harry laughed. "Me too. Come on. The sooner we figure things out, the better." He sat up and climbed over Malfoy, heading for his clothes.

Malfoy got up and got dressed in silence. Harry wondered if Malfoy was wondering about his skills and how he'd acquired them. But then, Malfoy was quite stunningly competent, himself - that blow job he'd given Harry had been quite impressive - Harry had never been deep-throated that skillfully before, nor had he so thoroughly enjoyed bottoming for Malfoy as much as with anyone else. And he realized that his curiosity would likely never be satisfied. They just wouldn't ever be that close, probably not even friends. It was a physical thing.

And that didn't leave room for questions like his.

* * *

The next time they had sex was in the library, six hours later. They'd eaten supper, Harry feeling rather odd about making a meal with Malfoy. Conversation had relaxed a fair bit since their after-lunch sex. Harry wasn't sure why Malfoy would be any more at ease, but for his own part, he was just starting to feel so familiar with Malfoy's body, at least, that it seemed to translate somehow. Although with Justin, the familiarity had only bored him. And Malfoy was far from boring. The more they were together, the more Harry craved him. They'd eaten and gone back to the library. They'd made a lot of progress, but there were a few questions that only someone more knowledgeable could answer. McGonagall or Flitwick, perhaps.

Malfoy had closed his book and given Harry a hard look. "I'm done for tonight."

Relief. "So am I, then," Harry said. Not a moment too soon; he was bored out of his skull.

"What are you doing now?" Malfoy asked, his mouth twitching.

Harry met his eyes, and the wonderful knowledge that the house was empty and that they had this *arrangement* pooled between them. "You," he said.

Malfoy shook his head. "Not again. Give me until tomorrow, at least."

"Well, whatever. You, in some form," Harry modified.

"Perhaps I should do you instead."

Harry considered. "That's definitely an option - " he cut himself off, bemused, as Malfoy pushed back his chair and came around to his side of the table, trapping Harry between himself and it. "What, here?"

"Here," Malfoy confirmed.

Harry glanced around. "You have some sort of pervy thing for books or something?"

"Or something," Malfoy said dryly. His forearm slid behind Harry's neck at the same time as his other hand insinuated itself onto his cock, which began to harden instantly. Their faces came together, and Harry sank into the kiss with gratitude. Their mouths were wet, and it was anything but gentle. Not as angry as that odd, last kiss they'd inflicted upon each other had been - in the field near the bunkhouse - but hardly gentle. Harry had wanted this in particular so badly, but never would have dared kiss Malfoy without his permission. He never had yet. Malfoy's arm kept their faces together, and his other hand had sensibly gotten itself out of the way; they were thrusting together with all their clothes on, the edge of the table cutting into the backs of Harry's thighs. Harry remembered himself and pulled away from the kiss. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Maybe it would only make his feelings for Malfoy, whatever they were, even stronger. Best just to stick to sex; it was less complicated.

"Need you to - I want - " Harry was unable to come up with the right alignment of words,

but Malfoy understood him.

"You want me inside you?" Malfoy's voice was low, intense. "You want me fucking you like you've never been fucked before, like I *own* you?"

Harry shivered. He wouldn't have put it quite that way. Or maybe he would have; maybe that was the whole problem. "I want you to fuck me," he said, his eyes closed.

Teeth closed over a very sensitive place on his neck and Harry moaned aloud. A soft breath over the bruised skin told him that Malfoy was laughing at him. "Oh, I will," he promised. "Strip."

The clothes were shed. Malfoy indicated that he should lie on the table and had apparently brought his own supply of lube with him in his trouser pocket. "Do you want me to - ?"

"Please," Harry said, eyes on the library's domed ceiling.

Malfoy's fingers, slick with lube, shoved into him in a way that, well, hurt, but in a particularly good way. He knew what he was doing. It wasn't too rough, but skating along the edge of it. He finger-fucked Harry for several moments, his other fingers teasing the head of Harry's cock, smearing precome around it and laughing at Harry's clear need.

"Stop teasing me," Harry said breathlessly after a bit. "I need you in me - "

Malfoy obliged him, replacing his fingers with his cock, driving it in with the same distinct lack of gentleness he'd employed earlier. He became silent except for the sounds he couldn't help making every so often, and Harry tacitly agreed to this. There were no words, just a hard fast fucking that felt to Harry like an orgasm was being physically forced from him body, like juice squeezed from a rock - he was gripping Malfoy's rock-hard upper arms as he came, his entire body on fire, and came so hard he nearly sobbed. Malfoy's orgasm followed, his entire face contorted with the need to get there. Harry sank limply back into the table, feeling more sated than he'd ever felt before. As exhausted as a wrung rag. He felt the urge to say inane, sentimental things which

should never be said bubbling to his lips, and wisely refrained from uttering any of them.

Malfoy had drooped onto him, clearly as spent as Harry was. A long moment passed and neither of them moved or spoke; they just lay there together on top of the long table, Malfoy still within him. At last, Malfoy stirred. "This is going to be a good few days," he mumbled against Harry's shoulder.

Relieved that Malfoy was still speaking to him, that he hadn't freaked out yet, Harry laughed. "Agreed. Though I'll be lucky if I can walk tomorrow, you fucker."

Malfoy jeered and pulled himself out off and out of Harry. "You asked for it, as I recall." He got off the table and found his wand, beginning to clean up some of the mess. Harry extricated himself from within it and let Malfoy spell him clean. Harry got dressed rather gingerly and went to look out one of the windows. Malfoy came to stand beside him. "Now what are you doing?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. It's been awhile since I've had... leisure time, I guess. I don't know what to do with myself."

Malfoy checked the time. "It's still early. Only eight-thirty. We could play a game or something."

The idea appealed, and Harry was secretly delighted that Malfoy still wanted to be around him at all. "Okay," he said, very casually, and it was as simple as that. They went down to the drawing room and found an old board game. It was just far easier than Harry ever would have thought, even despite the fact that they were still avoiding any particularly significant subjects. But it was something, and it was more than Harry had expected he would get. He was almost happy.

And Harry was happier yet when Malfoy decided that it was foolish to sleep so far away when they were the only people in the house, and slept in Ron's old bed in Harry's room. It wasn't the same bed, though Harry wished it was, but again, it was more than he'd thought he would get. He fell asleep with the sounds of Malfoy's breathing in his ears. And was content.

Chapter Eleven

Harry woke up because Malfoy was climbing into his bed. Without saying a word, he pulled back Harry's blankets and slithered down his body. Using a lot of very warm breath and occasional fluttering touches of his tongue, Malfoy coaxed him to hardness in very little time. Harry cleared his throat and rubbed his eyes with the back of a hand. "Malfoy?" he croaked.

The soft breath of a laugh again. "Shh."

Harry wasn't going to argue, sleep-fogged as his brain was. "Mmm," he said instead, and shifted his hips a bit, already revelling in the sensation. It was just the opposite from the roughness of the night before - it was slow, very gentle, just persuading the pleasure from him, strand by strand. Harry closed his eyes and reminded himself to keep breathing. His entire body was waking, moving upward toward the pleasure as though swimming under water and moving up to the surface. His fingers curled into his blankets and Harry fought to just let Malfoy do it, to let Malfoy make it happen for him. It was difficult to trust anyone in this current position - to allow someone to control how and when he came and how hard - Malfoy's mouth was making the odd, soft, sucking sound against his most sensitive flesh, and Harry could feel himself unravelling. "Oh, gods, yes," he heard himself murmur, and then the rush overcame him with blinding power.

Once again, he hadn't realized that Malfoy's fingers had probed right into him, but they had - two of them, in fact. All Harry had been aware of was sensation. Malfoy pulled himself up, covering Harry's body with his own. "I'm going to fuck you now," he announced in a rasp.

Harry was in no position to argue. "Yeah. Okay." He was still breathing hard. He looked tentatively into Malfoy's face. Malfoy made very brief eye contact with him, then averted his gaze again.

"Try not to get all sentimental on me, Potter," he said roughly, and pushed himself into Harry's body.

Harry turned his head to the side, colouring furiously and hoping Malfoy would attribute it to him being flushed from the blow job. He was genuinely a little sore from the previous night's sex and couldn't help wincing.

Malfoy noticed. "Too hard?" he asked in a different tone.

Harry didn't look at him, just bit his lip and nodded a bit.

"Sorry." Malfoy slowed down considerably. "You just - it feels so good."

It was one of the first times he'd ever said anything of the like during sex, and Harry recognized it for what it was. "S'okay."

"Does it hurt?"

Harry looked at him. Malfoy's eyes were on his, intent. "Not really. Not when you go slow like that."

Malfoy smiled, a slow, seductive smile. "Then I'll go slow. I don't want it to hurt you."

Harry couldn't think of a reasonable answer for that, so he didn't say anything. It felt good like this, actually. His body was very relaxed, both from sleep and from his post-coital languor, and Malfoy was triggering that place within him. Harry wasn't sure if he could come again already, but he was definitely enjoying it.

Malfoy appeared to be, too. He was moving against Harry's body, and something about it all just *felt* less perfunctory, less rushed-through like a job that needed to be accomplished. When Malfoy came at last, Harry was nearly ready to again. Malfoy didn't pull out of him immediately, but began to fist his cock slowly, slowly, allowing Harry to push up into his hand, their rhythms fitting together exactly. Malfoy's fingers were as talented as his mouth; they found just the right places to apply pressure, to stroke, to twist - he was watching Harry's cock as intently as he'd been watching Harry's face before, concentrated on the task at hand. When Harry arched and made a sound he hadn't meant to make, Malfoy's expression turned to one of satisfaction, though he had lapsed into silence again.

Harry lay still, panting, his belly covered in his own come. Malfoy pulled out of him then. "Going to have a shower," he said, and with that, he left.

Feeling very suddenly alone, Harry waited for the door to close. There was a strange lump in his throat that shouldn't have had anything to do with anything, but there it was. He got up and cleaned himself with his wand. He was hungry, he was still sleepy, and he sort of wanted to cry. Why was Malfoy being so difficult to read? His gentleness

during the blow job and the sex itself was misleading - Harry preferred the roughness from an emotional point of view, as he figured that he at least knew where he stood with Malfoy - nothing but a convenient sexual partner. Nothing more.

Like the kissing, he didn't know if he could handle the sex that was anything but fast and hard. Harry passed a hand over his stomach, feeling for traces of stickiness and got dressed, trying to ignore the fact that his eyes were glassy with - with *nothing*. Harry left his room and went downstairs.

* * *

Draco was sitting on the floor of the bathtub - unwittingly in the same place where Potter had once tried to drown himself, if he'd known - arms wrapped around his knees, head bowed. The shower beat down on his back. He was losing it. He was losing control of the situation. He breathed deeply and tried to regain control over his panic and his rampant emotions. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he have just fucked Potter into his mattress and let him heal himself later? Potter would have the right potions and such. Why should he care?

He cared. Of all preposterous situations to have gotten himself into, he was forced to admit that he cared. He didn't want to hurt Potter. Physically or otherwise. And while Draco wouldn't have wanted to hurt some chance encounter at the Leaky Cauldron, either, this was different and if he looked himself in the eye for one second, he knew it full well.

Why had that long-dormant *thing* for Potter never gone altogether away? It was an obsession, Blaise had told him. Even Pansy hadn't been willing to deny it to make him feel better. Gods. He was falling for Potter. Even thinking of Potter in passing practically gave him a hard-on, but he'd thought that he could separate the physical from the emotional entirely. Draco raised his head and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He'd been wrong. Clearly. What a fool.

He'd just added a third layer of complication to his loyalties. First his father. Then Snape. Now Potter. It would have been difficult to choose three less similar people to be feeling loyalty to. Potter would just have to wait. If they both got through this war alive, then fine. But otherwise, he simply had to come second.

Thinking of Potter and coming all in one sentence was a little too close to home. Draco unfolded his legs, stood up and washed his hair. There was no use being ridiculous about it. He knew where his duties lay. His card was just a little full already. It didn't matter if he was only now realizing that some little corner of him was quietly pining for real romance. It wasn't going to happen; he couldn't allow it to. No more silly, lovely-dovey gestures, then. No more lingering after the act was over. Perhaps no more face-to-face sex, either. It would have to be passionless. And the rest of their relationship would be kept solely within the bounds of camaraderie at most. And it would have to go on, as well - even if Draco wanted to entertain the notion of calling their little arrangement quits, which he didn't, he most certainly did *not* relish the idea of having to explain why to Potter. He could hardly argue incompatibility or lack of attraction at this point. It had become abundantly clear by now that those would be utter lies. They were almost frighteningly compatible, just sexually speaking, and Draco knew how hard Potter would laugh if he attempted to persuade him to believe that he wasn't interested in Potter's body or what it did to him.

Somehow, *"I need this to stop because I'm afraid I actually have feelings for you"* just wouldn't fly. He could not and would not say that. Admit it. And from this point forward, he would not even think about it. Even alone. At night. Ever. Draco looked at himself in the mirror, combing back wet hair. "No," he whispered, and tried to convince himself that it was an oath he had the power to keep.

* * *

Harry shut one of the cupboard doors a little too hard. Malfoy had disappeared. Presumably, he wouldn't still be in the shower, four hours later, but Harry had no idea where he'd gone. It was a big house. Harry refused to admit that he'd passed the morning moping in the little room where Buckbeak/Witherwings had once lived. It was much cleaner than it used to be. He had tried to read a book, just one of Sirius' old paperbacks, but didn't actually remember how any of it had gone. He'd left occasionally, bored and wandering around aimlessly. Wondering about Malfoy. Where he'd gone. Why he'd left so suddenly. He'd thought they were getting along better now.

The short answer was that Malfoy had figured him out, had realized that Harry liked him, and was avoiding him. Probably angry with him for having lied about that in the beginning. Harry leaned his forehead against the cupboard and forgot what he was trying to do. Lunch was forgotten. A large amount of very bad feeling was churning in his stomach, anyway, and although he knew that he'd be back in the barracks with its

revolting food all too soon, Harry's appetite had disappeared.

Tea, then. He could drink some tea. Harry put the kettle on and slumped against the counter, waiting for it to boil. Stared numbly at the teapot. Was it all over, then? Had that morning been the last time? Would Malfoy leave? Lupin had told him to stay, but - who knew?

The kettle boiled. Harry, shaken from his unhappy musings, noticed it and filled the teapot. He took this to the table, then went back to get himself a cup.

"Get me one, too, will you?"

The voice, very casual, startled him. Harry turned around, heart thumping for far more reasons than one. Malfoy was there, in the doorway, leaning easily against it. "I didn't hear you come down," Harry said, his pulse thudding.

A shrug. "Well, I'm here. And I'd like some of that tea."

Harry was flustered, but made every attempt not to show it. What was *this*, then? All of a sudden, Malfoy was acting like he had the night before again. Had Harry been imagining his rather abrupt departure that morning, or reading the wrong things into it? But then, where had Malfoy been all morning?

He went uncertainly back to the table and handed Malfoy a cup. "Thanks," Malfoy said lightly, and filled it, raising the teapot questioningly toward Harry's. "There any milk?"

"I'll check." Harry, who took only sugar in his tea, had forgotten about this.

"No, don't bother. I will." The instant Harry had sat down, Malfoy was up and moving across the kitchen. "Have you eaten lunch already?" Malfoy was still peering into the refrigerator as he spoke, his back to Harry.

"No," Harry said. He hadn't eaten breakfast, either, but there was no point mentioning

that.

"Let's see," Malfoy said. "There seems to be some sort of soup. It says MW. I can't think what that would stand for."

"Molly Weasley," Harry said, his spirits lifting cautiously. It didn't *seem* like the end of everything at the moment, anyway. How very odd. He got up and went to look.

Malfoy had prised off the lid of the container and surveying its contents. "What do you think? Cauliflower?"

"Or potato?" Harry guessed, dubious.

Malfoy stuck one finger into the soup and then into his mouth. "Mmm. I was right. Let's heat this up." His eyes flicked to Harry's quickly, both of them very much aware of the innuendo of both his action and his words.

Heat flared in Harry's abdomen, if nowhere else. "Okay." He cleared his throat; his voice wasn't quite steady. "Uh, I'll just - we could heat it up on the range or else just magically, I suppose - "

Malfoy studied it. "I don't know how to use that thing. Will it work, magically?"

"I don't know anything about that kind of magic," Harry said. "I don't know how it would turn out. Let's do it the normal way, then." He opened the stove drawer and took out a large pot. "We don't have to make it all."

Malfoy rummaged in another drawer and found a ladle. "Here."

"Thanks." Harry ladled out two bowls' worth of soup, maybe a little more, and set the pot on the range. "Look. It's easy. I'm just going to put it at about halfway on the dial, because I don't want it to burn. That's all there is to it."

He had Malfoy's complete attention. "But it's so inaccurate," Malfoy said. "What's 'maximum'? What are those numbers?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said. "It's all relative. There's hottest, coolest, and everything in between. That's all you need to know."

"Odd," Malfoy said. He went past Harry to look in the ice box. "Oh, good, there's still some of that French bread."

Harry caught himself watching Malfoy for a moment before remembering to answer. Malfoy didn't notice. "Right," he said. "I'll see if there's any cheese or something. We could make cheese toast."

And just like that, everything was fine. Harry guarded everything he said, and the conversation over lunch was all very light and inconsequential. Finally, still sipping tea after, Harry asked. "Malfoy?"

"Mmm?"

"Where've you been all morning?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "In the library. Where have *you* been?"

Harry's mouth fell open. "But I *looked* there, and you weren't there - "

"When did you look?"

Harry thought, but he hadn't been paying attention to the time. "I don't know. Not long after, uh, this morning."

Malfoy had been leaning forward, but straightened up a little now. "I was probably still in

the shower," he said, a trifle distantly. "It was a long shower."

Harry felt rebuffed. "Oh," he said. A small pause. "I didn't know where you had gone, that's all."

Malfoy gave a somewhat-forced smile. "And here I was wondering why you'd changed your mind about helping me research. Well. I suppose I should get back to it. Are you coming?"

Harry nodded. "Sure. Make any progress?"

"A bit. Come on, I'll show you." Malfoy stood. They got the dishes sorted out and put everything away, then went up the many flights of stairs and down the many passages leading to the library.

Harry followed, trying to keep his thoughts in his head, and still wondering about the "arrangement", if Malfoy still wanted - resolutely, Harry quashed that thought and resolved to stop thinking about it. Hoping for it. He probably *had* changed his mind, but didn't want to bring it up. Best to just let it lie.

* * *

Harry had gone to look for books on breaking supplemental strengthening spells and was lost between the dim stacks in the back of the library. It was rather creepy, actually, but he was trying to ignore that fact. It was easy to believe it could be haunted. He felt a breath on the back of his neck and jumped.

"Jumpy, aren't we?" Malfoy commented lightly, his lips grazing Harry's neck.

Harry closed his eyes, his heart pounding as Malfoy scared him for the second time in two hours. And for other reasons. He wanted nothing more than to lean back into Malfoy, feel his arms go around him, let their mouths find each other... but it wasn't going to happen. Having difficulty just breathing, Harry stiffened and resisted the urge. "A bit. It's creepy back here. What are you doing?"

Malfoy's nose was on the base of his neck, lips still touching that sensitive skin. "Study break?"

His hips pressed forward into Harry's arse, and Harry felt his hardness. "Is - that what you're calling it - now?" Speech had also become an obstacle.

"It's as good a term as any."

"True enough," Harry said. He turned around. A thousand conflicting emotions were probably scudding across his features; there were so many things he wanted to say. That he *shouldn't* say, not if he was interested in keeping this alive. The energy between them was palpable, practically visible. There was fire in Malfoy's eyes, fire which Harry felt reflected in every facet of his being.

Not another word was spoken. Malfoy, his eyes never leaving his, calmly unbuttoned Harry's jeans. Harry, hands unsteady, did the same. It was very, very quiet. Every tiny sound either of them made was instantly audible. Malfoy's fingers slipped into his shorts and brought out cock. Harry did the same for Malfoy, his heart beating loudly enough that he was sure Malfoy would be able to hear it. Malfoy finally dropped his gaze, eyes somewhere just beyond Harry's shoulder or something, and it was both a disappointment and a relief. More the relief, actually. This way, Harry didn't have to think, he could try to pretend that it was someone else, someone with whom he felt nothing but interest in getting off. That was all it was. Just a hand job. And yet, it was the fact that it was Malfoy that got him off so quickly. He refused to say anything if Malfoy wasn't going to. Neither of them spoke a word. They were both breathing hard, but nothing more. As it grew more heated, Malfoy backed him into the nearest shelf and began to stroke him harder, jerking at Harry's cock almost violently, the sound of his breathing getting a little higher, needy - Harry tightened his own grip and got his other hand onto Malfoy's balls, pressing one finger into that little place behind. Malfoy made a sound at last, muffled, though, as he bit into Harry's clothed shoulder and came with a final push into Harry's hand. Harry was still battling his mind, though, struggling to forget that it was Malfoy, then remembering and surging closer to climax again.

Just stop thinking, Harry pled with himself, but it was in vain - his turmoil was distracting him. Perhaps Malfoy knew his conflict. Perhaps he didn't, but he leaned forward and moved his open mouth over Harry's ear. His tongue and lips both closed around the

lobe, and Harry's nervous system suddenly went into revolution mode, the turmoil increasing rather dramatically. "Come, Harry," Malfoy whispered, so quietly it was difficult to tell that he'd spoken at all. "Come for me."

Harry closed his eyes as the inevitable happened and hated himself, his body, for doing exactly as it was told. He came for Malfoy, face turned away so that Malfoy wouldn't be able to see his humiliation. Harry came with force, one hand digging into Malfoy's back - how had that gotten there? - and he felt his breath shuddering over his lips, sweat on his brow. His ribcage was heaving against Malfoy's. Harry pushed himself away as soon as he could.

It was a very strange moment. Malfoy's face was slightly strained, as though he was having thoughts about something rather difficult to think about, while Harry was sure that he must look... how? Betrayed? It was a bit of how he felt. A low trick, that had been - getting him to come by playing on his emotions like that. Harry didn't know what to say.

Malfoy, however, found his tongue first. "Well, that was fun," he said, that same, light tone coming back. "Thanks."

Harry tried not to gape. Was Malfoy trying to pass it off as just a game, just a part of the hand job itself? "You called me Harry," he said, staring.

"Did I? Hmm." Malfoy declined to comment, turned and headed back in the direction of the table, zipping his trousers as he went. He stopped at the end of the shelf. "Find anything, by the way?"

Harry was just getting himself sorted out again at this. "What? Oh, yeah. A few books, actually."

Malfoy came back. "Where? I'll carry some of them."

And Harry, feeling more bewildered and uncertain than ever, let him take a few of them. "Thanks."

* * *

Everything seemed normal again. They didn't talk about anything big, anything really important, though they did discuss most other topics. Malfoy was very interesting to talk to as well as to fuck, apparently. They made supper together again, using other gifts of Molly's Weasley's to the Order. Afterward, they played a different game until it was time to go to bed. Neither of them said anything about the fact that Malfoy slept in Harry's room again - though in the other bed. Of course.

* * *

Harry was awake. It was dawn, or just past. Malfoy was still sleeping, his features looking slightly troubled even as he slept. He slipped out of his bed and stood in front of Malfoy's, wondering if he had the nerve to do it. Get in. Malfoy spared him making the decision by suddenly opening his eyes. "Just going to stand there?" he asked, his voice scratchy.

Harry grinned, guilty. "I thought you were asleep."

Malfoy shifted over to make room for him. "I was. I can feel it when someone's staring at me, Potter."

Potter again. Harry registered this and he spoke too quickly to cover the fact that he'd noticed. "It's only fair. You disrupted my sleep yesterday for this."

"And more than made up for it, as I recall," Malfoy drawled. It was clear that he was still sleepy though; it wasn't as sharp as it could have been. Harry draped himself over Malfoy, feeling both their cocks damp and at least partly hard through their pyjama pants.

"This okay?" Harry asked, beginning to move against Malfoy.

"What the fuck kind of stupid question is that?" Malfoy returned, rhetorically. His long

fingers were on Harry's arse, pulling Harry hard against himself.

Harry shrugged, half-smiling. "Thought it seemed reasonable."

Malfoy didn't answer, just closed his eyes and bit his lower lip. Harry watched the little crease in his forehead and loved it, wanted to see it over and over again. Malfoy's hair wasn't exactly fanned out across his pillow, but it was disarmingly touselled and unstyled. This game of friction-seeking took over Harry's attention, then, and he gave himself to it fully. He thrust against Malfoy's cock, imagining that he was fucking him again. Which was a rather good idea. Not only was it a rather inspiring thought, but it also gave him a bit of a chance for revenge. For yesterday. "I'm going to fuck you later," Harry said, trying to murmur. It came out as more of a gasp, but had the intended effect.

Malfoy's eyes flew open, and the expression in his eyes before he managed to hide it was one of intense desire. Harry smiled mockingly, triumphantly. Much better. Malfoy clearly didn't like this. He struggled and rolled them over, pinning Harry to the mattress. "Not if I get to you first," he said, voice lower and much more in control than Harry's. "In fact, why don't I - right now?"

Harry struggled right back. "No - you've already topped three times in a row - or something - "

"Don't pretend you're not keeping count, Potter, we both know that's a lie," Malfoy snarled, his hips shoving *hard*, almost too hard, against Harry. There was violence in his fingers, digging into Harry's arms.

Furious, Harry managed to roll them over again. "Shut the fuck up!" he hissed.

Malfoy's hands pushed down the back of his pyjama pants. "You know you want me to. Look, I'll even prepare you." He licked two fingers and they skated their way down Harry's arse toward his -

"No!" Scrambling away, Harry's balance was knocked askew as Malfoy took advantage of his discomfort and rolled them again - the beds were not all that wide, and they tumbled to the floor. Neither the thrusting nor the snarking stopped, though. "You stupid

fuck," Harry said, panting - he'd wound up on top - "stop distracting me with your stupid antics. I'm just in this to get off, you know."

"Right," Malfoy sneered, wrapping his legs around Harry's back and forcing them over again. "You know you want to thoughts of me."

"I do not!"

"Sure you do." Malfoy's grin was wicked. "Do you think about us doing this, maybe? I do."

Harry couldn't answer, he couldn't speak - he moaned as Malfoy's fingers successfully found their way into him and began to thrust, and his cock was bare and hard against Harry's. Their pyjama pants were tangled around their knees, and Malfoy quit trying to talk, too. They rocked together, moaning, Harry's knuckles being slowly crushed between Malfoy's back and the floor, but it didn't matter; he was going to come and it was glorious -

"Oh gods, *fuck*, Potter - " Malfoy was groaning, and Harry felt his cock surge against his own as Malfoy came. Harry's body apparently found *that* rather inspiring, too, and erupted just after that. He collapsed onto Malfoy and was surprised to hear Malfoy start chuckling a moment later.

He raised his head from where he'd been panting against Malfoy's neck. "What?" But he saw it, too, already grinning.

"Look at us!" Malfoy said, indicating their jumble of sprawled limbs and twisted pants. "I'm going to have bruises all over myself!"

Harry snickered. "Serves you right. Get your fingers out of there, by the way."

Malfoy smirked and wriggled them. "No, you like it too much. You know you do."

"No I don't, I - " Harry stopped in shock, looking up. His bedroom door was opening and *oh, fuck, I am not seeing this*, Lupin appeared. Harry could only gape, horrified.

"What - ?" Malfoy's head twisted to see what Harry was looking at, and saw Lupin, too.

Lupin looked like someone had hit him with a *Petrificus Totalus*. Finally, he cleared his throat, flushing and obviously horribly embarrassed. "My apologies," he said, sounding flustered and looking anywhere but at the two of them. "Just - Draco, I - happened to be back to get something and thought to remind you about your report. You're due at the Manor in half an hour."

"Fuck!" Malfoy said violently.

It surprised them both. Lupin looked almost affronted, but only said, "I'll - just be downstairs in the kitchen for another few minutes and then I'll be on my way again. Er - Harry - if I could have a word, before I go, that would be - appreciated." He closed the door.

"Oh, fuck," Harry echoed faintly, well aware that his face was flaming red.

Malfoy withdrew his fingers. "Well, that was pleasant," he said moodily. "I wonder how *that's* going to go over."

Harry rolled off him and got to his feet, grimacing. Malfoy wasn't going to be the only one with bruises all over his back, on his legs and arms, if the pain was anything to go by. "Did you forget about your report?" he asked.

Malfoy ignored his proffered hand and got up on his own, with similar grimaces. "No. I just... well, maybe. I lost track of the time."

Harry felt a stab of guilt. It was one thing to be having sex with Malfoy, another to risk endangering him like that. "Sorry for distracting you," he said stiffly.

Malfoy cracked a small smile and swatted his arse. "Don't be. It was my fault for forgetting. And letting you distract me. Well worth it, I must say." He looked Harry in the eye. "I'll be back this afternoon, and you can fuck me then."

Harry was both surprised and pleased. "Can I?"

A shrug. "It *is* your turn, and then some," Malfoy said. He aimed his wand at Harry and cleaned him off before reaching for a shirt.

Harry eyed Malfoy's arse as the other stalked across the room to where his yesterday's trousers lay folded on a chair. "Well, that's true enough."

Malfoy *Scourgified* his pants and said that he would change upstairs. At the door, he turned. "Don't worry about Lupin," he said. "He'll be okay."

"I'm more worried about you," Harry said, frowning. "Make sure, if they ask, that you say it's just an arrangement and everything. Not a risk or whatever."

Malfoy gave a mocking smile. "Why would I tell them anything else? I'll see you this afternoon."

A bit stung, Harry nodded. "Be careful."

"I always am."

* * *

Harry heaved a sigh and walked into the kitchen. Lupin was sitting at the table reading Wednesday's *Daily Prophet* very studiously, his face still rather pink. Harry walked past him to the teapot on the counter and poured himself a cup. "Just say it."

Lupin stiffened and didn't quite look him in the eye. "What do you suppose I'm going to

say?"

Harry shrugged, sipping and feeling like a teenager someone had called onto the carpet. "All sorts of stuff about making wise decisions and so forth. It's nothing, Remus. Just sex. That's all."

Lupin's expressionless features didn't waver. "How long has it been going on?"

Harry thought. "Officially, only for a little while."

"Define 'a little while'."

Harry glared and put his cup down. "What do you want to know, Remus? When we actually sat down and agreed that it would be nice to have someone to fuck and that we'd do for each other? Or the first few times when neither of us even knew that we wanted it? Or were you looking for the more sordid, personal details - when I first noticed his arse or thought about him in the shower?"

"There's no need for that," Lupin said, both angry and hurt. "I - didn't realize it was such a prickly subject. I just want to know that you know what you're doing with him. What you've gotten yourself into."

Harry's spurt of temper died away. "It's been a few weeks," he muttered. "I couldn't really give you a date."

"So it didn't just start while you were here, then," Lupin said quietly.

"Obviously not," Harry replied. He picked up his tea and told himself to stop feeling guilty.

"I wish you had told me."

"Why?" Harry asked, somewhat belligerently.

Lupin's look of hurt grew. "I - I just wish you felt you could confide in me. That's all." He turned back to the *Daily Prophet*, the frown lines on his forehead not leaving.

Harry felt as though someone had plunged him into cold water. He hadn't realized Lupin would take it like that. He went and sat down across from him, bringing the teapot with him. "Remus."

Lupin looked up and pushed his cup forward for a refill. "It's none of my business. I know that."

"I just didn't - don't - really know what to think of it, myself," Harry said, looking at his tea and forgetting about Lupin's. "I just know that I'm more or less happy with it. I know what I'm doing."

Lupin's smile was crooked. "I didn't even know that you preferred men."

At least he hadn't said "boys". Harry bit his lip. "Sorry. Guess I could have told you that. I've known that since Hogwarts days."

"Have you? I think that's when I first knew, too," Lupin said. "Sixth year or so."

Harry looked at him, startled. "What?"

"We're even. I never told you. Thought it might scare you off," Lupin said, shrugging. "Sorry."

Harry looked at him and smiled. It was time for a long overdue talk.

* * *

It seemed that discoveries were in the air. Shortly after Malfoy returned that afternoon, but before they could get into their plans, Ron and Hermione both arrived. Lupin had left again, in a hurry after the prolonged discussion over Harry's late breakfast, and he'd been alone for a few hours. It had been very odd; Harry hadn't been completely alone in a building for a long time. He'd been relieved when Malfoy got back. They'd eaten lunch, though Malfoy had just had tea with his father, and talked about the report. Malfoy actually volunteered the information on his own, to Harry's surprise.

Ron and Hermione had been at St. Mungo's again, and upon returning to the barracks, were turned away. They had been sent to Grimmauld Place, being of higher rank than most as original new Order members. Harry was happy to see them, but sorry to see his solitude with Malfoy go.

Especially as Malfoy didn't particularly get along with Ron or Hermione. He was civil to them, even when Ron was occasionally somewhat rude, but it was clearly a strained politeness. They had finished talking and gone to stand in the foyer to discuss what they should do for the remainder of the day. Malfoy came to stand behind Harry and said, very quietly, "I'm going upstairs. I'll be in my room if you need to find me."

Very much aware that their plans had been interrupted by Ron and Hermione's arrival, Harry nodded. Also aware that they were both watching this interaction, he answered softly, but of course perfectly audibly, "Okay." He wanted to add that he'd be up soon, to just wait a moment, but he couldn't, not in front of them.

Malfoy said nothing; just went upstairs.

Hermione's eyes were on Harry's, sharp as tacks. There came the distant sound of a door closing upstairs, and Hermione started immediately. "Harry, *what* is going on here?"

Ron's eyes were rather accusatory, too. Harry felt his temper boiling. "Nothing," he said shortly. "I - "

"Sure doesn't look like nothing, mate," Ron said. He sounded like he was trying not to sound judgemental, but he was obviously dubious.

"I - it's not - " Harry began, but Hermione cut across him.

"Don't give us that 'nothing' line," she warned. "It's plain as day that there's something going on between you, Harry."

"We're just getting to be friends, is all," Harry insisted.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "Friends who can't stop looking at each other?" Ron said. "Right."

"Friends who can't stop *touching* each other?" Hermione added softly. "We noticed, Harry."

Harry opened his mouth to disprove this, then closed it again. He hadn't realized they'd *been* looking at or touching each other. "It's just sex," he said flatly. "Nothing more. Happy?"

He said this with a glare at Ron, who blinked. "All you had to do was say, mate," Ron said meekly. "It's your life. I always thought you had a thing for him, anyway."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You did?"

They exchanged another one of those infuriating looks. "Yes," Hermione said in a small voice. "Your obsession with him, at Hogwarts... I mean you were always sort of obsessed with him, weren't you?"

Well. That much was true, but it had been for different reasons. Perhaps not as much in seventh year, but - "It's just an arrangement," Harry said. "Like with Justin." *Only ten times better and then some.*

"If you're happy, I'm happy," Ron said instantly. "Hey, Hermione, I'm starving. Can we

go and find something to eat?"

"Yes, let's," Hermione said. Her eyes were still on Harry. "I guess you're - " Her cheeks went pink.

Harry's face flamed. "I'll see you in a bit," he mumbled. And had never been so glad to make an escape. What a day.

Malfoy was in his room, as promised. He looked up when Harry opened the door. "Hello."

"Hi," Harry said awkwardly. He felt he should apologize, but what for?

"I assume they know."

Harry went over and sat down on Malfoy's bed next to him. "You assume correctly."

"Is this the part where Weasley freaks out and tries to kill me?" Malfoy asked dryly.

"No. They're fine with it," Harry said. "And besides, it's none of their business. I'm here, aren't I?"

Malfoy looked at him for a moment. At last he said, "You still want to fuck me?"

Harry rolled his eyes, smiling. "Why do you think I'm here, git?"

Malfoy smirked. "To use me for my beautiful body, of course."

"Right in one. Take your clothes off," Harry ordered.

Malfoy stood up and peeled off his shirt. "Getting into dominant mode, I see," he quipped, and rapidly shed the rest of his clothes.

Harry smiled and relaxed. It was going to be alright. "You like it."

"I admit it. Guilty as charged." Malfoy turned around, in fully nude glory. "Hurry up."

Harry's eyes raked over his body and he nearly tripped, trying to get out of his jeans. "I *am* hurrying!"

It turned out to be a very good afternoon, after all.

Chapter Twelve

Friday morning dawned, and Harry realized that he was alone. Malfoy had slept in his own room, despite the fact that Ron and Hermione were staying in the same room, the one where the twins had used to stay. Harry was frustrated by this, but understood it and didn't complain. It was odd waking up without Malfoy, though. He checked the time. It was just after eight. The four of them had played a game the night before (there really was nothing much else to do in the house) and gone to bed fairly early. Malfoy had waited until the other two had left before locking the door after them, straddling Harry's lap in his armchair and grinding their bodies together until they both came. He'd hardly said a word all evening, and this had been no exception.

Just thinking about it made Harry hard all over again. He got out of bed and deliberated going to find Malfoy or having a shower first. He went out into the hall and listened. He could hear the sounds of water splashing in the bathroom directly above the one across from Harry's room, and the far-off sounds of Ron and Hermione's laughing voices. Harry made a face to himself and decided to check the kitchen first. Malfoy's room was two floors up from his, with Ron and Hermione's in between. And whether or not they knew, Harry squirmed at the thought of them knowing that he was actively looking for Malfoy with the agenda he had in mind. Especially in his pyjama pants, and *especially* considering the state of his cock.

He padded downstairs and found Malfoy, to his devout relief, drinking tea and reading the *Daily Prophet*. "Good morning," Harry said.

Malfoy looked up, looked pointedly at Harry's crotch and smirked. "So it seems," he said, and got to his feet. He was similarly dressed and came over to Harry. Malfoy put his head near Harry's ear and bit his earlobe lightly, his other hand pushing into Harry's pants to fondle his erection. "Where are - "

"In the bath," Harry said breathily. "We're fine."

"Good." Malfoy reached around Harry to pull the kitchen door closed. He locked it with his wand and pushed Harry up against the wall beside it. Dropping to his knees, he wrenched Harry's pants down to his ankles and began to lip at his cock, along the sides and underneath, avoiding the head. Harry tried not to whimper and was mostly successful. Mostly. Malfoy snickered at him and added his tongue to the soft touches, at last dragging it over the head of Harry's cock and making light sucking movements with his lips as though trying to leave hickeys. Harry closed his eyes and pressed his palms into the wall.

"You're killing me," he groaned at last. "Fuck, Malfoy - stop teasing me and - " Harry stopped talking save to swear feelingly at this juncture; Malfoy was overwhelming him now, his entire mouth around his cock, fingers prising Harry's arse apart. They didn't probe this time, but Malfoy's head moved slowly back and forth, slowly, regularly engulfing Harry's length in the depths of his throat.

Harry's nails dug into the old, chipping paint of the wall behind him, little flakes of it jutting into his nail beds and he could have sworn that something exploded in his brain as he came. Malfoy's throat was swallowing around him, contracting and releasing over and over again and Harry could hardly bear it. When it was finished, he swiped the back of his hand over his forehead, wiping sweat away and hauled Malfoy to his feet. "Thanks," he gasped, hardly able to think in constructs as complicated as words.

Malfoy smiled lazily. "Don't mention it," he said, sounding like he had laryngitis. "My turn, Potter." He pushed Harry to his knees, smirking down at him.

Harry didn't hesitate. Sucking Malfoy off was something he looked forward to, as opposed to Justin or anyone else for that matter, for whom he did it only because it was fair to reciprocate or because he expected it to be reciprocated in turn. Harry started with his hands this time, adding his mouth later, when Malfoy's thighs were already trembling with need. His tongue explored the soft, wrinkled underside of Malfoy's balls, swirled around the base of his cock while his hands stroked Malfoy's arse and thighs, thumbs running up along those creases between his legs and his abdomen. Eventually, when Malfoy was already cursing him and demanding he hurry up, Harry ceased his method of revenge and took pity on him. Malfoy's cock was hot and leaking copiously by the time he got it in his mouth. Harry sucked like he was trying to draw water from a

stone, thinking of the way Malfoy was able to actually force Harry's climax out of him and determined to do the same. Malfoy actually cried out when he came, fingers nearly puncturing Harry's scalp as he did. He was quite incoherent during the last few moments, and Harry was ridiculously pleased with himself for having accomplished that.

He pulled himself up, dizzy, and for a moment, they just stood there, breathing hard and looking at each other. It was an odd moment. Had it been anyone else, Harry didn't know what he might have done. He knew what he wanted to do now, but of course couldn't do it. He cleared his throat. "Tea," he said, and Malfoy nodded.

"Good idea."

It had cooled off, though, and rather than heating it up again, Malfoy decided to make a new pot. Harry said that he was going to take a shower and would be back in ten minutes. Malfoy sat down and began to work on the *Prophet* crossword.

Harry escaped into the shower feeling as dazed as Malfoy had looked at the end, but strangely jubilant, too.

* * *

Lupin returned around lunch time, saying that he was not quite finished his "errands", but that he'd come back to let them know he would be gone until Sunday now. Potter looked almost relieved once Lupin left, causing Draco to wonder what had all been said between the two of them.

Granger and Weasley were thankfully out of the way most of the time. True, Potter had wandered off after breakfast to talk to them, and Draco had gone to read in the drawing room. If he happened to have sat in the same chair he and Potter had gotten off in the night before, so be it. It was a comfortable chair, that was all. And the thought of frothing with Potter with his friends barely out of the room was an amusing thought, anyway. He curled up and lost himself in a novel, something he rarely did but enjoyed vastly.

Snape appeared sometime Friday afternoon. Draco answered the door when the knocker sounded - that dreadful portrait had been quiet for months now, and the Order

was apparently still tiptoeing around it in hopes of not rousing it again. Snape stood on the doorstep, looking windblown and ill-tempered. "Hello," Draco said, more pleased at seeing Snape than he thought he'd be.

"What are you doing here?" Snape returned, and pushed past him into the house. "And where is Lupin?"

Draco was momentarily rebuffed, but then he recalled that he'd been in the company of solely Gryffindors, particularly Potter, for the past four days. He slid back into Slytherin mode and took it in stride. "Lupin told me to stay here. The barracks are full, anyway. He's been delayed on whatever it is that he's doing and said he'll be back on Sunday."

Snape didn't turn around; he was heading for the kitchen, so Draco followed him down the stairs. Potter was still closeted with his friends, anyway. And he hadn't seen Snape in ages. "When did you last see him?" Snape wanted to know.

"This morning," Draco said. "He had said that he would be back today but doesn't have access to owl post wherever he is, so he just came back to say that he'd be gone a little longer."

Snape looked troubled. "Until Sunday, you said. Did he seem - alright?"

Draco shrugged. "Fine, I thought. The same as always. I don't think he's in trouble, I think he would have said."

"Hmph." Snape proceeded to the kettle. "Is there anything to eat? I haven't eaten in days."

Draco was alarmed. "Really? That long?"

Snape was bent over, searching through the contents of the fridge. "No, it just feels that way. The last time was probably yesterday sometime. What is this?" He brought out a container. "Why must that woman label everything with her *initials* rather than its

contents?"

"We think that's leftover casserole," Draco said. They never *had* been sure, nor been sure how long it had been there, so they hadn't tried it.

Snape shot him a sharp look. "'We'?" he repeated, sniffing at the container's contents.

Draco silently cursed himself. "Sorry. Potter and I. He's here, too. Along with Granger and Weasley."

Snape sighed. "Delightful. Not Potter. The other two."

Draco allowed himself a bit of a smirk. "Thought you'd worked with Granger over the years."

"Occasionally. When duty calls, needs must obey," Snape cracked. "I don't know what this is. What have you been eating? And how long has Potter been here?"

"Since Monday afternoon," Draco said. "Same as me. There's some cauliflower soup on the third shelf and there's eggs and cheese and so forth. I learned how to use the range."

Snape snorted. "I always knew you were brilliant. Where is this soup?"

Draco told him again and set about making tea. "Sugar?"

"Give me that." Snape relieved him of one of the cups and glared at the question. His bowl of soup went from cold to steaming in a matter of a second and Snape carried it over to the table, apparently impervious to the heat of the bowl. Draco checked the time; it was only about three, but he was hungry. No matter; he would wait for Potter and eat with him later. He added milk and sugar to his tea and carried it to the table with the teapot, sitting down across from Snape.

Snape winced slightly at his first mouthful of soup. "Hot," he said, and blew on the next spoonful. His eyes focused on Draco at last. "What have you been up to?"

"Lupin told me to keep researching the St. Mungo's warding spells," Draco answered. "I've been working in the library here."

"Any luck so far?"

"Maybe. Potter figured out that some of the supporting spells could be taken out if a certain combination of hexes are used," Draco said. "I think it would work, but w - I haven't had a chance to report to anyone yet. I was hoping McGonagall might come by."

"Potter?" Snape repeated deliberately, eyebrows arching.

Draco shifted. "He wanted to do something, so Lupin told him to help me. He doesn't know as much about it, of course, but he *has* helped."

"Hard to believe, but I'll take your word for it," Snape said dryly.

Draco looked at him curiously. "He said the two of you get along now. And he wants to see you, by the way."

"Does he?" Snape's brow creased. "Hmm. Yes, we tolerate one another with a relative lack of open hostility now."

"Certainly an improvement from Hogwarts days," Draco commented.

Snape ignored this. "Did you report on Thursday?"

"Of course."

"How did it go?"

Draco shrugged. "Fine. I didn't tell him anything that will really hurt us."

"Has he mentioned anything about you needing to see the Dark Lord?" Snape asked, his spoon pausing halfway to his mouth.

"No," Draco said, frowning. "Should he have?"

"No. I was just wondering." Snape paused and looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. "I don't suppose that, if I summoned my scotch, it would survive the trip down."

Draco's lips twitched. "Would you like me to get it?"

"What a marvellous thought," Snape said, his dark eyes glittering. "Why don't you, then."

Draco shook his head, smiling, and went to do just that.

On his way upstairs, the floorboards creaked outside the Granger/Weasley room. Draco happened to glance in just as Potter was glancing out to pinpoint the source of the sound. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed with the other two, apparently deep in amiable conversation. Upon seeing Draco, though, he excused himself and jumped up, came to the door and closed it behind him. "Hi."

"Hi," Draco said. "Just passing through. No need to interrupt anything."

"No?" Potter's voice was light. "Where are you going?"

"Up to Snape's study," Draco said, smiling a bit. "He wants his scotch."

"He's here?" Potter fell into step behind him, following him up the stairs.

"Yeah. I told him you wanted to see him. You can come back with me, if you want," Draco offered. Snape's study was tucked away at the back of the third floor, in the corner. Draco found the door locked, but it opened to *Alohomora*. He went in, Potter still following and looking around with interest. Draco located the scotch on top of a cabinet, found a suitable glass and made to leave.

"This would be a pervy place to - " Potter started.

Draco stopped. Considered it, and turned around. Potter was looking very offhand, casually surveying the walls and bookshelves as though actually interested in their content. Draco felt the anticipated stirring in his body and did a very quick time check, wondering how much time he could be expected to take in fetching the liquor. "Potter," he said, hesitating, wanting it a great deal, but not foolish enough to incur Snape's wrath, "I don't have time. It would definitely be pervy, but - "

Potter nodded, looking slightly disappointed, but not pressing the point. "Okay."

"After," Draco promised. *Right* after, he added to himself.

"Alright," Potter said peaceably, and left the study. Draco followed him out this time, locking the door again. His eyes followed Potter's arse down the stairs and his body tightened in the strain of wanting it. He hadn't had this much sex probably in his entire life before these past four days, though he wasn't complaining. He appeared to be capable of wanting it all the time, when Potter was around. They went by the Granger/Weasley room and Potter was just starting down the next set of stairs, the tension thick between them.

And then it happened, as Draco had half known it would. Potter turned around to speak or ask him something, and the words never got out of his mouth. Draco's body slammed into his, trapping Potter between the wall and himself and he hadn't even put the scotch or the glass down, just let Potter's hands on his arse control their rhythm, their closeness while Draco gripped each of the objects he was holding. Neither of them said a word, though Potter's glasses were fogging slightly. It took perhaps a minute,

altogether. Draco came in his trousers for about the third time in twenty-four hours, and felt Potter's body go limp a moment later. "I couldn't wait," Draco said, by way of explanation. "Sorry."

He started down the stairs again, transferring the glass to the other hand in order to withdraw his wand to clean himself up. Potter snickered softly from behind him. "No need to apologize."

Once in the kitchen, Potter cleaned his glasses on his shirt and sat down at the end of the table, carefully positioned between Draco and Snape. Snape greeted him neutrally and poured himself a hefty tot of scotch. "I hear you've been doing some research," Snape added, the dry amusement obvious in his tone.

Potter shrugged. "A little," he said, not rising to the bait. "Just trying to do something."

Snape had finished his soup and had made toast. "Have some tea. Malfoy said you wanted to see me?"

Harry *Accio*-ed a cup and poured himself some tea. "Yeah, I did. I was wondering if you would have heard anything about V - the Dark Lord," he said courteously. "Anything new on where he is, I mean."

Snape regarded Potter for a long moment. "No one knows, Potter. Even the Death Eaters are at a loss. There are rumours everywhere, but as far as I know, he hasn't been seen in months."

Potter swore. Snape glanced at Draco. Draco tacitly got up and went to the counter to get the sugar. He dropped it and a spoon silently in front of Potter and sat down again. Potter spared him a quick nod of thanks, but ignored it. "I just wish he would come out and fight his own fucking war," he said angrily. "He's just trying to decimate our side until there's nothing left but people who support him!"

"And this surprises you?" Snape drawled. "Of course he is. He's systematically trying to kill off all the people who stand between you and he. Including the entire army, yes."

"I don't understand why he can't just come directly to me," Potter said. His face clouded with anger, he gave Snape a hard look. "Please tell me there aren't spells set around me to make him unable to find me."

Snape's eyebrows had not yet recovered from the profanity. "Rest assured that there are not. However, even if there were, removing you from them would only mean that Death Eaters would hunt you down and have you at the point of death before you could draw your wand, leaving the Dark Lord to only need to finish you off. He would see that you were too weak to defend yourself and *then* attack. That is how he works, Potter. You know that."

Potter drank some of his tea, grimaced and finally added sugar to it. "I thought he liked to do things by himself, though."

"Oh, certainly - the easy things," Snape sneered. "Little bits of magic here and there, while others do the grunt work. Lots of symbolic gestures. He's very fond of that."

Draco listened to this exchange and felt the Mark pulsate lightly on his arm. And wished with all of his soul that it wasn't there.

* * *

Harry returned to his room with a heavy heart. No luck. He had been so hoping that Snape would know something he didn't. Instead, it was looking as though he might be staying here for another few days yet before returning to the barracks or the field. Although *that* certainly had its compensations.

He'd been expecting the step outside his door, the pause. About thirty minutes had passed since he'd left Malfoy with Snape to debrief or whatever it was that they talked about. Presumably making up more false-but-close information for Malfoy to tell his father. Harry hated thinking of Malfoy going to the Manor, being alone with Lucius at all, on several levels, all of them hateful. First, he was just plain nervous for Malfoy himself. Worried that he would get caught, either by slipping somehow or Lucius just plain figuring it out or becoming suspicious. Second, and worse, Harry was actually worried about Malfoy's loyalties. He hated admitting it even to himself, but he knew that trusting

Malfoy was out of the question. His loyalties were obviously divided between Snape and his father, and there was no room for Harry in there. Besides which, Harry reminded himself for the thousandth time, it was an *arrangement*. Nothing more. It was not love, nor would it ever be. Well, not mutually, at least. It was sex with a side of casual friendship, that was all.

Harry very much wanted it to be more. There was barely a moment during which he didn't think about Malfoy, wonder what he was doing and long to be with him, touching him again, talking to him. It wasn't just sex for him. Not any more. He wanted more.

More was not possible. Harry told himself this again, and waited to see if it would register in his mind. It didn't.

And Malfoy was at the door, about to knock. Harry got there before he could and opened it. "Hi."

"Hi." Malfoy came in and sat down on the other bed.

"Finished with Snape?"

He got a sardonic look for that. "No, I'm still talking to him, Potter. It may look like I'm here, but really, I'm still down in the kitchen."

Harry grinned. "Shut up."

"Come over here and shut me up yourself," Malfoy said, trying to leer. The effect was rather spoiled by the fact that he was grinning, though.

Harry locked the door and then, thoughtfully, added a Silencing spell for good measure and took off his shirt.

Malfoy's eyes followed his fingers to the waistband of his jeans. He didn't say anything, but uncurled himself from the bed and stood up in the space between it and Harry.

Harry watched him come closer, closed his eyes as Malfoy put his mouth on Harry's chest, teeth sinking into one pec, then sliding over to mouth his nipple. His tongue flicked against it and Harry shivered convulsively. He'd always had sensitive nipples. Without thinking about it, he threaded his fingers into Malfoy's soft hair just for the sake of touching it. Malfoy's hand moved down to cup Harry's erection through his jeans. "Let's get naked."

"I'm all for that," Harry said, heart thudding. Malfoy straightened up, taking care to rub his crotch against Harry's thigh while doing so. They undressed in silence, watching each other like predator and prey - only who was playing which part was open to discussion. "I'm topping," Harry announced.

"Fuck you, Potter. You topped last time," Malfoy said, though he didn't look remotely uninterested in the idea. He pulled off his second sock and put his hands on his naked hips.

Harry grinned, a flash of challenge in his eyes. "I don't care." With lightning-quick reflexes, his hand shot out to grab Malfoy's wrist.

Malfoy made to pull away, but was clearly fighting a losing battle with himself. "Ah - let go - I'm not - "

"Yes you are," Harry said, wrenching Malfoy closer. He got his mouth close to Malfoy's ear and said, seductively, "and you're going to love it. You always do."

"Potter, you can just - "

"Do what I like," Harry filled in for him. Malfoy was still struggling, but it seemed a bit put on. At least until Malfoy jerked his wrist out of Harry's grasp and pulled their hips together.

"Not so fast," Malfoy growled. "*I'm* topping."

Their cocks were trapped together by their proximity, and as they were both still trying to

gain the upper hand, they ended up rubbing together. Harry deliberately increased the effect, and Malfoy broke first. "Oh, fuck," he moaned, his eyes half closing. "I hate you, Potter."

Harry, grinning, turned him around and backed him into his own bed. "So you say *now*." He pushed Malfoy down and crawled onto him. Malfoy automatically pulled up his knees and spread them. Harry stuck two fingers into Malfoy's mouth and used them to stretch him.

"No lube? How barbaric," Malfoy commented breathily, his cock straining against his abdomen.

"I'm never barbaric," Harry said, in an attempt to sound lofty. He bent low over Malfoy, reaching for the lube he thought he'd left under the pillow - yes, there it was. Malfoy tried to grab it from him, and somehow they managed to get the cap off together. "Stop trying to pretend you don't like this," Harry jeered as Malfoy bit his lip to keep from making any sound when Harry's fingers entered him again. "You love it. It's patently obvious."

"Stop - ah - stop using words you don't know, Potter," Malfoy panted. "Do you." He clearly meant Harry's cock, nodding at it, and managed to get the lube away from Harry. His grip was strong and the feel of his hand on Harry's cock was almost enough to end it right there.

"Stop that." Harry pushed Malfoy's hands away and held his wrists down to the bed. He pushed himself slowly into Malfoy's body and looked down at his face, wondering at the fact that he was permitted to do this, fuck Malfoy. Have sex with the one person he really shouldn't be getting involved with. And this was involved, regardless of what either of them said. At the end of the day, it still meant that Harry was making love to the person with whom he was - he had to admit it - rather desperately in love. Ron and Hermione need never know. Malfoy certainly need never know, not if Harry could help it, at least. But he still wanted it, wanted Malfoy's loyalties, his admissions, his allegiance. His love. Harry looked down at him and wanted to kiss him. He didn't.

Harry settled for fucking him as hard and fast as Malfoy would allow, and when they both came, he felt more or less satisfied. For now. Malfoy lay panting beneath him. "I'm topping next time," he said, breathing hard.

"Of course you are." Harry smirked. "But I won, this time."

"Whatever. Move, Potter."

Harry disengaged himself from Malfoy's arse and they went through their rituals of cleaning.

"Granger and Weasley still here?" Malfoy asked.

"Yeah. Don't know what they're doing, but they're here," Harry said. "Oh, and I forget to tell you, Molly Weasley's coming by in a bit with some food."

"Good," Malfoy said. "We're running a bit low."

"I know we are."

* * *

Snape fixed himself a plate of chicken, potatoes and green beans and took it and his scotch back upstairs to his study - with a word to Draco to join him later to discuss the ward information.

Potter looked up at this juncture from where he was standing at the counter, carving chicken onto his plate. "Should I come, too?"

"Why not?" Snape said, with what sounded like a suppressed sigh. He turned and departed.

Draco watched Weasley shovel food into his mouth and suppressed his own sigh. He admitted to himself that he could understand why Potter liked him. He was loyal, he could be funny, he made an excellent foil for Potter's many superior skills - not that

Potter had probably thought of that in quite those terms, but still - and he could actually be fun, too. When he wasn't making an arse of himself or being a git. Still. Draco had long ago accepted the fact that they would never be friends. It hadn't been difficult. Tearing his eyes off Weasley's (decidedly barbaric) table manners, Draco glanced at Granger. Who scared him a fair bit, actually. He remembered being surprised when she went to the Yule Ball with Krum; he'd always assumed she and Weasley's sister were lesbians. Curious, that.

Potter sat down across from him. Relief. Draco smiled a bit, then dropped his eyes and focused on his food. An arrangement. His meeting with Snape had jolted him back into the reality of the war and what he was meant to be doing. At least Snape didn't know about him and Potter yet, though Lupin would probably tell him. Draco spared a moment to wonder about the two of them, but then, Snape had always seemed entirely sexless, for the most part. Ambiguous in the extreme, and he'd never once mentioned anything to dispel that impression, so Draco had let it stand.

Granger proposed a different board game for the evening, for after his and Potter's ward discussion with Snape. Draco suppressed another inward sigh and heard himself agree out loud - after Potter had kicked him under the table, at least.

* * *

Harry made his way up the stairs, his entire body full of anger. There had been no *need* for Malfoy to keep prodding Ron like that, about losing the stupid game. He'd just done it to provoke his temper, sitting back all quietly smug and satisfied when Ron blew up at last. Hermione had tried to play peacemaker and both of them had turned on her, leaving her to nurse hurt feelings. The game had fallen apart shortly after, Malfoy slipping out of the room like a shadow.

A large part of Harry wanted to think that Malfoy was just jealous of his friends, was somehow taking it out on them that he didn't have Harry to himself any more, but Harry didn't even know that that was true. It could just be that Malfoy was a malicious git who enjoyed making people feel small. Hence his anger. Hermione had tried to calm him down, too, and honestly, Harry wasn't even sure why he was so furious. But he was. He reached the third floor and hammered on the door to Malfoy's room.

There was no answer. He banged on it again. "Malfoy! Let me in!"

The door opened. Malfoy stood there in just his jeans, barefoot, his face as cold as ice. "What do you want?"

"Let me in," Harry demanded. "We have to talk."

"We have to do no such thing," Malfoy stated categorically. "Why don't you fuck off."

Harry felt his cheeks flushing with rage. "No! I'm not leaving until you've explained to me precisely *why* you need to be such a bastard all the time!"

Malfoy glared at him. "Oh, and are you going to have this same chat with the Weasel about what an utter *child* he is about losing a simple board game, too? Or are we just back to your friends doing nothing wrong, ever, because they're *your* friends, and - "

"Shut up about them," Harry said angrily. "You're my friend, too, but you started this!"

Snape suddenly appeared at the end of the hallway. "Fascinating as this exchange is," he said loudly, "some of us are trying to sleep. Kindly take your bickering into the room and Silence it!"

Malfoy glared at Harry again and mumbled an apology to Snape. Snape muttered darkly to himself and padded off again, leaving Harry to register the fact that he'd just seen Snape in his dressing gown with dim amusement in the back of his mind. Malfoy heaved a sigh, stood back and let Harry into his room. He shut the door, locked it and Silenced the room. "I didn't start a damned thing. Weasley was getting on my nerves."

"Yes, but you pushed him and made all those snide little comments under your breath and just did everything you how to push his buttons," Harry said, frustrated that Malfoy was being so pigheaded about it.

Malfoy shrugged, his face white with his own anger. "This is who I am, Potter. You've always known that. I don't like Weasley. He doesn't like me. And I didn't appreciate what

he said about my father."

Harry recalled that moment and felt a brief stab of guilt. "Well, I told him off for that," he muttered tersely.

Malfoy's gaze bored into him. "I don't see why you're so upset. What does it matter what I think or say or do? It doesn't change our arrangement, does it?"

That stung worse than anything else so far. Harry's entire face coloured. Of *course* it mattered. It mattered because Malfoy had disappointed him. It mattered because he meant far more to Harry than he could admit. "No," he said tonelessly. "It doesn't change a thing."

Malfoy looked smug. "Then why do you look like someone just killed your dog?"

Harry wanted to hit him. "I *don't*," he said through gritted teeth. "I just thought you were slightly more likeable than that."

Malfoy pushed up his left sleeve and shoved his arm out. The Dark Mark stood out in bleak contrast to his pale skin, and Harry could not look directly at it - he always avoided it, covered it with his hand, something so that he could forget it was there when they were together. "I'm not," Malfoy snarled. "It's time you got over your romantic delusions of me."

"I do not have romantic delusions of you!" Harry snapped. "I just - "

"What? Think about me to the point of obsession?" Malfoy sneered. "Get insecure and restless if you haven't seen me in more than an hour? Lie awake at night thinking about how, if things were different, then we'd - "

"Shut up!" Harry roared, furious. "Just shut up! I do not! And you - you don't do *any* of that, do you? All those years at Hogwarts and everything you *did* had something to do with me in some way. And who keeps coming to find who, here? You look for me more than I look for you! Don't give me that crap about this only being - " he stopped short,

realizing that he'd just crossed the unspoken line. Malfoy had pushed him over it, but the fact remained that he'd just spoken the unspeakable. He looked at Malfoy, stricken. Malfoy was staring at him.

"I did not obsess over you at Hogwarts," Malfoy said quietly.

"Liar." Harry glared. "Just here, then?"

Malfoy's fist flew out of nowhere, catching Harry in the jaw. Harry grabbed his wrist and forced it down, cursing. They were struggling furiously in near silence and ended up on the floor, getting in their blows wherever they could. Harry had just landed a solid punch to Malfoy's face when Malfoy cried out in pain. Blood was streaming everywhere. Malfoy grabbed his face with one hand and found his wand with the other. He aimed his wand at his face. "*Episkey*," he said, and his nose healed. They stared at each other for a moment, and Harry realized they were both hard. The next instant, he wasn't sure what had happened, but they were rolling again, only not hitting each other any more. The snarling and cursing changed to moaning and cursing. Harry got up and pulled his jeans and shirt off.

"Take your clothes off," he said, and Malfoy actually obeyed him. They eyed each other warily as the garments came off. "Where's your lube?"

Malfoy went silently to a chest of drawers and brought it out. He gave it to Harry and went to the bed, lying down in silent submission.

An apology? Harry wondered, but with Malfoy, who knew? He went over and wondered how to make peace from his end of things. He lay down beside Malfoy and did what Malfoy had done earlier, took his nipples into his mouth, one at a time and sucked gently. On impulse, Harry licked and sucked a trail down Malfoy's unresisting body to his cock and took the latter into his mouth.

"Fuck, Potter," Malfoy breathed, staring at the ceiling, and Harry knew that everything was better. He tried not to smile around Malfoy's cock, but released it and spent a good moment or two engaged in licking his balls. Malfoy was shaking by the time he was through. Harry removed his lubed fingers and positioned himself. A slow thrust of his hips, and he was fully inside Malfoy, bent low over him. Malfoy closed his eyes, that little

crease between his brows the only thing he was apparently going to communicate with.

Harry began to thrust and wished he knew a way to make Malfoy talk. Open his eyes. Acknowledge that it was *Harry* fucking him, not some random stranger. Not some coldly-made arrangement. Harry wanted his *admission*, not just his non-verbal compliance. It felt as good as ever, perhaps even more so because of this new tension between them, and Harry sped up his motions. His hand closed over Malfoy's cock only to have Malfoy try to push his hand away. "Don't," Malfoy said, his head turned to the side now.

He clearly meant to do it himself, but Harry would have none of it. Malfoy's entire body was trembling beneath him in that way it did when he was just short of coming, and Harry wanted to be the one responsible for pushing him over the edge. He said nothing but their hands fought for dominance. Harry won out. Matching his strokes with the rhythm of the rest of his body moving against Malfoy's, he finally thought of what to say.

"Malfoy. Look at me," he commanded.

Malfoy shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Do it," Harry ordered roughly, squeezing harder. He used his most authoritative tone, one that people rarely failed to obey.

Malfoy opened his eyes. Their eyes met with such intensity that Harry trembled, himself. Malfoy gasped against his will, coming violently. Harry silenced him fiercely with his mouth, one arm behind Malfoy's neck, kissing him with all the fury he possessed. He came himself during it, as their tongues pushed against each other's, as Malfoy gave in and gave himself over to the kiss for a few moments. It was wet and hot and Harry gave himself over to it entirely, drowning. Malfoy was kissing back, arms around Harry's neck, his knees still pressed tightly to Harry's body.

Harry was triumphant, but his triumph was short-lived. Malfoy broke off the kiss, pushing Harry's face away with both hands. "Stop it!" he gasped, still short of breath. "Get off me!"

Harry felt as though he'd just been plunged into cold water. "Malfoy - "

"Get *off* me," Malfoy repeated, pushing him hard, palms against Harry's chest.

Harry disentangled himself and stood up dizzily. Malfoy rolled off the bed and reached for a towel. Wrapping it around his waist, he stalked out of the room without a backward look over his shoulder, leaving Harry alone.

The door closed and Harry, overwhelmed, bewildered, upset and confused, felt his face crumple, emotion clouding his eyes and his senses. He got up, somehow got himself dressed and fled Malfoy's room.

Chapter Thirteen

The shower had long since turned cold, and Draco was shivering violently, his teeth chattering. He made no move to warm himself or to leave, though. The cold was numbing and he needed to be numbed. More than that, he needed to learn how to turn off his thoughts altogether. His emotions. Because they were consuming him at the moment - and they'd betrayed him. He should have known that continuing this stupid arrangement with Potter once he realized he'd starting caring about him was completely foolish. And he always *had* suspected that Potter cared more than he let on, too. This entire fiasco had just proved it.

His fingers were wrinkled and starting to turn blue. Draco finally turned off the water and got out of the shower, wrapping himself in the towel, shivering harder than ever. He had no idea how long he'd been in there, but he would have guessed an hour, at least. Long enough, hopefully, that Potter had left his room by now. There was no way he could possibly face him now. Not a chance of it. Draco finished drying himself, teeth still chattering, and sent a detecting spell down the hallway to his room. It registered as empty, and Draco sighed with relief. He just wanted to escape into the room and hide from everyone. He stole down the corridor and closed the door behind him, locking it and Silencing the room again.

Relief. Only, the actual sight of the room was causing him almost physical pain now. Draco dropped the towel on the floor, uncharacteristically messy, found pyjamas and crawled into the bed. Trying to forget, trying to block it out. He curled up on his side facing the wall and prayed for sleep to take him before his mind relaxed and showed him what he'd done over again.

* * *

He woke in the middle of the night with a start. He'd been dreaming about Potter. Draco sat up and drew his knees up to his chest, heart pounding. He couldn't remember what he'd dreamed, but his face - his eyes - were wet. Draco put his face in his hands. This was hopeless. Ridiculous. Unseemingly in the extreme. He was in love with Potter. That fact had never stood out in his mind so baldly as it did now. That last round of sex had just proved it - he had come, eyes wide open, looking into Potter's eyes. He hadn't been thinking in abstracts, or of random strangers. He'd been thinking of *Potter*. Potter, fucking him. Potter, stroking him and taking great care, in that anxious way of his, to ensure his pleasure. Potter, kissing him with every ounce of passion he possessed.

Draco was weak for wanting it again and again and again.

It had to end. He couldn't go on like this. Draco wiped his eyes and refused to admit he'd been crying in his sleep. He could only guess what Potter was thinking or feeling at the moment, but he was certain that he was feeling just as badly about it all. Surely Potter knew it was over already. Perhaps they wouldn't even have to talk about it.

Pity it had had to end like this, with misunderstanding and pain on both sides. Draco tried to think of it philosophically, but three in the morning is rarely a good time to attempt this. He failed. Draco got up and paced, his chest tight for want of breath. He wanted Potter. He wanted Potter's arms around him. He wanted Potter to kiss him again, to be able to just relax and really give it back, rather than what he'd done - let his control slip for a moment, enjoying it fiercely for a very short while before recovering it and doing the right thing.

It was the right thing. Draco stopped by the small window and looked out over the dingy back gardens of Grimmauld Place, looking much nicer by moonlight. He suddenly felt thirty times more alone than he had before. Which was foolish, because he'd always *been* alone. He'd chosen this path, this method of doing things, and now it was time to face just one more of the consequences of having chosen this way. No Potter. He was a goddamned spy, for fuck's sake - hardly the ideal circumstances under which to begin what would likely be an ill-fated romance, anyway. He had enough to think about as it was. Besides - Potter's friends hated him. Granger was civil, and Weasley sort of managed it, too, but it was clear that they were *only* tolerating him out of loyalty to Potter. He would never fit in with Potter's little Gryffindor circle.

So, Potter would just have to do without him. The "arrangement" - Draco thought the term with bitter acidity - would just have to die a natural death. Draco leaned his head against the cool window pane and closed his eyes. Perhaps Potter would get an assignment tomorrow and this silly, false relationship they'd been enjoying would end on its own. Draco turned and stumbled back into bed, not seeing anything. The war would end some day, and Potter would either die - which would likely mean that Snape would have died, too, and Draco would be forced to go back to his father (unless he was discovered and killed), or else Potter would triumph, and forget him. It was pointless to dwell on things that could not be.

The eastern skies were beginning to lighten when Draco finally managed to fall asleep again.

* * *

He woke when Snape knocked on his door, with a start. Draco blearily sat up, rubbed his eyes and fumbled for his wand, sending another detecting spell toward his door. Snape. "Just a moment," he said hoarsely. He was exhausted. He got himself to the door and removed the locking spells to open the door.

Snape stood there, fully dressed. "Malfoy. I see I woke you. My apologies."

"It's okay," Draco said, wondering what was going on. He yawned widely behind his hand. "What's up?"

Snape glanced around the room. "I would prefer your fully alert attention," he said. "Please join me in my study when you have dressed."

He left before Draco could answer, closing the door. Memories of the night before swamped his brain and threatened to overwhelm him, but he forced himself not to think of it and got dressed as quickly as possible. A glance in the mirror showed deep, purplish bruises beneath his eyes. He looked tired and haggard. Wonderful. He wore grey to suit his mood - a deep charcoal with black trousers. Today, he hated everything.

Snape was in his study, drinking strong, black tea. He acknowledged Draco's knock and directed him to the only other chair. Draco recalled - had it just been yesterday? - a particular suggestion which he now rather wished he'd given in to at the time. No matter. It was over. He sat.

"An owl for you," Snape said darkly. "It's from your father."

Draco swallowed and took it. "Why did he owl me? Did you read it?"

"No," Snape said sharply. "Why would I? But it is his magical signature."

Draco broke the seal and opened it, scanning quickly. His pulse sped up noticeably. "He wants information on the St. Mungo's wards," he said uncomfortably. "And he wants it today."

Snape drew in his breath. "Well, we can't have that, obviously," he murmured. "Hmmm." He scratched his chin, dark with morning stubble, and contemplated. "Do you know how to break them?"

"I think so, yes," Draco said. "If you knocked out the support spells, you'd be able to shake the *Contego* wards enough to basically shatter them with brute force, if that makes any sense."

Snape nodded, but rather absently - as though his thoughts were elsewhere. "And you know which support spells they are?"

"Yes." Draco couldn't say Potter's name. "We... I figured it out."

Snape said nothing, but disappeared behind his desk, stooping to open a low drawer. He drew out something heavy and covered. With a considerable lack of flourish, he pulled the cover off. "Do you know what this is?"

Draco stared at it. It was a low, stone bowl filled with something white and swirling, as ethereal as memory, something between mist and cloud and liquid. "Is it a Pensieve?"

"Very good." Snape indicated the swirling matter within. "This is thought. My thought, to be precise, and a few of Dumbledore's older ones. It was his, once. Now it belongs to me. I would like to remove your memories of any research you have done on these wards before you leave."

Draco was discomfited. "Right now?"

"That would be ideal, yes."

Draco looked at the white matter. "How would you do that?"

"One day, I will show you how to remove your own thoughts and memories," Snape said. "But for now, we do not have the time. I will use Legilimency."

Draco thought vividly of all the sex he'd just had over the past several days, and of his current, barely-suppressed turmoil and bucked at this idea. "Uh - is there anything else we could do?"

Snape frowned, looking somewhat annoyed. "I can assure you that I won't pry," he said irritably. "I merely intend to locate the research memories and to extract them. If you concentrate on those, then your Occlumency should be sufficient to keep me from seeing anything you would rather keep private."

Draco thought of researching at St. Mungo's, and that was fine. He thought of researching here in the library, and despite how much he'd learned, those memories were full of Potter. The table. Both on it and under it. The back shelves. And their conversations, as well. Snape would see it all. He knew that Snape was waiting for an answer, and well aware that he was of the fact that Snape was *not* a patient man, Draco was frozen with indecision. He could not allow Snape to see all that. He could not allow *himself* to see all that, but he also couldn't bear to lose his memories of it, even for a little while.

Snape made an impatient noise. "Well?"

Draco discovered that he wasn't capable of speaking. He clenched his jaw and noted that his fingers were gripping each other rather painfully. There was a lot of pressure in his throat. He fought, made himself swallow. "No."

Snape got up from behind his desk and came to stand in front of him. "Malfoy, what is this? Is something the matter?" The familiar brusqueness was still there, but there was also an edge of genuine concern.

The concern was the last straw. Draco pulled his knees up again and covered his face.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Snape paused. "Does this have something to do with Potter, perchance?"

How had he - ? Draco recalled the fact that Snape had overheard some of their conversation the night before. Had *that* much told him so much? He said nothing.

Snape grew impatient. "Malfoy. Please spare me a shred of respect. A blind man could see it. In hindsight, at least," he added fairly.

"I hate him." Draco spoke into his hands.

"Really," Snape said dryly. "Well, I promise that I'll try very hard to avoid any *Potter*-based memories, then."

Draco lowered his hands and glared at Snape. "You didn't know I was sleeping with him," he said, accusing, defiant.

The corners of Snape's mouth tightened. "Not until now, no."

Draco's glare intensified. "Then what were you implying a second ago?!"

"Merely that your... feelings for Potter might be rather more than what they used to be," Snape answered, carefully studying his cuticles. He shot Draco a glance. "Gotten out of hand, has it?"

"It was just sex," Draco muttered.

"But," Snape said, and waited for Draco to finish it. When he didn't, when the silence between them grew, Snape said, more quietly, "but you have feelings for him. I see. And believe it or not, I understand. There's a war on. Desperation grows. As well, I can see this having been a carry-over from whatever the two of you used to have at

Hogwarts."

"We hated each other at Hogwarts," Draco said, barely audibly.

Snape shrugged. "Hate. Obsession. Love. They're all very close." He leaned back on the edge of his desk. "Malfoy," he said gently, "I can't let you go back to the Manor with this information in your mind. Your father is not the Legilimens I am, but he is very powerful nonetheless. You know how capable he would be of retrieving your knowledge if he suspected you of possessing it. I would not risk your position that way. Come. Let me take the memories. You will have them back as soon as you return. I assume that Potter is in some of them?"

Face red, Draco nodded mutely, unable to meet Snape's eyes.

"I will do my very best to ignore those parts, then," Snape said firmly. "Are you ready?"

Draco closed his eyes. "I suppose so."

"Look at me."

The words were too familiar. The pressure in his throat grew, preventing speech, almost preventing air. Draco obeyed nonetheless. Snape's eyes were dark, boring into his skull, and Draco felt himself being sucked into the depths of that black gaze like a whorl, helpless to fight the eddying current of Snape's stronger mind. They were there, in the library. Draco saw Potter sitting across from himself, quietly reading and taking the occasional note. Something within Draco throbbed painfully, but Snape pushed him along through the scene. The instant Potter said something about Draco distracting him with his stretch, Draco felt his panic begin to rise. Snape pushed them on. They saw Potter in the dusty back shelves, poring through books. Draco silently warned Snape off that one, too. It did not take very long altogether, but Draco was relieved to feel Snape withdrawing from his mind.

He opened his eyes. Snape's wand tip was on his temple, drawing out a strand of silvery stuff, dropping it into the bowl. He frowned, concentrating, and selected another - a conversation with Potter in which everything was discussed. This was deposited with

the other thoughts, and Snape went to his cabinet. He poured a hefty tot of scotch and passed it to Draco. "Drink it," he said roughly. "You're shaking."

It was true. Ashamed, Draco reached out and prayed he wouldn't drop the little shot glass. He knocked it back at once and waited for the fire to stop dissolving his esophagus. It burned in his belly and he felt nauseous.

"Tell me about the *Contego* wards," Snape said, eyes piercingly strong on his again.

Draco thought hard - and came up empty. "Nothing, now," he said, not entirely happy about it. He could remember Potter in the library, but nothing more.

"You'll get these back as soon as you return," Snape promised. "I'm going to owl McGonagall and get her to take a look, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead," Draco said, not caring. "Should I owl my father?"

"Yes," Snape said. He pushed a quill and parchment forward. "The sooner the better. And eat something before you go; you look rather pale."

Draco stood up and went to the door. Snape's voice stopped him.

"Malfoy."

Draco looked back over his shoulder.

Snape's face was shadowed oddly in the candlelight, making him look older and more tired. "I'm sorry."

Draco had no idea whether he was talking about the mental intrusion, Potter, this extra visit to the Manor or what. He decided not to ask, just nodded once and left.

* * *

Harry woke up late. He was stiff and tired and wondered for a moment why he felt so troubled when the events of the night before came rushing back into his mind with the impact of a freight train. He'd been reaching for his glasses, but his arm dropped limply. His instinct was to roll over and go back to sleep. It was all over. He knew it was. He'd gone and pushed Malfoy too far. Made him admit something Harry hadn't even been sure existed. Apparently it did, and apparently Malfoy hated him for forcing out the admission. Not quite the victory Harry had thought it might be - to know at last that he wasn't the only one who had more invested in their "arrangement". For all the good it did.

Eventually, he got up, because it was the done thing. As well, he suspected that it was rather late. He was correct; the time was past eleven already. That explained the hunger. Harry dressed very slowly, trying his best to look nice, at least - it would be even harder to face Malfoy if he looked like shit. The hair was a lost cause, but Harry tried, anyway. He gathered his courage and exited the room.

He didn't see a soul on his way downstairs. The kitchen was empty. Confused, his gut churning, Harry turned and slowly retraced his steps. The drawing room was empty. The library was deserted - not that he'd looked; a detecting spell was more than adequate to tell him that much. There was a conspicuous lack of sound behind Ron and Hermione's door, which was never a good sign. Harry grimaced to himself and returned to the kitchen to find something to eat. Mrs. Weasley had left quite a bit of fresh food, but Harry barely noticed it. His entire nervous system was waiting for his first, inevitable run-in with Malfoy and all of the awkwardness it would provoke. He ate toast with some cold roast beef without tasting it, drank tea that scalded his mouth and hardly felt it. Panic was swirling in him like a vortex threatening to draw everything else in. There were steps - multiple feet - on the stairs. Harry looked up, his heart in his throat.

The door opened. It was Hermione, followed by Ron. Harry's heart sank like lead again, into his belly. "Oh, it's you," he said, slightly relieved not to be alone any more for when Malfoy came in, as he was bound to at some point. Harry vowed to stick to his friends like mud until the inevitable confrontation was forced out.

"Harry!" Hermione said. "You're finally up!"

"Sort of," Harry said.

Ron sat down and poured himself some tea. "You alright, mate? You look knackered."

Harry opened his mouth, and realized that he didn't want to talk to Ron about this. He didn't really want to talk to anyone about it, frankly, but Ron, while accepting, would not necessarily understand. He was a good wizard and a great friend, but relationships had never been his strong point. "I am," he said instead.

Ron gave him a scrutinizing look and wrinkled his nose a bit. "Late night with the ferret?"

"Ron!" Hermione's voice was reproachful.

Harry felt like he'd just been punched in the stomach. He felt sick. He stood up very quickly and went over to the sink, turning on the water. He couldn't answer. He splashed some water on his face and asked, over the running water, "Have you seen him today?"

"He left," Hermione said. "He had to go to the Manor. Snape said he got an owl this morning. Snape's still here, though - up in his study, I think."

Harry hardly heard her last words. Malfoy was gone. He knew it wasn't Malfoy's doing, but it was the final kick in the teeth. Some corner of him had maintained a tiny flame of hope that he and Malfoy could work everything out. Agree to not ever talk about That again, and get on with things. And now he was gone. He'd probably be sent back to the barracks, and who knew where Harry would be sent. He tasted ash and gripped the counter to hold off the sudden vertigo swirling around him.

"Harry?" Hermione asked tentatively. "Are you alright?"

Harry couldn't answer. Eyes closed, he shook his head. "I... don't feel very well," he said numbly, understating it considerably.

He heard them murmuring quietly back and forth. "Harry," Ron said, louder, "I got an owl this morning, too. I'm off, actually. In about ten minutes or so. I'm sorry if I said something that upset you."

Harry turned around. "Where are you going?" he asked, his voice hollow.

"Back to St. Mungo's, naturally," Ron said, making a face. "Just guarding the patients, that's all. Shouldn't be too bad. Unless another battle breaks out, I guess - but hey, I've lasted this long, right?" He grinned, an obvious effort to be cheerful.

Harry's worry just deepened. "Be careful," he said. He didn't add, *I need you. Come back.*

"Sure thing," Ron promised. He came over. "I'm glad I saw you before I had to leave." He clapped a hand to Harry's shoulder. "Buck up, mate. If Malfoy's being a git, I'll just be sure to hex him good the next time I see him, okay? Remember, you're hot stuff. Everyone wants you. Lots of fish in the sea and all that."

"Ron," Hermione said, exasperated.

Ron just grinned again. "Chin up," he said.

Harry gripped his arms and Ron drew him into a hug, rather unexpectedly. Harry fought down the urge to cry. Ron wasn't remotely homophobic, but hugging a crying man might be a little much for him to handle. Harry extricated himself. "Do you know where you'll be after?"

"Do I ever?" Ron asked rhetorically. "I'll stay in touch. I expect I'll see you back at the barracks soon enough."

"Okay," Harry said. He managed a bit of a smile. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Me?" Ron sounded surprised, but suddenly looked a bit like the twins. "Never!"

He looked at Hermione. "I guess I'll go up and get my stuff," he said, his voice immediately softer. His "Hermione" voice, Harry called it privately.

She stood. "I'll go with you." Turning back to Harry, she added, "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

Harry knew he was in for a Hermione Talk and accepted the fact with grim resignation. "Okay. See you, mate."

Ron grinned again, and was gone.

Hermione returned a few minutes later. Harry had sat down again with his tea. He couldn't even stand to think; it hurt too much. He was dreading Hermione's questions and having to answer them. She sat down silently and pushed the teapot away. "What's going on?" she asked quietly.

Harry dug his thumbnail into the side of the cup. "Nothing. I'm just a fool, that's all."

"How so?" Her voice was gentle and patient. Harry almost wished she'd just yell and him or something; her patience was going to undo him, loose the ties holding him together.

He fidgeted with the cup a little more. "I thought I could do this thing with Malfoy without falling for him, and of course I was wrong. That's all."

A pause. "And - do you know how he feels?" Hermione asked, more quietly still.

"Sort of - no," Harry corrected himself. "No, I don't. I - no."

"Right," Hermione said dryly. "That explains it perfectly."

"I wondered," Harry said, doggedly avoiding her eyes. "I thought he might, but I could be wrong. And it doesn't matter, anyway. He would never get into a relationship during the war, never mind with *me*."

"What made you think he might like you?" Hermione asked, her sympathy so strong it could have choked him.

Harry squirmed agitatedly. "He - sometimes, at least - he used to kiss me sometimes." His face was flushing, but he'd discussed other relationships and flings with Hermione in the past. She was perfectly accepting of most things, unless she thought that Harry had behaved badly somehow. But this sort of thing never fazed her. "I never did it first, it was always him. And he always initiated stuff, in the beginning."

Hermione looked interested in this. "Really? Malfoy doesn't seem like the type. He seems more likely to wait for people to come to him."

"I know," Harry said. "So..."

"Right," Hermione said. She leaned forward. "Harry, what happened last night? I know you were upset with him because of the game and everything - but what happened after that? Did you fight?"

"At first," Harry said. "I broke his nose, actually."

Hermione looked amused. "Over Ron?"

"Over everything," Harry said. "He was making fun of me for having feelings for him, too - he didn't come out and say it that explicitly, but it's what he meant. I don't know. He hit me first, so I hit him back. And then I don't know what happened. We just ended up having sex, I guess."

Hermione's brows lifted. "Quite a change, that," she remarked.

Harry smiled reluctantly. "Not all that different, for us," he said wryly. "Anyway, toward - uh, the end, I - are you sure you want to hear this?"

Hermione's cheeks were a bit pink, but she nodded. "It's okay. Tell me."

Blushing, Harry squinted at his teacup and went on. "I kissed him right while he was - " he stopped, cleared his throat and went on. "It was the first time I'd ever been the one to kiss *him*, not the other way around, and it was really good, at first."

Hermione's expression was worried. "What happened?"

"He just seemed to change his mind partway through it," Harry said miserably. "All of a sudden, he was pushing me away and telling me to get off him and stuff. And then he just left and didn't say another word."

Hermione was quiet for a long bit, thinking. "You sure know how to pick them," she murmured. "What a scenario. And I guess you haven't seen him since then."

"No." Harry saw his fingertips whiten on the rim of his cup. "I know it's over, Hermione. He was kissing back like he really wanted it, like he meant it - and I'm *sure* he didn't mean for that to happen. I know he's mad because I pushed him too far."

Hermione smiled and patted his wrist. "It's not over till it's over," she said bracingly. "Maybe he just needs a little space. Sounds like he's not ready for whatever level of what he's feeling for you right now."

"But he's gone," Harry said, feeling empty. "It's just - we've been on our own here since Tuesday morning; we both got here on Monday, and it's been like our own little world away from the rest of the war, and nothing will ever be the same again. It was hard enough back at the barracks, trying to find some privacy."

"It was already going on back there?" Hermione looked surprised.

"Sorry for not telling you," Harry mumbled.

"Don't apologize. You're allowed to have some privacy, you know," Hermione said with a fond smile. "I just - didn't realize, is all."

Harry didn't say anything.

Hermione sighed, got up and came around the table to sit beside him. She tucked an arm around his waist and hugged him gently. Her chin on his shoulder, she asked softly, "Are you in love with him?"

Harry knew at that moment that there was only one person in the world who would ask him that question, that forthrightly and yet so unobtrusively, and only one person he would have answered. He let his head rest on top of hers. "Yeah."

The arm squeezed. "I'm sorry, Harry."

* * *

Lupin returned on Saturday night. Harry was glad to see him; Hermione's orders had arrived late that afternoon and she'd left, too, joining Ron at St. Mungo's. After having stuck to Harry's side the entire time she's been there, never mentioned Malfoy, but sympathy still radiating from her in waves. Snape was presumably still in the house, but keeping himself in his study. Probably researching or brewing potions, and Harry was just as glad not to have to talk to him.

"You look tired, Harry," Lupin said, giving him a fleeting one-over. "Feeling alright?"

"Fine," Harry said, not wanting to get into all of it again. "You hungry?"

"Definitely." Lupin glanced at the wall calendar. "Full moon in three days. That always

does it for me. What have we here?"

He drew out half a chicken from the fridge with great interest. They set about making supper. It was past nine, but Harry hadn't eaten yet. They were dining in companionable silence - Harry grateful that Lupin was willing to let him be - when Snape made his way down to the kitchen.

"Ah - Lupin," he said, sounding genuinely *not*-hateful, which was a surprise. Perhaps sharing the house had been good for them, Harry thought with a twist of amusement. "I wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow, I thought."

Lupin looked up and gave Snape his mild smile. "Got finished earlier. I'll tell you about it later." As a general rule, the Order shared information only on a "need-to-know" basis, and Harry didn't feel remotely offended that they weren't going to discuss it in front of him. "Are you hungry?" Lupin asked courteously.

"I know where the refrigerator is," Snape returned. He glanced at Lupin's plate, however. "What have you got there? Chicken?"

"Indeed," Lupin said.

Snape prepared himself a plate and came to join them. The oddly companionable silence continued.

* * *

Sunday dawned with a knock on Harry's door. Harry stumbled blindly to the door, shoving his glasses toward his face as he went. It was Lupin.

"What?" Harry asked, his voice scratchy.

Lupin held out a scroll. "Your wishes have come true," he said whimsically. "An assignment, I think."

Harry took it and unrolled it, leaning wearily against the doorframe. He scanned the short letter. "They're sending me to Diagon Alley?"

"Are they?" Lupin inquired. "I had nothing to do with this, Harry. At least it's safer there, now, though that perhaps won't make you particularly happy. Was is the assignment for?"

"Just hex removal," Harry said gloomily. "Same old boring thing."

"Same old boring team?" Lupin asked, smiling.

"Yeah." Harry yawned and, leaving the door open, turned and went back into the room. He picked up a shirt and found that Lupin was still watching him. "What?"

Lupin shifted his weight. "Is everything alright?" he asked quietly. "I don't want to pry, but you seemed... different, yesterday."

Harry scowled at the shirt for no particular reason and felt the hollow feeling return. "Everything's not alright, but I expect I'll get over it," he said neutrally.

"Harry - what - ?"

Harry pulled the shirt on and spoke while his head was still inside, turning away from Lupin. "Malfoy and I broke up, I guess," he said. "Not that we were ever together, really. But whatever it was is over. I don't really want to talk about it."

He saw Lupin nod at once in his peripheral vision. "Of course," Lupin said, instantly backing off. "We won't talk about it, then. I am sorry, though. I thought you two might be good for one another."

Harry's jaw clenched, but he just looked resolutely at one of the unadorned walls.

"There's a war on. None of us can afford to get into relationships. But I think you're wrong about us being good for each other."

Lupin was silent for a long time. "Sometimes," he said after a long pause, "it's the people who care most about us who hurt us the most. Funny, that." Harry didn't answer, and Lupin nodded again, as though to himself. "I'll be in the parlour if you want to see me before you go."

Harry nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. Lupin left him alone.

* * *

Harry cursed inwardly as Angela Jones triggered another pattern of hexes scattered over the outer walls of the Diagon Alley branch of the Ministry of Magic. He sent Derek to heal whatever she'd lacerated this time and focused his attention on the bricks, which were glowing and crumbling before his eyes. He didn't know the hexes, had no way of identifying them or figuring out what harm they were causing the building, whether physically or magically. It was his third day out here. With a noticeable lack of joy, he'd returned to the barracks on Sunday night after his first day working on this. It was even more crowded than it had been and people were sleeping on the floors of the bunkhouses; a few were even sleeping outside. Harry had not gotten his usual bed back, though he'd at least gotten a bed. It was in bunkhouse eight, still, but the bed had once been Terry Boot's.

He concentrated on the bricks. "*Finite incantatem*." Nothing happened, of course. Harry sighed. Of course not, that would be too simple. He needed Hermione to help him on this one - she was so much better at discerning magical behaviour patterns than he was. "*Exigo*," he tried. Nothing. "*Compleo*." The red faded. Ah. Progress. Harry threw another handful of spells at the wall and eventually had it persuaded to stop trying to kill all three of them. Much better.

He returned to the barracks that evening tired, hungry, and depressed. Perhaps Ron or Hermione would be there. He hadn't seen Malfoy since Friday night. He couldn't believe it hadn't even been a week yet. It felt like he'd lived a month since then. The entire thing still hurt too much to think about, so Harry simply didn't think about it. It crept up on him in the quiet moments, though, burying him with waves of emotion he couldn't bear at all. He'd heard himself actually groan aloud under the weight of it while trying to fall asleep,

found himself dreaming of Malfoy's face, angry and pushing him away.

Harry waited in the queue for food, or what passed as food here, in a line that had trebled in average length since his last stay. He consumed an unappetizing meal of badly-made beef stew and tried to avoid painful thoughts of Malfoy. He ate alone, yet the tables were all full, including his. Strangers, all of them.

A round of owl-memos had just come, and Harry found himself starting absently into a group of people chattering, reading them and generally sounding dismayed. Hardly unusual. He abandoned his stew and went over to see what was going on. The memos were all vague to the point of being quite frightening - battle breaking out at St. Mungo's, people killed - he hadn't seen a casualty list yet, though. Harry's heart began to pound. *Not Ron or Hermione, not Ron or Hermione*, he chanted over and over again in his head, the way he always did when this sort of news came.

More owls began to arrive in smaller groups and on their own. People noticed Harry's presence then, and everything got very quiet. Panic rose in his chest. No. It couldn't be. But even as Harry's gut clenched with fear, fear that was almost becoming nausea, Harry happened to look up and saw the tiny form of Pigwidgeon approaching. If Ron was owling him *now* - Harry numbly took the scroll from Pig and looked around at the crowd before opening it. Everyone was staring at him, a hushed silence falling.

And Harry, the parchment scroll clutched tight in a trembling hand, knew then, beyond all doubt, that Hermione was dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Harry lay curled on his side on a curtained-off room of the Infirmary. Numbed with grief and shock, all he could do was stare at the far wall. He was at the very end of the ward. The medical staff had made it very clear that they thought him mentally unstable, likely to come unhinged and do rash things, and had decided to give him some space. The little chamber was Silenced, and all Harry's mind was silence, too.

He'd known before they told him, before he got Ron's owl, hastily scribbled in almost illegible hand, it was so shaky, pleading with him to come to the Burrow. Harry had passed out instead, and stayed here. He couldn't go to the Burrow. He couldn't see anyone, or else he really might fall apart on everyone - that last little string holding him together would snap, and the wizarding world would be left without any hero-figure. Harry was shivering, the blanket drawn tightly around his shoulders.

Hermione. He couldn't believe she was gone. The cleverest witch around, finally outsmarted by a stray curse. The blow to the wizarding community's intellect alone was staggering. The blow to Harry personally was incomprehensible. He snivelled, drowning in utter misery. It was too much to ask one person to take. He couldn't deal with this. He'd already thought he had enough before, too much to deal with his heartbreak over

Malfoy.

He thought of Malfoy and longed for him with all his being, knowing and hating and raging at the fact that it was utterly futile. If Malfoy had heard by now - and he must have - it was no use. Harry knew that it wouldn't change anything. A bit of pity didn't make a person willing to love.

A horrible, aching sob escaped him suddenly. Harry heard it, agonized, as though it was a sound someone else had made. It sounded almost inhuman. He ground his jaw shut and closed his eyes as tears streamed down his face. It had been over thirty-six hours since he'd found out and he hadn't moved since then.

For all Harry cared, the world was welcome to end any time it chose to do so.

* * *

Draco sat, once again, in his white-walled room in the nameless Ministry building, staring at the back of the plain, white door. Indecision hemmed him in from every side. He felt wretched. He'd been at St. Mungo's, had heard that Granger had been killed two floors down. And all he'd been able to think about was Potter, losing another friend like that. Potter, who was probably already upset about the ending of whatever they'd had. And now this. He wondered if Potter had gone to wherever it was that Weasley lived. That would be good. Molly Weasley could fuss over him and make sure that he was eating and drinking, and he and Weasley could comfort each other. Draco actually pitied Weasley rather acutely. Whatever he'd thought of him and Granger, it was obvious that they were made for one another, and besides, they'd been together since seventh year. On and off, at first, but altogether around eight years now. And Weasley would take it hard. Draco didn't blame him.

A knock on the door sounded. Draco went to answer it after a newly-established password and countersign were exchanged. He opened the door to receive an owl. He had been ordered back to the barracks to await further instructions. The Ministry was converting this building for other uses. Draco got up and left the room without looking behind him.

The main hall at the barracks was buzzing with sound. Draco checked the news - all bad - and then, curiously, checked the Infirmary lists.

Potter, to his shock, was listed under "Classified". He was here. Not with the Weasleys. Draco's indecision returned to him with full force, but even as his stomach flipped, he knew that he'd lost the battle once and for all.

He went to the Infirmary.

* * *

The Healer left, urging Harry to eat his watery soup. Harry ignored her steadfastly. He'd gotten up to relieve himself shortly before, then retreated back to his bed. He was hungry in the sense that his stomach, like all the rest of his being, was empty. But he had no desire to eat - the thought made him feel rather ill. She was exasperated with him, but left him alone. Harry curled up on his side again, drew his knees up to his chest and let the wracking pain consume him.

He heard the curtains twitch aside. Assuming it was one of the Healers or their assistants, he ignored it. Maybe if he lay very still, they would think he'd fallen asleep and leave him alone. No such luck. Soft footsteps crossed the floor and came to stand behind him.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Malfoy said, very quietly.

Harry stiffened in shock. "What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice toneless and expressionless.

"I had to come," Malfoy said, still very quietly. "I couldn't just leave you alone here - I thought you would be at the Weasleys' house."

"They wanted me to." Harry gestured carelessly toward a small pile of scrolls on the table next to the bed, his back still to Malfoy. The dull pain of Malfoy's rejection sank into him again. He closed his eyes. "I couldn't go."

"I thought you would be there," Malfoy repeated, sounding almost angry. "I thought you would do the smart thing and be with people who would look after you, not stay here and - "

Harry shook his head. "Go away, Malfoy." He could hardly summon the energy to speak. "I'm not - I'm too tired to fight with you. You win. I'm stupid. I admit it. Go away."

"I'm not going away," Malfoy said, and came closer. Harry felt the blankets lift behind him, felt Malfoy sliding into the bed, fully clothed, even his shoes. An arm came around Harry's middle and Malfoy curled his body around Harry's. "I can't."

It was too much, again. The string snapped and he began to sob uncontrollably. He hated the fact that he was, but seemed to be entirely powerless to stop it. He couldn't speak, couldn't tell Malfoy to stop playing games with him, to go and sod himself into next year, to just leave him *alone*, or -

Malfoy held him tightly and didn't say anything for a long time. After a bit, though, he conjured something which turned out to be a face flannel, which he then doused in the untouched glass of water on Harry's other side, leaning over him to do so. Malfoy gently pulled him over onto his back and began to wipe his face, his eyes. His eyes were very intense and concerned. The cool cloth felt nice, and regardless of why Malfoy was there, Harry was momentarily grateful. "Do you really want me to go?" Malfoy asked, his expression unreadable.

Harry shook his head, unable to answer.

"Good. Because I'm not going anywhere," Malfoy said. His hand and the cloth were on Harry's cheek. And then slowly, very slowly, Malfoy's face came down to his, his eyes closing, he kissed Harry full on the lips, very gently and very sensuously and very fully.

Harry reached for him like a blind man - not far off, as his glasses were on the table - and clung to Malfoy like a baby. Their mouths came apart for a moment, and Malfoy slid his arms under Harry's back and drew him closer. They kissed again, and then again. Malfoy's hand was on his face, and Harry was lost somewhere between gratitude, bewilderment and relief. "I needed you," he said, still uncertain.

Malfoy shook his head. "I'm sorry. About the other day. But I couldn't leave you to deal with all this by yourself."

"I love you," Harry said, without meaning to. "And I don't trust you, but I need you."

Malfoy didn't say anything, just looked intently into his eyes. When they kissed again, Harry didn't know who had initiated it. It had just happened. They shifted so that Malfoy was on his side, facing Harry, and for many long moments, they just looked at each other, trying to figure themselves out. "I need you, too," Malfoy said, finally. "I was pretty miserable without you. I thought you wouldn't want me right now. I thought you would be with your friends."

"I couldn't," Harry said, agonized all over again. "Ron's owed me three times now, but I can't go. I just can't see him, it would make it all even worse, I think."

Malfoy's arms were still around him, uncomfortable as it must have been for the arm beneath Harry's weight, but he didn't say anything about it. "You have to take care of yourself," Malfoy said. "You can go to them when you feel up to it. I assume you're on compassionate leave?"

"I guess so," Harry said. He didn't know for sure, actually, but didn't really care. He wasn't going anywhere at the moment. He focused on Malfoy's face. "I didn't think you were ever going to talk to me again."

Malfoy gave an unhappy laugh. "I don't think I was going to, either."

Harry felt himself stiffen again. "So is this just a pity thing, then?"

Malfoy sighed gustily. "No. It's not just pity. I love you, too, you twit. I rather thought that was painfully obvious by now."

"Obvious?" Harry echoed in disbelief. He didn't pull away from Malfoy, though he was strongly tempted to. "*Obvious*?! When you pushed me away like that, like you couldn't *bear* having me do something remotely emotional with you - and then you just left without saying goodbye or even telling me you were leaving, and didn't bother owling even just to tell me to stay away, or whatever - I was supposed to figure out from *that* that you actually *cared* two Knuts about me?"

Malfoy ignored this for a moment. He leaned over Harry to re-wet the flannel and began dabbing at his face again. "Shh. You're getting yourself all worked up."

"All worked *up*?!" Harry repeated, aware that he was echoing Malfoy again. "Malfoy - "

"Draco," Malfoy corrected, and cut off his protest with his mouth.

Harry abandoned the argument in favour of attempting to remove Malfoy's tonsils with his tongue. Their mouths were open so wide he could hardly even breathe through his nose, but Malfoy was pressed against him, kissing him so hard that Harry rather thought he might pass out. Of course, that could also be from not eating, but the amount of emotion swirling in his head at the moment would have been enough to make anyone dizzy. All he knew was that he loved Malfoy desperately and needed him just as desperately, and that he wasn't alone anymore. He couldn't handle Hermione's death on his own, yet the addition of Ron's pain would be too much at the moment. And Malfoy was telling him that he loved him and was *here*, tangible and real, and hadn't rejected him, but was holding him fiercely, and yet gently, too. Harry was overwhelmed. He gave up any thought of trying to control the situation and just let Malfoy have it.

Malfoy released him, his face still very close to Harry's. "I'm not going to leave you," he said.

It was the only thing he really wanted to hear. And Harry was tired, so very tired, and just wanted to sleep. Only, he was afraid to close his eyes lest he wake to find that he'd hallucinated all this, that he was still alone. His hand closed over the front of Malfoy's robes. "Please don't."

"I won't." Malfoy shifted, kicking off his shoes. "It's night. Are you tired?"

"Yes."

"Go to sleep, then. I won't leave."

Harry put one hand on the back of Malfoy's neck and drew him closer. They kissed for a long moment. Harry opened his eyes. "You fought this for so long," he said, half-drugged with fatigue and the stress of trying to deal with it all.

"Yeah, I did. Go to sleep," Malfoy repeated.

Harry broke the kiss himself that time, and turned back over onto his side. Malfoy closed

the gap between them with his body and wrapped one arm firmly around Harry again. Harry put his elbow over it and twined his fingers into Malfoy's, on his chest, so that he would feel it if Malfoy left during the night. "I'm glad you came," he said softly. The weight of Hermione's loss was still sitting heavily on his chest, but something else was very slowly beginning to heal.

Malfoy didn't say anything for a long time. And when he did, Harry was very nearly asleep already. He heard it in the back of his mind, just a half-subconscious murmur. "I couldn't have not come, Harry."

* * *

Late in the afternoon the next day (Harry had lost track of the days, but Draco had told him that it was Wednesday), Harry sat down to write a letter. It was short and to the point.

Dear Ron,

I'm so sorry I haven't written sooner. I'll explain when I get there, but I'm coming right now. Can Malfoy come? He'll be good, I promise. I need him. But I need you, too, so I need to come. Would that be alright?

I'll see you very soon.

Harry.

"If he says no, I won't come," Draco said. "He's got to be in a pretty bad place right now. I'll understand if he doesn't want me there."

"I want you there," Harry said firmly. "He'll probably understand." He tied the scroll to the Infirmary owl's leg and sent it to the Burrow. That done, he allowed Draco to pull him back down to the bed. Harry went quite willingly. They'd talked a lot more in the morning, often restating things that had already been said. Everything - at least about their relationship - was out in the open, now. Draco had asked if he wanted to talk about

Hermione or how she died. Harry had thought that he did, but he'd started crying again, to his own humiliation, and Draco had tacitly changed the subject after a bit.

They lay together now and Harry wondered what Draco was thinking. He wondered about the future, how long this would last, and realized that nothing was remotely certain at all. There was no single element in his life which he could count on to remain unchanged. Anyone could die. If they could kill Hermione, they could certainly manage just about anyone else. Snape was wily enough that he might survive, and maybe Draco, too. Who knew?

"What are you thinking about?" Draco asked him, intense and unsmiling.

"Too much," Harry said, sighing.

Draco reached over, under the blankets, and unabashedly slipped his hand into Harry's shorts. Harry had showered for the first time in days that morning and never bothered getting fully dressed. "Better," Draco said, his hand working Harry's cock to fullness.

Harry closed his eyes and tried not to think about Hermione. Just focus on this. Feeling good. Letting Draco make him feel good. Yes. "Better," he said, and couldn't remember if Draco had already said that or not.

Draco silently found his hand and moved it to his own crotch. Harry complied readily, fingers fumbling past the zip of Draco's jeans, and felt how hard he was already. "Missed this?" he asked, managing a smile.

Draco groaned and pushed his hips forward, his cock into Harry's palm. "Yeah."

They didn't talk any more after that, except for a quiet, "Oh, gods, Harry - " toward the end, rather strained and breathy, too - just cupped and squeezed and rubbed in all their familiarity with one another's bodies, and Harry watched Draco's face and thought how fortunate he was that Draco had actually come back. He'd been so sure it would never happen again. He came into Draco's hand and realized that it was indeed *Draco's* hand now, not *Malfoy's*. He liked the difference.

Draco came shortly after, his breath a small explosion as his release overtook him. They kissed again after, and again after that. It was easier not to talk. There was so

much that was still so raw and painful for Harry that it was nice to be able to just lie there and know that someone was watching over him and there when he needed him.

Pigwidgeon arrived about half an hour later, bearing Ron's reply. It was even shorter than Harry's had been:

Harry,

*I don't care. Bring him if you have to,
but please, just come. I need you here.*

Ron.

Draco read it over his shoulder. "Do you want to go now?"

Harry nodded, his own relief rather great. Draco had been willing not to come, certainly, but Harry had been unwilling to be parted for a second longer than they needed to be. He intended to spend a lot of time alone with Ron, but knowing that Draco was there in the house would mean a great deal to him. And he was also relieved that Draco had said he would come. He'd fixed it with Snape, he'd said. They'd exchanged owls that morning. Harry rather wondered what Snape thought of all this, but didn't ask, and Draco didn't volunteer anything.

* * *

They went to the field and Apparated to the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley met them at the door, wringing her hands and crushing the breath out of Harry. Draco hung politely back and waited for permission to enter the house. He got it at last. Mrs. Weasley's greeting was a little strained - she probably thought he didn't belong there, Draco thought, and perhaps she was right. But if Harry wanted him there, then - acutely aware as Draco was that he was possibly compromising his work to both sides of the war by asking for time off *now*, and that it was because of his feelings for Harry, which he'd *sworn* to himself not to get in the way - Draco knew that this was the place he needed to be. Not at this crumbling shack of a house held together by magic, apparently, and not much else - but with Harry. The rest, he would deal with later.

They were inside now. Draco looked around with interest. It was about as far removed

from the Manor as anything got. Mrs. Weasley went to get her son - Harry had said he would just go on up, but Mrs. Weasley had fussed and told him to sit down and make himself comfortable. Weasley appeared alone, apparently having lost his mother upstairs. He was white in the face, whiter than usual, and Harry's cheeks drained, seeing him. He got up and went to Weasley. Not a word was spoken. Draco averted his eyes as they embraced, both of them crying, and tried not to feel like an intruder.

Harry was murmuring things Draco couldn't hear to Weasley, and Weasley was trying to respond, his voice clouded with emotion. Mrs. Weasley made a reappearance, slipping past the two of them. She came to sit down across from Draco. "Tea?" she asked, sounding a little more kindly.

Draco didn't know what to do, other than to accept it. "Thank you."

"I'm glad he's crying at last," Mrs. Weasley whispered confidentially. Meaning her son, Draco supposed. "He's barely said a word since it happened. We've been very worried. It's so good that you brought Harry here, our Ron really needed him. The three of them were always so close."

Draco nodded numbly, recalling his intense jealousy of the Golden Trio of Hogwarts when they'd all been at school. It was hard to believe that Granger was actually dead. That irrepressible intellect, her outspoken, sometimes forceful nature - it was difficult to imagine that she wouldn't just come into the room and start bossing the other two about at any moment.

Eventually, Harry pulled away from Weasley. His face was flushed and wet, and Weasley looked rather like a tomato with orange foliage. Mrs. Weasley looked at them hopefully. "Some tea?" she enquired quaveringly.

Weasley seemed to contemplate this. "Alright," he said listlessly, his voice very congested. Harry cleaned his glasses and came back to the table, sitting by Draco. Weasley trailed after him and sat on his other side. Draco studied his cuticles and attempted not to feel ridiculously out of place.

* * *

It was night. Mrs. Weasley had let Draco stay in the same room as him, and that was good. Harry bade her good night, then got up to switch off the light and transferred

himself immediately to Fred's bed, where Draco was.

Draco had already moved over in the narrow twin bed to make room for him. Harry curled up against him, facing him, and Draco held him. It felt odd but familiar, new, and so completely right that Harry figured his emotions would be a mess for years. Neither of them spoke for a long time. Harry closed his eyes and absorbed Draco's wordless comfort.

Eventually, Draco stirred. He pushed Harry's knees down so that their bodies were properly aligned. "Did you have a good talk with him this afternoon?"

"Yeah," Harry said. It had been very tiring and very sad. Ron had cried somewhat constantly, face in his hands and hiccupping every so often. Harry had just sat near him, one arm around his shoulders, and quietly tried to just be there. They'd talked about Hermione a little, but it had been so hard for both of them that they preferred to leave off.

Ron had gotten his mother to contact Hermione's parents to let them know and explain the circumstances. They'd known about the war and had been very concerned all along, but they seemed to understand.

"How are they?" Harry had asked.

"I haven't talked to them, myself," Ron said numbly. "They say I can go and stay any time I want. I don't know if I want to, though. It would just be so hard, seeing pictures of her everywhere and them wanting to talk about it - I don't think I could take it right now."

"There's no rush, I'm sure," Harry said. "They'll understand, either way."

"I hope so." Ron's face fell again. "I just can't believe she's gone, Harry! I can't imagine life without her - she just *has* to be *somewhere* - but she isn't, and I wasn't even with her when she died. I was on the next floor up. I wish I had been there."

"Why?" Harry asked, his tone suddenly savage. "So that you could watch her die a thousand times over in your memory? You're better off this way, Ron. Trust me."

Ron had wiped his eyes and looked at him, subdued. "You mean Sirius?"

Harry had nodded. "You don't want to have seen it. And there's nothing you could have done - people said the curse bounced off one of the walls or something, and with everything that was going on, there's no way you could have seen it or prevented it."

"I know that. I just wish I'd had a chance to talk to her again, or something," Ron said, his tears starting afresh. "I hope she died instantly. I hope she didn't feel a thing."

Harry, who had heard that it had indeed happened that way, volunteered this information.

Ron had been somewhat comforted. Later, he'd managed to stop crying for a bit, and talked about Hermione in a dull voice for a long time. Harry didn't want to hear it; wasn't ready for it yet, but sat there and made himself listen. He owed Ron that much, at least. "I thought we would get married," Ron said dully. "I thought I would always have her, no matter what else happened."

Harry had thought of Draco and wondered if he would ever be able to be that certain. "I'm sorry," he said inadequately. "I'm so sorry, Ron."

Now, with Draco's arms around him, he told him about it, just from his side. He didn't repeat most of what Ron had said. Draco didn't say much, but his fingertips trailed lightly over Harry's back as he spoke, just listening. Harry got tired of talking about it and said so. "I'm tired," he said simply.

"How long are we staying?" Draco asked.

"For another day or two?" Harry said. "If that's okay."

"I have to report the day after tomorrow, but otherwise, it's fine. You're sure you want me here?" Draco asked, sounding a little uncertain. "I can - if you think you need to spend more time with Weasley just on your own, I can leave and come back again, or something."

Panic stirred in Harry. "No. Please don't go. I want you to be here. I'm sorry I left you on

your own all evening, but I think the worst of that is over. Ron needs me here with him, but I need you here with me, if that makes any sense. I don't want you going back out there while I'm still stuck here."

Draco put his fingers over Harry's mouth. "Shh. I won't go, then. Don't worry."

"Draco - " Harry reached for him. Draco grasped his arms and pulled him over, onto himself. His arms were tight around Harry's ribcage and they were kissing urgently, nearly suffocatingly, but Harry needed it, wanted to dissolve himself into Draco and just always know that he could be that close to him. As they kissed, he could feel himself hardening against Draco, whose cock was definitely appearing to be interested in these proceedings. Harry pulled back, looking down at Draco. "Can I - ?"

"Yes." Draco cut him off. "Please. I want you to."

"Do you have - ?"

Draco reached around under his pillow. "I can't - it's here somewhere, but - can you find it?"

Harry located it along with Draco's fingers in the process. "Let's do this properly," he said, rolling out of the bed to take off his pyjamas. Draco smiled indulgently and just lay there as Harry stripped his pyjama pants off, the only thing he'd been wearing.

Harry got back into the bed, lube in hand. "This isn't casual sex any more," he said warningly, watching Draco's reaction in the moonlit dark of the room.

"I believe the conventional term is making love," Draco said coolly, not even lifting his head from the pillow.

"I believe the conventional term is comfort sex," Harry corrected, his tone wry.

"I don't care what we call it as long as we do it, and soon," Draco responded, with what Harry thought was a glimmer of smirk.

He rather hoped it was. He moved to Draco, settled himself between his legs and held his gaze as he prepared him, kissing him every so often and still marvelling at the fact that he was allowed to do so. That, and the fact that Draco was *here*, at the Burrow, solely because Harry wanted him there. The thought made him nearly dizzy. Harry kept up the eye contact even as his cock pushed slowly into Draco's body, though once he was fully seated, Draco pulled his head down and kissed him deeply. Harry began to move slowly as they kissed, and kept his eyes closed even after. "Do you think it's bad that I want this, that I'm doing this, when Hermione - " he started, just above a whisper.

Draco shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "She would want you to be happy. Does this make you happy?"

Harry opened his eyes and saw that Draco's were open and clear and unwavering. "Nothing would make me happier," he said, without a trace of doubt or insincerity.

"Good."

And so, they made love. And it *was* good. Harry gave himself over to it, let the act and the emotion become one thing within Draco's body and his, together. And this time, Draco reached for Harry's hand to guide it to his cock, glistening with readiness and desire, and they brought him off together. The sight of him coming was so arousing that it provided that last bit of stimulus for Harry, and he came, too. It was so astonishingly different from the last time they'd done this that it felt as though it had happened months before. Harry hadn't even really understood that it could be like this with Draco - anything other than casual or furious. But this had been no less intense, just a lot less upsetting.

They lay together in the dark, tangled together, and neither of them made any effort to move. Harry sort of wanted to know what Draco was thinking about, but the rest of him felt peaceful enough to let it be for now and to go to sleep. He turned his head on the pillow, found Draco's mouth and kissed him one more time. He wanted to say *thank you* or something along those lines, but after a bit, decided to say nothing at all. Perhaps it was better not to disturb the mood. They tacitly slid into more comfortable positions and settled in for the night. Harry fell asleep.

* * *

Draco fell asleep a little later, his thoughts finally wandering off the topic of Harry and back to his last report at the Manor. Lucius had been most displeased with his lack on

information on the wards and had set him the specific task of finding it. "Use your brain," he had snarled, colder than ice. "I didn't spend seven years teaching you how to find information only to have you stumped by something as small as this."

Luckily for Draco, he could not have told Lucius if he'd wanted to. "I'll try," he promised, vowing to owl Snape as soon as he could. He'd stood to leave. Lucius had silently followed him to the Apparating Chamber.

"Are you eating enough, son?" Lucius asked then, his tone different. Softer. "You look rather tired. Are they overworking you?"

Draco's turmoil over Harry had tried to surface again, and he'd ducked the question. "I'm fine, Father. How are you? I miss you, and being here." Not altogether true, but not altogether false, either.

Lucius had sighed and smiled. "War is war," he said simply. "Personal agenda gets set aside. For now, let us just say that the day that bespectacled, half-blood brat steps over the line and gets himself killed will be a day of joy in this household. Going?"

Draco had drawn upon his full reserves of Occlumency and met his father's gaze dispassionately, though it had taken every ounce of his energy. "I must. But you know how to find me if you need me before - wait, can we meet on Friday, instead? Give me a little more time with the wards. Please."

Lucius paused, deliberately this request. Eventually, he sighed again. "Fine. Friday. Eleven o'clock sharp. And I expect you will have found something by then," he said, the threat quite clear in his voice. Draco had nodded, swallowed hard, and Disapparated.

Harry was asleep, his breathing soft and regular, face almost relaxed in his sleep. Draco looked at it for a long time and wondered if his own face ever looked like that. He set his head gently against Harry's and surrendered to himself to sleep at last.

Chapter Fifteen

The silence lengthened. Draco tried not to fidget as Snape thought and frowned. Finally, Snape spoke. "And you really cannot tell him *nothing*," he said, agreeing. "That much is certain. As well, you cannot tell him anything false. And yet, to tell him something true would be - "

"Unthinkable," Draco supplied, with a sigh. "I know. What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm thinking," Snape snapped. Silence fell once again.

"What if," Draco ventured, after a bit, "I told him a partial truth? Something that would lead him in the right direction but not give him enough to take out the spells."

The need for security, he knew, had only increased, as the Ministry of Magic had finally fallen. The only two safe places left were the as-yet-untouched parts of St. Mungo's, and the army barracks. And, of course, Grimmauld Place itself. The shadows deepened

in Snape's study as he digested Draco's suggestion, and Draco felt his thoughts wander briefly (but wistfully) down to the kitchen where Harry was eating with Lupin.

"What would you say?" Snape asked, breaking the silence. He took a sip of his scotch and waited.

Draco shrugged. "I don't know; I hadn't thought that far. What if it was something like, I tell him that the wards are *Contego* wards and that they use supporting spells? It's a very precise combination of supports, ones that you wouldn't think to put together, right? I doubt very much that he could figure it out from there. But it would be true. If I say that's all I can find out - "

Snape hesitated for a long moment. "Do you think he would believe that? False modesty about your own researching skills will get you nowhere here, Malfoy."

"Well, do you have any better ideas?" Draco snarled. "You know he'd probably seriously detain me if I can't give him something real. And if I lie to him, it'll only be a matter of his trying and finding out that I told him the wrong kind of wards, and then he'd *really* be angry."

Snape pressed the tips of his fingers into his temples and rubbed. "No. I don't have any better ideas," he said wearily, as though he hadn't heard the second half of Draco's sentence. "Very well, then. But we *must* find a way to change the wards ourselves, in the meantime."

"Not to mention, figure out who's been leaking information in the first place," Draco added. "Because if it's one of the Healers - or a group of them - then changing the wards won't solve anything. It could be the person who changes them. It could be one of the Aurors guarding them. We don't know who's doing it. Or maybe they've just paid someone to let them into the hospital and they're spying."

"I keep telling them all this," Snape said, gesturing vaguely. "They've - the Aurors - said it's the top priority right now. Some of the Unspeakables have gone under cover; I've encountered them here and there. However, the Oaths which Healers are required to make are so... binding, for lack of a better word, that I seriously doubt conscious participation on their part. I need to look into tracing recent uses of the Imperius curse."

"Are you still spying, yourself, then?" Draco asked, frowning. "I thought you said, after Dumbledore, that you couldn't any more?"

Snape gave a mirthless laugh. "I believe they are still convinced that I did it on the Dark Lord's orders. And for my Unbreakable Vow with your mother. I have managed to keep the bit about my *prior* Unbreakable with Dumbledore quiet so far. I don't do it often. Only when really necessary. They still believe, I think, that I am deep under cover for them, here."

Draco laughed, shaking his head. "And how many people on our side still think that about you in reverse?" he asked rhetorically.

"Too many," Snape said darkly. "I'd like to know what they would have done in my place. He made me promise him that I would do whatever he commanded. He told me he was dying. The potion was the last straw; it was dissolving his organs. I think that I have told you this already. But he ordered me, pleaded with me, to kill him. And reminded me of my Vow. And that way, I managed to fulfill both Vows at once. It was - I don't like to think about it. But anyone who thinks me truly capable of betraying Dumbledore is sorely mistaken."

Draco stared into space, lost in thought.

* * *

Draco gave a deep sigh, shifting very slightly against Harry's body. Harry noticed that it had been about the third sigh like this. Draco was lying half on his side and half draped over Harry's chest. Harry had his arm over Draco's back and had been lightly dragging his fingers over his bare skin in random, meaningless patterns as he waited for sleep to overtake him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "You keep sighing."

"Sorry," Draco said, but didn't volunteer anything else.

Harry waited. The silence continued. "Is anything wrong?" he asked again, more pointedly.

Another sigh. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Harry looked at the ceiling and tried not to sigh in return. "Okay, then."

Draco's hand stroked a soft line across Harry's ribcage. "It's not you. I just don't want to even think about." He turned his face into Harry's chest and mouthed a kiss over it.

Harry stopped moving his hand and squeezed his arm around Draco a bit. "It's okay. Is it about your father? You don't have to tell me. I just wondered."

There was a bit of a pause. Then Draco said, "I hate reporting to him. I hate going back there."

"I'm sure," Harry said, which was a bit of a lie. The truth was, he didn't really know how Draco felt about the entire business. It was one of those things they just didn't talk about.

A longer stretch of silence. "I'm not sure if you'd understand. But imagine your father was still alive. Imagine he... well, it really doesn't compare to being a Death Eater and that, but imagine he did things you just couldn't justify, regardless of philosophy or point of view."

Harry remembered his turmoil over this very subject, nearly ten years before, after having broken into Snape's Pensieve. True, it wasn't anywhere near the same level. But his father had been a bully. Arrogant and sure of his right to do as he liked, James had been the sort of person - Harry winced to think of it - who had, as children, beaten Harry up during school breaks in his pre-Hogwarts years. But if he could choose between having James alive and having him dead - Harry knew in a heartbeat what he would have chosen. "I understand," he said. And he wasn't sure what prompted this, but he went on in a bit of a rush. "My dad was a bully. He used to make fun of Snape and push

him around. I didn't even know that about him until fifth year. It was hard to accept, and to realize that I'm my own person and that I don't have to be just like him. But I still wish I'd known him."

Draco's fingers tightened, the tips going white where they pressed into Harry's skin. He seemed to be breathing with difficulty, and his face was still hidden, face down against Harry. He didn't speak.

"It must be hard," Harry said softly, resuming his stroking. "Do you trust him?"

Draco tensed a bit at this. "No," he said bleakly. "Would you, if you were me?"

Harry said nothing. The honest answer was *Not on your life*, but there was no point in his saying so. It would only hurt Draco.

Draco raised his head suddenly, startling Harry. "I want to - " He didn't finish the sentence, but moved down Harry's body with lithe grace. His fingers had found the waistband of Harry's pyjama pants and were slipping beneath, feathering over Harry's cock. It was unbearably arousing and Harry, who had been dozing a moment ago, felt sleep retreat even further at this, his nervous system coming back to life at once. Draco glanced up at him as though for permission. Neither of them spoke; their gazes held intensely for a moment - Harry was unable to utter a word - and Draco seemed to take it as acceptance.

He breathed around Harry's sensitive skin but didn't touch it with his lips or his fingers, not yet - his fingers were close enough to drive Harry mad with anticipation, but not close enough to - they both watched him getting hard. When Harry's erection was nearly full, Draco closed his eyes and slid his cheek along Harry's cock, like a loving caress. His chin, his nose, even his forehead were all touching him, a fluttering touch of silky hair slipping past, and Harry was shivering.

"Draco - please - " He needn't have spoken, though; Draco was ahead of him, his mouth finally lipping at just the very tip of Harry's cock. Even that little bit of sensation was enough to suspend Harry's ability to formulate sentences, and he stopped trying. He watched Draco's mouth, closed his eyes and felt Draco's tongue, firm and sure on his cock, rubbing slowly as his mouth moved over the flesh. His lips were tight and Harry

was in heaven. He happened to open his eyes and saw Draco's eyes watching his face. After a moment, Draco broke the look and increased the pace of his blow job, evidently determined to finish what he'd started. A moment of concentration, his brow creasing slightly, and *there*, there was that give; Draco's lips slid down to the base of Harry's cock. Harry heard himself moan softly, his eyes closing while his face contorted with need. His back arched off the bed, desperate for more of that warm, amazing sensation - Draco's hands gripped his thighs, squeezing, and Harry thrust twice into the sanctuary of his throat and came, gasping Draco's name.

Draco held him and swallowed, swallowed again, and eased Harry's melting cock from his mouth. Harry would have thought that his flesh was too sensitive to handle what Draco did next, but when Draco turned his head and kissed beneath the very base of his cock, Harry just shivered. It was beautiful. He pulled Draco up, spreading his knees apart as he did so and tilting his hips up. Draco's eyes were darker than usual, glowing with intent and desire, and Harry only saw them barely long enough to register this when his eyes closed again and they were kissing. He could taste only the faintest traces of his come in Draco's mouth, and it made him feel somehow rather fiercely proud that Draco Malfoy, of all desirable, unattainable people, had done that for him - taken Harry into his mouth and willingly swallowed his body's release. Not for the first time, not by a long shot - but it hadn't stopped amazing Harry just yet. He kissed back with a sort of hungry passion, crushing Draco against him. He could feel Draco's fingers in him, held himself still as Draco entered him slowly. They did this often, of course, but Harry was experiencing a vivid sensation of closeness, of an intense intimacy with Draco. Draco opened his eyes then and looked at him. Their eyes met and held, kept holding as Draco moved rhythmically into him, their bodies moving in tandem toward the same goal. Harry was feeling far too sated to come again, but that had stopped being as important, somehow. He just craved this, being *with* Draco like this. The muscles on his arms stood out in sharp relief, supporting his weight, and Harry had to touch them, feel the hard curves beneath his fingers, his palms.

Draco's forehead shone with a faint sheen of sweat; blond hair fell across his face and he attempted to blow it off. Harry reached up and pushed it back behind his ear, left his hand on Draco's face and drew it down to his. Their mouths were moving together; Harry could feel Draco's racing pulse against his tongue, between their chests, and loved him so much at that moment that it almost hurt. Draco pulled away, kissed his neck and jaw and chest rather wildly, his hips bucking into Harry's body. He groaned, closed his eyes and came hard, still thrusting until it was over. His arms gave way and Harry pulled him down to himself. For a long moment, Draco just panted against him, their bodies intertwined in as many places as possible. Harry held him, his eyes closed, his cheek pressed into the top of Draco's head and felt absolutely indescribable.

After a bit, they separated themselves, mostly at least, and settled into better positions for sleeping. About ten minutes passed, perhaps a little more. Harry was just drifting off when Draco, eyes closed, his lips brushing against Harry's shoulder, spoke.

"I wish you trusted me," he said, very quietly.

Harry didn't know how to respond to this. It was still completely true that he didn't trust Draco fully. He loved him - oh, yes, there was no doubt of that - but his instincts spoke of practicality, of the reality of Draco's situation within the war and Harry's place in relation to that. He couldn't trust Draco. He simply couldn't. And he hadn't known that Draco wanted it, wanted his trust. Although he obviously didn't expect it. Conflict burned within Harry, and eventually he decided it might be best to pretend he was asleep already. He kept his eyes closed and made no reply.

* * *

Draco knew that Harry had heard him, and his heart throbbed uncomfortably when Harry didn't answer. Had he been Harry, he probably would have shaken himself and repeated his sentence. But he was not Harry. He said nothing.

* * *

They were downstairs, all four of them. Harry and Lupin were by the sink, talking quietly and peeling potatoes, neither of them in possession of the proper way to do it magically. Draco was sitting at the table with Snape, drinking tea and discussing in lowered voices Draco's return to the Manor, which was to happen quite soon. It was Friday, mid-morning, and Harry and Lupin were apparently working on lunch already. They had stayed at the Burrow until late Thursday afternoon. Granger's funeral had been in the morning, so he and Harry had stayed for the aftermath. With promises to see Weasley again soon, Harry had said they had to go, as Draco had said he needed to talk to Snape. They'd come back to Grimmauld Place, relieved at not having had to return to the barracks just yet.

He hadn't forgotten the little moment from the night before, and was trying not to think of it. Draco stared moodily into his cup. Was there even a way to prove his allegiance to

Harry, or would Harry always suspect him, always wonder? He'd been surprisingly understanding about the father thing, but Draco wished he hadn't mentioned it now. Harry would have to be suspicious about his ability to distance himself from Lucius for the sake of his duties to the Order. Every time he went back to the Manor, he wondered what Harry thought of it. If he wondered whether Draco was staring around the Manor's spacious hallways and rooms and wishing he lived there still, or even wishing that he'd never left. The thought made Draco feel rather sick. Of course, visiting the Manor made him feel rather sick, too, but it was a necessary evil. And a dangerous one. He put his cup down and stood up.

Snape looked up at him. "Is it time?"

"It is," Draco said. He hesitated. He'd owed Snape from the Burrow to explain, in very brief terms, that he was with Harry at the Weasleys' because of Granger's death and left it at that. If Snape wanted to assume that they were together, that was fine. Draco frankly preferred not to discuss it with him, well aware of the fact that there had there had never been a lot of lost between the two of them. All the same, he was leaving, and regardless of the thing from last night, he wanted to say good bye. He cleared his throat.

Harry, to his devout relief, heard it and looked back over his shoulder. "Are you leaving?" he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

Draco wanted to stamp out the concern, if it wasn't there for the right reasons, at least. "Yes," he said, and left it at that. He turned and exited the kitchen to wait for Harry in the foyer.

Harry followed him. They faced each other in the dimly-lit foyer. "Be careful," Harry said.

"I always am," Draco said evenly.

Harry's face flickered with a dozen emotions at once. He took what looked like an involuntary step forward. "I love you."

The utterance was somewhat embarrassing, but at least there was no one else to hear

it. "I love you, too," Draco mumbled, and was relieved when Harry didn't say anything else, opting to kiss him, instead.

It was an odd kiss; Harry was holding his shoulders as though either keeping Draco from running away or else holding him off. Draco didn't know what to make of it. He pulled back. "Don't do that," he said, and moved past Harry's arms to get inside them. Closing his own arms around Harry, Draco looked into his eyes and smiled when Harry relaxed slightly and held him properly. "Better," Draco said, and they kissed again. This time, it was long, tender, and appropriately passionate. Draco was dizzy by the end of it, and had half-forgotten where he was going and what he was supposed to be doing. He gave himself a shake and gently disentangled himself from the embrace. "I'll be back soon," he promised. "An hour, maybe."

"For lunch," Harry said, finally smiling. "We'll make enough for you."

"Okay." Draco smiled back and went to the door. "See you soon."

"Bye," Harry said, and watched until Draco pulled the door closed behind him. On the front stoop, Draco heard the many locks clicking shut behind him and knew that Harry was right there on the other side of the door. He closed his eyes and longed to go back inside. However, duty called. Lucius was waiting. Draco Disapparated.

* * *

Harry went back into the kitchen. Snape glared at him for no good reason. Harry wondered if he knew and decided that he must. It would explain the glare. He went back to the counter where Lupin was now making salad and told him that Draco would be back later on. And tried to shake off his feeling of uneasiness. Lupin just smiled. Harry hadn't said, in so many words, that he and Draco were finally together, but he assumed that Lupin had figured it out.

* * *

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. Harry was pacing in the drawing room. Draco had not come back for lunch. Worry, outright fear, and worst of all, doubt, were consuming

him. Where was Draco? Why had he not returned when he'd said he would? Had something happened? If so, what? Had Lucius suspected his information, was Draco being tortured for more right at that very moment? A tiny voice in the back of Harry's mind also suggested a terrible little scenario in which Draco was at the Manor and perfectly safe - and all that had happened being something that had made him realize where his true priorities lay - there, with his father. *Betrayal*. Harry's mind with cold with the fear of it.

He could *not* handle Draco's betrayal. At the same time, he told himself not to be ridiculous. Draco had said that he loved him. Twice now, in fact. Somewhat unwillingly the second time, perhaps, but he'd still said it. He was not one to say something he didn't mean. *Unless he's trying to deceive someone*, the little voice in the back of Harry's mind reminded him. *He's a spy, after all*. And perhaps Harry's lack of answer the night before had not gone unnoticed, perhaps it had in fact convinced Draco that, if Harry didn't trust him anyway, he might as well have the game as well as the name. Harry's pacing grew more agitated. He tried to persuade himself that he was mostly concerned for Draco's safety, and he *was* - but that other voice would not stop taunting him, building a mountain of paranoia in Harry's heart and making him feel sick.

Lupin came upstairs. "Harry, there's no point," he said. "Snape has gone to the Manor to find him. Could you just relax?"

They'd had this conversation already. Harry turned around, meaning to retort, but found that he had no words to express his many fears. His eyes bespoke the greatest fear of them all, though, and Lupin looked a bit startled by it. But then the surprise of it faded, and was replaced by a grim look. "I know," he said, although Harry hadn't spoken. "I know. All we can do is wait and see, I suppose."

"Did Snape give him his memories back?" Harry asked, his lips hardly moving.

Lupin's lips might have compressed just slightly; it was difficult to tell. "Yes," he said simply.

Harry turned back to the window, every thought in his mind in disarray.

* * *

Draco came back a little later, alone. He looked as weary as though a week had passed in his few hours' absence. Harry's nervous system was sparking; he wasn't sure he could handle this situation. He made himself in the foyer and waited to see if Draco would come and find him. He did. Harry heard his step outside the door - he knew instinctively that it was Draco's step in particular - and stayed where he was.

The door opened. "Hello," Draco said, his voice sounding odd - tired, but there was something else there, too. And Harry didn't know what it was.

"Hello," he said tightly, looking up. "Came back at last, did you?"

Draco passed a hand over his eyes. "It's been awful. I'm so glad to *be* back. If Snape hadn't come - "

"What?" Harry interrupted, rising. "What would have happened, Draco?"

Draco didn't quite look at him, shaking his head. "I don't know. I don't know, Harry."

Harry walked slowly toward him. When they were standing face to face, Draco looked at him again, an odd tension between them. Harry wasn't sure what to say, and it seemed that Draco wasn't sure, either. After a moment of strained silence, Draco reached for him, and Harry let him, not entirely sure why. But maybe if they - maybe everything would somehow be alright. Draco's hand drew him close, his lips parting Harry's. The kiss felt right, mostly, but the tension was still there. Harry was uncertain. Everything in him was in turmoil; he didn't know what to think of any of this. But he *wanted* Draco, wanted it to be right with all of his being. He shut off his brain, or tried to, and let the kiss deepen. Draco made a small, indiscernible sound and wrapped his arms around Harry's waist, burying his face in Harry's neck.

"I need you," he said.

Harry's conflict persisted; he still didn't know what to make of anything. Draco was pressed against him and he had no idea if it was just ruse to make him trust, make him

blind to anything other than Draco's body and Harry's perceptions of what they felt for each other. His hands were ahead of his mind, though, and already travelling over Draco's back, his arse, pushing up under his shirt. Draco, his eyes closed, lifted his arms and Harry pulled it off. Draco made to kiss him again, but Harry held himself off, taking off his own shirt, followed by his trousers and socks. Draco's expression was hurt for a fleeting moment, and then he followed suit. Perhaps thinking that if Harry was going along with it, then everything would be fine.

Harry wished it were that easy. He loved Draco - rather desperately, in fact - but he reminded himself again that it was foolish to trust a spy, especially one with obviously divided loyalties. He knew where he ranked. And sometimes, third-best simply wasn't good enough. Anger began to filter through his turmoil, bubbling up from his depths, and the next time he touched Draco, it was rather rough, pushing him down to the floor.

Draco spread his knees willingly and drew them up, waiting for Harry. Harry, meanwhile, was digging in his trouser pockets for his wand to summon the lube from his bedroom across the hall. It flew to his hand and he put it to use. His fingers were too hard; he could see that on Draco's face, though no complaints were made. Perhaps, Harry thought viciously, Draco knew he'd sinned and was atoning. If Harry discovered that he had, in fact, been betrayed, then Draco would be atoning in a much more serious fashion that *this*, however. He avoided Draco's eyes and entered him. It was fast and hard and Harry's feelings would not stay uninvolved; they were all around his head, suffocating and choking him, his paranoia convincing him that Draco must have given too much away out of love for his father, love that Harry wanted, needed, had to have. Draco was clinging to him, gasping, his eyes squeezed shut in a mixture of pain and need. Harry felt the muscles of his own arse clenching as he thrust harder than he ever had before, punishing this heartbreakingly beautiful person beneath him who just might have cost him nearly everything. Harry came, hating himself for it, hating the fact that he'd come into Draco when everything was like this. They shouldn't have done this. Not when he'd been feeling this way. He opened his eyes, reason flooding back into him - not that his worries had vanished, not by any stretch - but he saw Draco's face, saw the pain and desire and - fear. Harry had made him afraid.

And Draco hadn't come yet. His cock was stretched out along his sleek, flat belly, dripping gently. Draco's hands were on Harry's sides, making no move to touch himself. Trusting Harry to do it. Harry looked at him and wanted to hit him, wanted to scream at him for having done whatever it was he'd done. If he'd done something. Harry grabbed Draco's cock and jerked it into orgasm. It was angry and perfunctory, but at least it was done. He pulled himself free of Draco's body and cleaned himself. He heard Draco quietly get up behind him, stumbling toward his own wand so as to do the same. Harry,

pulling his shirt back on, had an idea. "Are you thirsty?" he asked. It came out rather bluntly, but there it was. He looked at Draco, who nodded silently, not looking at him. "I'll be right back," Harry said. Meaning, *Stay here*. Draco didn't try to follow him.

* * *

The drawing room door swung closed. Draco let out a shaky breath and attempted to control his emotions. He would not cry. He would *not* cry. It was obvious that Harry suspected him. It was almost as though Draco had known this would happen, known it for sure since the night before, when Harry so specifically hadn't countered Draco's accusation of sorts that Harry didn't trust him.

Lucius had been highly displeased by the fact that he hadn't brought more specific information. Draco sat down on the edge of the sofa, raking fingers through his tousled hair and recalled the past few hours, which had been rather dreadful. Lucius had greeted him, served tea and asked for the information before they'd taken the first sip, so anxious was he to get his hands on it.

Draco had told him as much as he'd planned to. Lucius, impatient, had pressed him for more. Draco had claimed not to know any more. He closed his eyes and remembered it.

"What do you mean, you don't know any more than that?" Lucius asked, disbelievingly. "What have you been *doing* all this time?"

"Father," Draco had said, trying not to fidget, "I am a spy. I must appear to be on their side, correct? Which means that I need to do as I am told. I have been doing mundane little things like guarding prisoners and supervising transfers and trying to keep out of the line of fire. I have been researching where possible, but I don't get a lot of free time."

Lucius leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his abdomen in a satisfied sort of way. "Well then, isn't it lucky that you're here?" he drawled. "You're *quite* familiar with our library. I suggest you get to it."

Panic. "I am expected back," Draco said cautiously, already knowing the gambit would fail.

It did. "You will simply need to inform them that something came up," Lucius said smoothly. "Library. Now."

Draco thought of Harry, waiting for him to come back for lunch at Grimmauld Place, and stood reluctantly. It would obviously be dangerous to argue with this, and yet - what was he to do? The sooner he gave Lucius some information, the sooner he would be permitted to leave - presumably - but to give him *correct* information was unthinkable, as he'd said to Snape before. He stood, nodded his obedience, and made his way to the library. Lucius followed.

Draco had gone to the area where all the appropriate books were stored. Draco's eyes fell upon one which he rather suspected might be fairly specific on the topic of wards and how they worked, called *The True Nature of the Ward*. He also found another called *Alternative Warding Methods for the Creative* and selected it along with several others. He carried these back to his old table and sat down. Lucius announced that he would return in an hour to check on his progress.

Draco was panicking still further; in an hour, Harry would be *really* worried. Would he think that he'd changed his mind, or betrayed them all? He looked rapidly through the pages of *The True Nature of the Ward* to the section on the *Contego* ward and read a short but concise paragraph entailing the supporting spell combinations most frequently used to keep them in place. The combination he and Harry had discovered was the last one listed. Draco glanced around, suspicious. He was certain that he was being monitored, so ripping out the page was not an option. Nor was burning the book, hiding it, erasing the text on the page, or anything else he could think of. Just then, a house-elf popped into sight, making him jump nearly out of his skin.

"Master Draco!" the elf exclaimed. Draco had no idea what it was called; it appeared to be new. "Tinky is wondering if she can do anything to help?"

Draco looked at the elf suspiciously. "Did Master Lucius send you?" he asked.

The elf shook its head vigorously, long ears flapping. "No, no! Tinky is coming on her own! Tinky is excited that Master Draco is here for a visit!"

Draco considered it. The elf could take the book and hide it, true, but would the monitoring spells catch that? If they did, all would be lost, and he would never see Grimmauld Place or Harry again, not to mention whatever amount of damage his trust in the elf would have caused. *Trust No One*. The old motto upstairs in the distant bedroom wing sprang to mind. Draco smiled at the elf. "No, thank you, Tinky. I'm fine. I'm just doing a little research. It turns out this book wasn't very helpful, that's all. I'll try another one. You can go, it's alright."

He put the book down very casually and picked up another. Tinky's ears drooped in disappointment. "Master is sure?"

"Very sure," Draco assured her. "I appreciate the offer, though."

The elf gave him a gloomy look of servanthood failed and disappeared with a *pop*.

Draco took a long, slow breath, slid the book away and chose *Alternative Warding Methods for the Creative* and began to read, quickly. He had not gotten far, however, when the door opened and Lucius strolled in. Draco waited three beats, then looked up casually. "Father," he said neutrally.

Lucius offered a pleasant-enough smile. "I thought perhaps you could use some help," he said. "It's a bit of a needle-in-a-haystack sort of job, isn't it?"

Not if you know exactly what to look for. "It is," Draco agreed, and tried to look pleased or relieved. He pushed one of the bland-looking books that would contain all the standard warding information toward Lucius and pulled *The True Nature of the Ward* back to himself while moving his actual book to the side.

"Thank you," Lucius said, courteous as ever. He opened the book and began to read. "So," he said, scanning the index with a long finger, "tell me what you know."

What he knew? Draco spoke quickly. "The *Contego* ward functions differently than the *Custodius* wards used on the rest of the hospital. They have some sort of complementary spells, but I don't know what kind, and they are very likely layered, as

well." He hesitated, thinking about something he'd been wondering for awhile now. He leaned forward over his book and Lucius mimed his movement. "I was wondering something, though," Draco said.

"What?" His father's eyes had always been a deeper grey than his, almost black in his anger, almost blue in his mirth. At the moment, they were simply the same steel-grey as usual.

"The wards that have been broken already," Draco said. "How were they broken? If I knew how they'd been broken, that would help. Or if you knew who knew how to break them, maybe I could talk to them - "

Lucius looked amused. "You do realize what you're asking, I hope."

Draco paused, considering. "Yes," he said, with a slight smile. "I'm asking if you actually know who broke the wards, or figured out how to, at least. It would help."

"I can't tell you that," Lucius said, fairly much immediately. "I don't know how the wards were broken." He bent forward even further, lowering his voice. "But I'll tell you this: the people who broke them were the people who cast them in the first place."

Draco was shocked. "The Healers?"

"*Some* of the Healers," his father concurred, correcting him and continuing to look amused.

"But - I thought they had all these Oaths and so forth," Draco faltered.

"Oaths can be broken," Lucius said offhandedly. "All Oaths. Just not the Unbreakable Vow. Why else do you think it would be called that?"

Draco knew as much about the Unbreakable Vow by now as anyone, and said nothing about this. Those memories were better left undisturbed. "How many Healers?" he

wanted to know.

Lucius' smile turned into something of a leer. "More than you'd like to think, if you were on the other side."

Unrepentant. Draco looked quickly down at his book again. "I'd better keep looking, then."

"Yes, you'd best," Lucius agreed coolly. Their somewhat-companionable moment had passed, it seemed. The tip of his wand appeared over the table. "You're not leaving until I know what I need to know."

Draco thought of Harry again, and nodded mechanically. "I... understand."

The air had grown thick between them. "Good." Lucius resumed his perusal of the book. Draco pulled the one he was actually reading back to himself and began to search frantically. Should Lucius discover the actual information, it would be imperative that he get himself to St. Mungo's to... not talk to the Healers - there was no way of knowing which were in on the conspiracy and which were not - he would have to recast the wards himself. And as that might take some doing, he'd best get reading. He read frantically, trying to seem as though his panic had more to do with anxiousness not to disappoint rather than fear for his side of the army. And at last, he found something. It seemed to behave rather like the *Contego*, only it didn't require any supporting spells. In fact, Draco went on to read, the *Faveus* supports favoured by the St. Mungo's staff for the *Contego* wards actually weakened this particular spell. It wasn't exactly a ward, but functioned in a similar manner.

Draco checked the time. Over three hours had passed since he'd arrived, and he was almost beyond panic. What Harry would be thinking by now was anyone's guess. He only hoped that Snape would find him one day or something.

There was a small *pop* and Tinky appeared. "Master Lucius," she squealed. "Mister Snape is wanting to see you!"

Lucius' eyes flicked to Draco's in an instant. He knew that Snape was Draco's contact

on the other side, but then, he was also assuming that Snape was a spy. It should be safe. *Should* being the operative word. "I'll be right with him," Lucius told Tinky, never taking his eyes off Draco. Tinky disappeared and Lucius rose. "You stay here."

Draco nodded. "I have lots to keep me busy," he said with a wan smile.

"I know you do." Lucius towered over him. "Hurry up. I haven't got all day." He left.

Draco watched the door close, and made up his mind. He slid *The True Nature of the Ward* under the table and charmed it not to open. He then changed the cover to read *Simple Wards for the Simple-Minded* and placed it at the bottom of his pile. Anything more would look suspicious. The door opened again, and his father reappeared with Snape. They seemed to be rather uncomfortable around each other, but Snape stepped forward and said that it was time to go. Draco had never been so relieved before. Lucius didn't even say goodbye, just assured him that they would be in touch in the near future. Draco made his escape.

They got out of the Manor's grounds and Draco began to speak at once, explaining. Snape listened grimly. "I thought it must have been something like that," he said.

"I need to go to St. Mungo's to change the wards," Draco said urgently. "But I need to go to Grimmauld Place first."

Snape made a disgusted sound. "Please tell me this has nothing to do with Potter."

Draco scowled. "It's important to me."

Snape gave him an oblique look. "And you think this is really the best use of your talents for the war effort, do you?"

Draco didn't answer, conflict and upset brewing in his belly. Snape sighed heavily. "Go, then. Apparate there, and I will come back for you. I need to stop by the barracks, anyway."

Now, back at Grimmauld Place at last, he waited for Harry to return, feeling uneasy in the extreme. At the Manor, he'd been distracted by the fact that he knew Harry would be waiting for him, watching for him, and extremely disconcerted by the fact that he was still gone. He'd wanted nothing more than to come back, to be with Harry. But Harry's - *assault* was the word that came to mind - had left his body sore and his heart bruised. His inner Slytherin jeered at this last, but Draco was still fighting the urge to cry. He'd never known Harry to be so rough with him, not since Granger had died, at least, when they'd been equally rough with each other. He didn't know what to say to make Harry trust him. He could explain what had happened, of course, but would Harry believe him?

The door opened and Harry came back with two glasses of water. He gave Draco one and set his own on the coffee table. Draco took it and drank, for want of anything better to do. He was nervous, though he'd done nothing wrong and knew it.

"Where were you?" Harry finally asked.

Draco stiffened. "My father made me help him research," he said. "He wasn't happy with how little I had to tell him."

Harry frowned. "Did you tell him about the *Contego* wards?"

"Yes," Draco said. "But I - "

"So when you researched," Harry interrupted, "did you tell him anything else? Did you tell him about how they use support spells and rely on each other?"

Draco opened his mouth, fully intending to tell Harry to back off and to let him explain what had actually happened, but instead, heard himself say, "Yes," again. Surprised by this, Draco went to speak again, but Harry beat him to it.

He'd stood, hands on his hips. "Did you tell him which ones?"

Too late, Draco realized. He tapped the glass with his wand, muttering the spell, and

sure enough, the faint scent of hyacinth drifted up to him. Furious, he dropped it and stood. The spiked water splashed all over the ancient carpet. "You put Veritaserum in my water!"

"And a good thing, too!" Harry said loudly, his cheeks blazing. "Would you have told me that, otherwise? I can't believe you told him!"

"I can't believe you drugged me!" Draco was beyond hurt, beyond enraged, beyond betrayed.

Harry wasn't giving an inch, though. "You told him how to break the wards, didn't you!"

"Harry, listen to me!" Draco was burning with fury, but determined to set the record straight. "I didn't - "

"You've been lying to me all along, haven't you!" Harry stormed. "Haven't you! You never did intend to stay loyal to our side - you were just covering your own arse, weren't you? How much else did you tell your father? Did you tell him about us? How you got the better of poor, gullible Harry Potter and how he was stupid enough to fall for a fucking spy?!" He was completely red in the face and probably beyond the point of reason now.

Draco could hardly breathe, he was so upset. "Harry, *no!* There's no way I would ever tell him that, and that's totally not how I - "

"Did you tell him about other stuff, too?" Harry cut through his words relentlessly. "How much other research have you done, Draco? Did you tell him about the wards they broke through the day they got Hermione? Did you?" He was crying again, but still completely furious.

Draco was growing desperate. "No, Harry - I haven't done anything like that at all - listen to me, I'm obviously telling the truth, since you - "

"Don't even talk about me betraying your trust," Harry shouted, eyes dark pools of an

emotion which actually scared Draco a fair bit. "You've used me all along! I can't believe I was ever stupid enough to fall for it!"

"Harry - " Draco didn't know what to say, there were ten thousand things he needed to say all at once and didn't know which should come first. "I wasn't - I didn't - "

"Just get out!" Harry roared.

Draco stood where he was, stricken and rooted to the floor.

"Go! Get out!" Harry repeated, gesticulating wildly at the door.

An owl zipped into the drawing room and dropped a scroll into Draco's hand. It was from Snape, requesting his presence at St. Mungo's immediately - battle had broken out, apparently. Lucius was there and Snape wanted Draco to distract him from the new wards. Draco looked up at Harry. "I have to go," he said. "But I'll come back - you have to let me explain."

"Are you going back to your father?" Harry asked, his voice hard.

The Veritaserum interpreted that question as a positive one. "Yes," Draco said, wincing as he heard it. "But only to - "

"Don't give me that," Harry fumed. "Don't go twisting the truth. And don't bother coming back, either."

His face was as hard as his voice, and something crumbled inside Draco's chest. He turned and stumbled blindly from the room.

* * *

It was later. Between six and seven, Harry's internal clock thought. He hadn't left the

drawing room, choosing instead to barricade himself from the outside world within its deceptive safety. He'd made a serious mistake, before, using the Veritaserum. He hadn't been sure yet that Draco was, in fact, a traitor. And if he hadn't been then, Harry's behaviour was sure to have swung the balance in Lucius' favour. Harry hated the both of them equally at the moment, himself and Draco. Draco, obedient to his word or to whatever loyalty he'd chosen in the end, had not returned.

Harry jumped when Lupin said his name from the doorway. He turned quickly, already afraid of what he was about to hear.

Lupin's face was grey and drawn. "Maybe you should come downstairs," he started to say, but Harry shook his head vigorously.

"Tell me," he said, his voice steely. "What's happened?"

Lupin put on hand over his face. "The St. Mungo's wards are down. The patients - those who've survived - are being Apparated to the barracks even as we speak. It's our last stronghold now - that, and this house."

Harry was having an out-of-body experience, or so it felt. Feeling strangely detached from his body, even his voice sounding very odd, he asked - he had to know - "And Draco?"

"I don't know," Lupin answered, sounding equally strained. "He was definitely on the scene - his magical signature has been detected. But I don't know where he is. I'm still waiting to hear from Severus, but I'm sure - "

Harry stopped hearing. The cold, sick feeling was washing over him in waves and he could hardly stand. It was imperative, however, that he leave the room. Lupin was still trying to speak to him as he went, but a blind and terrible fury of emotion had taken Harry into its grips and he was unable to hear or see or feel anything other than the weight of Draco's betrayal.

Chapter Sixteen

Draco followed Snape into the corridor, still shaking and hardly knowing where he was or what was happening. Snape turned to speak to him and stopped, giving him a sharp look. "What is it?" he snapped.

Tense because of what was going on, probably, but Draco didn't need the harshness at the moment. He looked away, his eyes and throat burning, and couldn't speak.

Snape cursed to himself and pushed Draco into a small room. A linen closet, perhaps. He switched on the light. "Listen," he said urgently. "I don't know what's happened, but in war, sometimes the personal issues need to be put aside. Do you understand me? I thought you would understand this, but it seems that you have lost sight of that lately. You have all of five minutes to pull yourself together. There are a few things I need to tell you. First, I went to see McGonagall for a few reasons, among them the fact that it is clearly too dangerous to send you back to Lucius again. We will need to rethink things. Secondly, and more to the point, your father knows that you are a spy. He has broken through the last of the wards here. How, we don't know, but I can only presume one of two things: you told him how, or else he managed to extrapolate from what you had told him or left reading material lying about which would have indicated the correct spells. It was a matter of minutes after your departure. He must have had alerts in the library set to detect any magic you performed."

Draco absorbed this numbly. He'd probably been having sex while the battle had begun - the battle it had been his sole task to prevent. And sex with a person who would - no. He couldn't think about it. Shame began a slow burn within Draco, however, and his cheeks were surely showing it.

"McGonagall suggested that you try your idea," Snape said. "Somehow, she doubts the

wards already on St. Mungo's will allow it - the *Custodius* wards, as you recall, remain in place - but please do try. I am taking you to the center of the hospital, where your spell would reach the most area. Is that clear?"

Draco nodded, still wordless.

Snape exhaled loudly and shoved his hair away from his eyes. "What happened at the house?"

"He thinks I'm a traitor," Draco mumbled to the floor. "He drugged my water. I didn't think to test it."

"Always think to test it," Snape snapped. "Trust no one. You are a spy. Had you forgotten?"

This biting comment stung Draco even further, and he closed his mouth resolutely, determined not to say another word. Breaking though his heart might be, this was not the time, place or person. Person? Who was he trying to fool? Without Harry, there was no one. Bitter defeat soured Draco's mouth. "Let's go," he said tightly, his jaw clenched.

Snape opened the closet door and strode out, robes billowing after him. Draco followed, hand gripping his wand tightly.

* * *

Lupin knocked again. Harry knew it was him; it had to be. There was no one else in the house now. In the rest of the world, apparently the last battle was going on, with the exception of the two key players. He wished Dumbledore could help him, but there wasn't anyone who could. He was grieving, and all he wanted was to be left alone. He ignored the repeated knock as he'd ignored the first one.

Lupin appeared determined by now, though. A few spells later, he opened the door and came in anyway, shutting it firmly behind him. Silently, he moved across the room and sat down on the other bed - the one Harry couldn't even look at without feeling hollow

and raw - as though someone had scraped over every feeling he'd ever had with sandpaper. "I'm not going away," Lupin said sternly. "Stop thinking I'll give up on you."

Harry was facing the wall, his back to Lupin - and the bed. "I wish you would," he said dully.

"Harry, what *happened*?"

"Nothing I shouldn't have suspected all along," Harry said, closing his eyes.

"You don't know that he's a traitor, Harry."

"He told his father about the wards," Harry said, his voice barely above a whisper. "He's been feeding him information all along."

"Do you *know* that?" Lupin persisted.

"The first part, yeah."

"I knew that he was going to tell Lucius something about the *Contego* wards," Lupin said stubbornly. "Severus told me. It was part of the plan."

"It can't have been part of the plan for him to tell Lucius exactly how to knock them out, though, or close enough," Harry said. He felt too tired and too horrible to discuss it. He wished Lupin would just accept that it was true and leave him alone.

Lupin sighed gustily. "Harry, do you remember how you reacted after Albus died? I don't mean to rub it in, but you were wrong then, too, weren't you? Sometimes, things aren't what they seem."

Harry turned over to face him at last, furious. "And sometimes they are!" he shouted. "Gods, Remus, do you trust *everybody*?! Sometimes people betray people! That's why

he didn't want to get formally involved, all along! I should have known better. I should have *known*. I - "

"Harry," Lupin interrupted gently, "just let me suggest something. What if you were wrong? What if you found out that all the evidence had pointed to Draco, but it turned out that he hadn't actually betrayed you or our side in the slightest? How would you feel then? Would there be anything you would regret having said to him? Done to him? I'm not saying that I know he's innocent - I don't know that, and won't until Severus returns. I just want you to consider the possibility. What would that mean?"

Harry went very still. If Draco was innocent, then - then the betrayal was on his part. The Veritaserum. His lack of trust, and his ultimate rejection. "I don't know," he said thickly, still ashamed of himself over the Veritaserum - and at not having given Draco the chance to fully explain himself. "I guess I..." he stopped, unable to finish. What if he'd just ruined everything and driven Draco away altogether? Was it too late to call him back? Would he even come? Harry tried to think about it from Draco's perspective - if he was innocent, that was - and decided that he wouldn't, if it had been him.

So deep in thought was he that he hardly noticed Lupin come over and pat him consolingly on the shoulder. "I'll be downstairs if you want to talk or anything," Lupin said quietly. "You should eat something, later." He left, closing the door again. Harry was left alone to his very dark and confused thoughts.

* * *

Draco was numb. He'd been following Snape through the underbelly of St. Mungo's, the storage areas of the basement. The wards here had long fallen to the enemy. They were Disillusioned, but movement would still make them visible. Snape kept them to shadows, flattening himself against walls, easing around doorways and making quick dashes with surprising agility for a man of his age. Though it was not the first time he'd been surprised by this. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Draco was thinking only of the new spell he needed to cast, if he could, and nothing else. Nothing else. He repeated the words to himself, trying to replace this mantra with his memory of the incantations for the spell. Snape's arm flung out suddenly, catching him across the chest. Draco was momentarily winded, but recovered himself silently. Silence was key.

Had any basement been larger? They turned down corridor after corridor, stepping into

large closets or behind pillars when Snape detected traces of movement anywhere around them. It needed his full attention; Draco knew that and tried to give himself to it. Nothing had deviated from his original plan. Nothing. He was simply back to two allies rather than three, that was all. It was really - somewhat - simpler this way. It was also rather difficult to breathe at the moment, but that was neither here nor there. Snape beckoned, and they moved on.

* * *

They'd made it to the center of St. Mungo's undetected. Snape procured him a quiet space, said he'd guard it, and left Draco to do his task. Draco cast the spell. It was a simple enough set of incantations, and the wand movements were nothing novel. He had no way of testing it, though. He left the small office of sorts to find Snape.

Snape was nowhere in sight, but at that point, everything else flew from Draco's head. Because Lucius was there in his place.

He was standing out in the corridor, wand aimed lazily at the door, clearly waiting for Draco.

Draco froze. Where was Snape? Incapacitated? "Working" with his father? Draco experienced a thrill of fear. "Father," he said, trying to keep it from his voice, though his throat was dry.

"Son," Lucius said pleasantly, but his face was full of vicious triumph. "Might I inquire as to what you are doing?"

Draco thought as quickly as he could. "Looking for you," he said. "I went back to the Manor, but you were already gone. I assumed you must be here."

Lucius looked faintly, mockingly surprised. "Really? Here? Why would you assume that?"

Draco shrugged. "This is where most of the battles take place these days," he said

casually, though his pulse was trying to split his throat. Where was Snape? He looked around, trying not to look panicked. "Seen anyone I would know?"

Lucius leered. "What an interesting question." He raised his wand to aim it directly at the center of Draco's chest. "Thank you for the book. A nasty trick, disguising it like that, but on the other hand, the fact that you did most certainly helped me locate the information more expediently. Otherwise, I might have been there researching all day."

So, there was no game to be had here. Draco swallowed, his eyes on his father's wand. "The house elf," he said, his voice sounding distant in his ears. "Did you send her?"

Lucius frowned. "What house elf? What are you talking about?"

Draco could have slapped himself in retrospect. So Tinky really *had* been trying to help. This was his own reward for not having trusted her, then. Though he didn't really think it should amount to his own death. Lucius backed him up against a wall. He didn't know what to say. He wanted to ask where Snape was, but to mention Snape's name in this situation would surely give him away. "Never mind," Draco said instead, in answer to Lucius' question.

"I do rather mind, though," Lucius said coldly. "Tell me, *son*. How long have you been a traitor?"

Draco stared at him, helpless. Both his hands were plainly in view and he'd foolishly put his wand away inside the office. Stupid. He was stupid. Stupid to have let his guard down, stupid to have trusted Snape to be there for him, stupid to have let himself fall for that - *bastard* who'd taken his heart and crushed it to bits. He couldn't formulate an answer for Lucius, not with the acrid taste of his own failure, defeat and bitter, bitter heartbreak in his mouth like this.

The wand tip pressed into his chest, hot. "Tell me," Lucius repeated, sneering. "Was it the time you first held the Mudblood child's heart? Was that it?"

The answer was Yes, and although his mind must have been utterly clear of the Veritaserum's effect by now, Draco felt himself wanting to admit it. Confess his

misdeeds as a misbehaving child confesses to an angry parent. Beneath his father's obvious anger, he could also sense a profound disappointment and - yes, betrayal. The theme of Draco's day thus far. How perfect. He was spared the need to answer, though, as at least one person came through for him that day.

Snape appeared from around the corner, wand arm straight and unwavering. "*Stupefy*."

Lucius fell to the floor.

Draco's eyes met Snape's in the space in between. "Where were you?" Draco asked, beginning to tremble out of sheer relief.

"There is no time," Snape said shortly. "The hospital is crawling with Death Eaters. It is too late for wards now. Come. We must go." He moved to Draco and took his arm. "As the wards are down, we will be able to Apparate, but you don't know the place we are going."

Draco pulled away, resisting. "Not Grimmauld Place - "

For a moment, the expression on Snape's face turned rather ugly. "No. Not Grimmauld Place," he agreed. "Come."

Draco let himself be taken, felt the world around him dissolving into darkness, and gave himself to it.

* * *

Harry had been called to return to the barracks. McGonagall had actually come to Grimmauld Place and told him that it was time. The last stand was approaching. Voldemort was bound to come out of the woodwork sooner or later, and she wanted him nearby for the instant that the moment came to pass. Harry had wandered through the main hall unseeingly, and eventually heard someone familiar calling his name.

"Harry! *Harry!*"

Harry looked around, and saw, to his immense relief, Ron. The one person he wanted to see. Not the one person he needed to see, but he had a feeling that he might never see *that* person again. Or if he did, that it would be under extremely bitter circumstances, such as at his or Harry's death. Harry felt the wave of pain and panic hit him again and shuddered, trying to push it off. Ron was shouldering his way through the crowd to him. Harry stood where he was and waited for his best friend to get there, but made no move to go to him. It didn't matter. Ron extricated himself from the crowd and bear-hugged Harry roughly. "I'm so glad you're here," Ron said with evident relief and emotion.

Harry hugged back automatically. "Me, too," he said, but he felt hollow.

Ron held on a little too long, but Harry let him. "My mother is worried to death about you," he said tightly. "She couldn't stand it, Harry, not you and Hermione both - "

"Let's not talk about Hermione," Harry said quickly, just a hint of plea in his tone. And trying not to think about what would happen to *Ron* in that instance. Well, that was neither here nor there, really - if Harry lost the battle with Voldemort, Ron and the rest of the Weasleys would all be dead. *And then*, he thought bitterly, *Draco can come and dance on my grave if he wants to. If he's innocent, he'd deserve to. And if he isn't, well then, I'm sure he'd be delighted to have the chance.*

Ron pulled away, his eyes rather red even though he hadn't cried. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize." Harry looked around. "So, it seems pretty tense here."

"Tense is the word," Ron agreed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly. "Like an anthill someone's gone and stirred up. Do you really think we're that close to drawing Voldemort out?"

Harry spared a brief thought to thank whatever deities there might be that Hermione had finally managed to train Ron into saying Voldemort's name without all the theatrics before she'd died. "I have no idea," he answered, glancing over Ron's shoulder to look around the hall.

Ron shifted his weight. "Did you just get here? Are you hungry?"

Harry realized, to his dread, that he was. He should have eaten at Grimmauld Place, but hadn't thought of it. "I just got here," he concurred, "and I guess I am."

"So am I. Come on, let's go and see what sort of slop the kitchen's come up with today," Ron proposed.

With a sinking heart, Harry knew that there was really nothing else to be done, and found himself trailing after Ron. He was in agony over the entire question of Draco, but what could he do? He had no idea how he could even contact him; owls were limited at the moment and even if he could send one, it wouldn't be safe - if Draco *had* betrayed him, then what was the point in sending a letter like that into enemy territory? It would be suicidal at best. Harry joined the queue behind Ron and felt worse than he'd ever felt in his life.

* * *

That night, he lay awake. Ironically, he and Ron had both been assigned places in bunkhouse eight again, even in the same bed, though not either of their former, usual beds. It was a relief to be sharing with someone familiar, Harry thought, but he hadn't shared a bed with anyone but Draco in weeks. His instinct was to seek out the other person there, meld his body into the other's. The fact that it was Ron and not Draco was nearly comical in contrast. Harry could have laughed, or he could have cried.

Everything hurt so much that he didn't know where to leave himself. Harry wondered retrospectively if he shouldn't have talked to Lupin about it more before he'd left. But if Lupin didn't know either, then what could he even say? It was hopeless. Harry turned quietly away from Ron and longed for Hermione. The one person he wanted to talk to, and could never talk to again. Besides the entire question of the looming final battle - which was both horrifying as well as impossible to even contemplate - after five years of war, to actually realize that the long-awaited moment might be upon him at last - Harry couldn't even imagine it. But besides of all that, Harry wanted Hermione's advice. He also wanted her advice in terms of Voldemort and what he should be doing to prepare herself. He wanted Dumbledore for that, too, and hoped rather desperately to have one

more chance to get some information and to talk to his former Headmaster before the battle.

Hermione had always, Harry had realized particularly since their graduation, sort of acted the part of older sister to him. Always appearing so much wiser about most things than him, Hermione had been his default source in terms of person to turn to in times of question. The summer after Dumbledore had died, Harry's personal life had upended itself. He'd assumed, at the point when he'd broken up with Ginny, that they would eventually reunite after the war or something. Never expecting, of course, that the war would ease off as Voldemort pulled his forces back, only to gather the strength to attack with the fortitude which he had two years later, resulting in this ghastly, five-year struggle of ever-increasing loss of territory for their side. And somewhere in there, Harry had found himself beginning to be attracted to men. A process which he later realized had actually begun earlier, but he'd never paid it any heed whatsoever. He'd assumed it was a glitch in an otherwise "normal" system, that it was a result of his trauma over Snape and Dumbledore and the rest of it. Within a few months, however, he'd known it was there to stay. And he'd kept it good and quiet until the year after they'd graduated, and the first person he'd told then was Hermione.

She'd understood - and already known, as was her wont - and been both supportive and understanding as well as blasé, making it seem like it wasn't a big deal at all. Her attitude had calmed Harry, steadied him, and he'd started telling her about his tentative experimentation. Not in any detail, of course, but he told her. He'd told Ron, too, but Ron had had Hermione to brace him for it. And he'd been fine. He didn't understand it, but he was fine. Hermione had understood things like relationships and why people did the things they did. Not one of Harry's strong points, he knew. But he'd never before had an emotional crisis like this one, where he just didn't know what to do or what to think.

Ginny, of course, he never would have told. Harry had always assumed that Hermione or someone had told her. She'd been over him for awhile by then anyway, or Harry had thought, going back to dating Dean for a bit, then moving on again. But he'd never been as close to her as to Ron and Hermione, anyway, so why rub his newfound orientation in her face like that, when he wouldn't have confided in her like that even before? Their drift had been quite amiable, and Harry had intended it to stay that way.

He turned over again. Ron was asleep, his back rising and falling gently as he snored quietly. The small room was cramped; sleeping bags were strewn over the floor, making a nighttime visit to the lav rather treacherous. Harry assumed that he'd only gotten a

bed at all because of who he was. He thought of that first time with Draco, two beds over, and wondered how things would be now if Draco had never done what he'd done. Harry's entire body felt empty. He wanted to be able to forget everything, forget all the politics, and just have Draco back. He closed his eyes and longed for him with all of his being. And wondered if he'd been the one to ruin everything - or if Draco had.

* * *

Draco followed Snape into the dilapidated house in Spinner's End. Only, it wasn't really *in* Spinner's End; Snape had taken off the Illusion charm that made it appear as though it were. Draco had been there before, following the disastrous end of his sixth year. He'd been full of emotion then, too - his incredible turmoil over Dumbledore; his confusion over Snape's role in the entire matter; his anger at himself for his failure. He'd spent much of the summer there, between them. They'd been on the run, but Snape had hidden the house well and they'd returned every so often. Wormtail had, of course, been evicted and Obliviated. And they had talked. A lot. It had been mostly him asking questions, wanting to know what had happened. And Snape, naturally, had been unable to answer his questions with complete honesty. He'd told Draco about the Unbreakable Vow he'd made with his mother. But as far as his actual loyalties went, Snape had simply shown him the Dark Mark and told him to stop asking foolish questions.

Draco, whose own temporary Mark had already faded upon the completion of Snape's Vow, had put together his own conclusions later. Much later. In the end, Snape had essentially forbidden him to talk about it further and announced that they would be returning to Hogwarts in the autumn - Draco as a regular, seventh year student, and himself as the Potions master once more. They had done exactly that, and when Draco had graduated, Lucius had come for him and taken him home. Snape had watched him go without a backward glance.

But he'd still made the Unbreakable Vow for him, and fulfilled it, saving Draco's life. Regardless of his reasons for it - or even his prior Vow to Dumbledore - it had left an impression. Draco's memories of this house were extremely mixed.

The fact of the matter was that the house was quite isolated, located in a remote corner of Gloucestershire. There were no houses anywhere near it, just open meadow and a scattering of forest nearby. Snape unlocked the door with difficulty; the hinges were rusting, and let them both in. Draco followed him, hardly caring about anything at the moment. He had two choices - he could either let himself be completely overwhelmed

by the happenings with Harry and his father both, or else he could be cold and shut off his emotions entirely. He needed to be cold.

Snape gestured vaguely about. "You know the house," he said briefly. "Make yourself at home."

Draco dragged his eyes off a dusty portrait of some bygone Snape. "How long will we be here?"

"I have no idea." Snape pulled off his cloak and tossed it over a chair. "I apologize for having left you in that situation."

"What happened?" Draco took off his shoes but not his robes. He waited for Snape to reply and went to sit on a piece of dusty, ancient-looking furniture.

"I was attacked," Snape said, that ugly look returning to his face. "By Wormtail, of all people. It seems he is a little bitter over our past."

Draco made himself laugh. "The past in which you made him grovel at your feet?"

"The same," Snape agreed with a mirthless smile. "I'm hungry. Let me see what's in the house. I haven't been here in months."

It didn't sound promising, but then, Draco wasn't hungry. Left alone, he felt the turmoil rising again, threatening to choke him. For a brief, ugly moment, it occurred to him that if he intended to choose his father in the end, now would be the time to do it. He knew quite a bit too much. He could give away the location of the barracks, and surely provide enough leading information to guide someone to Grimmauld Place. He could do it.

Draco buried his face in his hands. Back to square one again.

* * *

Harry woke facing away from Ron, his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. Ron was kneeling on the bed behind him, shaking his shoulder and saying his name. Harry jerked awake. "What?"

"Relax," Ron said. "It's just me. I've had an owl from my mother, and she wants you to come to the Burrow today."

What? Harry sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Huh?"

Ron shrugged. "You can read it yourself, if you like. She didn't say why, just that she's cleared it with whoever."

Harry frowned. "What time is it?"

"Past ten. I didn't want to wake you; you were sleeping pretty soundly." Ron rummaged in his robe pocket and found the note. "Did you want to read it?"

"Sure." Harry took it and scanned it quickly. Ron had told him pretty much everything. "I wonder what she wants."

"Probably just to see you and fuss over you a bit," Ron said. "You know how she is."

Harry just nodded and got to his feet, yawning. "I guess I should go, then. Did you eat already?"

Ron made a face. "Yeah. Don't. You can eat something at my house."

"Good point." Harry headed for the shower. "I'll come and find you before I go. Where do you think you'll be?"

"Main hall, probably," Ron said. He took the note from his mother back and put it in his

pocket again. "See you later."

"Yeah." Harry gave him a perfunctory smile and closed the door of the lav.

* * *

Molly Weasley met him at the door and for once didn't exclaim over him. Her eyes were round and anxious-looking, but she drew him into the house with a firm arm around his shoulders. "Come in, come in," she said, the lines around her eyes deepening. "I hope you didn't eat at the barracks; I'm just getting lunch ready."

"I didn't eat," Harry admitted. "The barracks food has gotten worse, if you can believe it."

"Of course I can," Mrs. Weasley said brusquely. "There's a war on. Come and sit down, Harry dear." She brought over a teapot, and Harry caught a glimpse of knives chopping and pots steaming on the range on their own, seemingly. "Let's have a cup of tea while we're waiting, then. I wanted to talk to you."

Harry took the cup she poured him automatically. "About what?"

"About Draco Malfoy," Mrs. Weasley said, watching his reaction closely, her face stern but still anxious.

Harry stood abruptly. "No."

"Harry, please sit down," Mrs. Weasley pleaded. "Please. I just want to talk to you a bit."

"Did Remus put you up to this?" Harry asked, his face stony.

"Of course he didn't," Mrs. Weasley said indignantly. "This is my own idea. *Please*, Harry. Just talk to me a little."

Harry sat, but turned his face avoided and didn't touch his tea. "I have nothing to say about it."

"Oh, rubbish," Mrs. Weasley said briskly. "I'm a simple woman, Harry, but I'm not blind. You have plenty to say because you're right upset. And I don't blame you."

Harry's jaw tightened. "And what I am supposed to be saying, or upset about, then?"

"Harry." Mrs. Weasley grew impatient. "I know what he is to you. I could see it plainly when you brought him here. I put you in the same room on purpose. You're a young man now, and I know that it's none of my business. I just want you to be happy, and if you're happy with him, then I have nothing to say about it. But now you're upset because you think he's betrayed you. Aren't you."

Harry kept his eyes fixed steadfastly on the magical clock on the opposite wall, but very slowly, he nodded.

"Drink your tea, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, gentle now.

"I just wish I knew, one way or the other," Harry said dully. "Whether it's my fault or his that this has happened, I mean."

"Well, I can tell you what I know," Mrs. Weasley said. "The spell he tried to cast at St. Mungo's was a combination of protective spells which Remus thinks was an attempt to replace the wards. It didn't work, but that's all the magic they could detect. From his wand, at least. We know that his father was there, and Snape as well."

"Was - he - with Snape?" Harry asked, unable to say Draco's name.

"I don't know," Mrs. Weasley said softly.

Harry put both his elbows on the table (any other time, she might have scolded him for

it) and covered his face with his hands. "I just wish I knew what to think."

She pulled his teacup away quietly and took his hands in her own. "Listen," she said intently. "I've learned a few things about life and relationships in my day, and one thing I can tell is you is that love never gives up. You just don't stop believing in the person you love, Harry. You don't. If your love is real, and his for you is real, then you'll make it through this."

Harry couldn't meet her eyes. "I don't know if he - "

"You're not responsible for what he does," Mrs. Weasley interrupted. "Just for what you do. And until you know, it's your responsibility as his - his lover - to have faith in him. Do you understand me?"

Harry shook his head. "I never trusted him," he said, his voice sounding very expressionless. "Not completely. I loved him. I love him, I mean. But how can I trust him? He's a spy."

"I can't judge him for you," Mrs. Weasley said sternly. "But I don't think that you should be judging him at all. Wait and see. That's my advice. And in the meantime, perhaps you should think about what it means to really love a person." She paused. "It could be that your love is the one thing that saves everything now. If he knows that you do - that could be the pivotal factor here." She patted his hand. "Drink your tea," she urged again.

Harry picked up his cup, hardly thinking about it. His tea was just barely warm now, but Mrs. Weasley refilled his cup when he set it down. "Let's see about lunch, then," she said, jumping to her feet.

She went into the rest of the kitchen, and Harry sat at the table staring numbly into his cup and turning her words over in his head.

* * *

Back at the barracks, in bed with Ron and Neville snoring on either side of him, Harry

was still thinking about it all. Wondering if it was really true, what she'd implied - that to love a person meant to trust them. Blindly? Perhaps not that. But he owed Draco more trust than he'd given. So, if he played damage control now, then he needed to find Draco, and before the final battle. He saw that it was true, that Draco could indeed prove to be the pivotal point in all of this, that his loyalties could be the deciding factor. He could lead Voldemort directly to Harry, if he so chose. Or else he could cast his lot on Dumbledore's side and deal with Harry later, take his chances on Harry's abilities.

It was perhaps four in the morning. Harry turned again, trying not to move the bed too much. He needed to sleep on it, he decided, and having come to that conclusion, fell asleep almost at once.

* * *

And in the morning, when Ron shook him awake again, Harry instantly knew something that he hadn't known when he'd gone to sleep, even despite his groggy state of mind: he loved Draco, loved him with all of his being, and wasn't willing to give up on this just yet. He had to write - it was essential. It was urgent. Now. It had to be now. Harry got out of bed. "I need some parchment," he told Ron, who was bemused, but found him some.

"Ink?" Ron asked, offering an inkwell and a quill.

Harry took them. "Thanks." He sat down and hesitated. "I'll get dressed in a second. Go on ahead; I'll come to the hall in a minute or two, alright?"

Ron agreed, still shaking his head, but went. There were a few other people moving about the cramped room, but he didn't know them, so it didn't matter. Harry pulled someone else's book onto his knees and began to write.

Dear Draco, he wrote. He stopped to think, then went on, writing increasingly faster as he went.

*I don't know if you'll even be willing
to read this, but I hope you are. I just wanted*

*to tell you how sorry I am about the Veritaserum
and that I know I had no right to do that to
you. I love you and I don't want to give up
on this. Please, please, please come back. I
miss you and I'm miserable without you. I
don't want this to be over. I'm not even going
to think about the politics or whatever - just
come back to me, please. I'm so sorry I didn't
trust you.
I love you.*

Harry.

He read it over. It looked a bit garbled, but the right sentiments were essentially all there. He'd never been much of a letter-writer, anyway. He scrolled the parchment and sealed it with a charm that would let him know when the seal was broken. That done, Harry set the scroll down carefully beside him and got dressed in a hurry. There were owls for public use in the main hall, and if he hurried, there might still be one or two around. He tied his trainers tightly, made sure he had his wand with him, and went to the hall to find Ron and to post his letter. And to cross his fingers that Draco would read it and forgive him his lack of trust.

* * *

By two o'clock in the afternoon, the seal had still not been broken. Harry was agitated to the point of distraction, but he soon had something else to occupy his thoughts. Ron hurried into the bunkhouse partway through the afternoon, his face white, and Harry knew instantly that the news was very bad. It was.

The Death Eaters had breached the barracks' wards at last, and Voldemort was on the grounds.

Chapter Seventeen

Harry stood where he was, rooted to the floor. He'd half expected this. But now that the moment had come, he could think of only one thing, and think it in complete numbness and shock: Draco. Where was Draco? Who was he with?

"Harry, come *on*," Ron urged. "McGonagall sent me to find you. We have to go. The Death Eaters are coming."

Harry stirred himself. "Where are they?" he heard himself ask, his tone neutral and expressionless.

"Last I looked, nearly at the main hall," Ron said with evident relief that Harry was responsive at all. "McGonagall's convening people in bunkhouse ten. Let's go!"

Harry checked to make sure his wand was still in his pocket. It was. He couldn't think of anything else he might need, save for his invisibility cloak - but what use would that be in a battle, anyway? Harry decided to leave it. Ron was waiting by the door. Harry followed him through it, afraid at what he might find. He didn't see anything unusual, but Ron grabbed his arm. "They're all over the place," he breathed. "Quietly!"

They ran as furtively as possible down toward the last of the bunkhouses. It was crowded to impossible lengths inside. McGonagall was at the front of the crowd, standing on a bed (supported by Tonks from the floor), giving loud instructions as hastily as possible. Her beady eyes spotted Harry and Ron as soon as they entered and she paused for a mere split second before continuing her sentence. As soon as she'd finished, her eyes fell on Harry once more. There was a sudden hush in the room as the others noticed him, too. Harry suddenly felt very young, very foolish, very inexperienced, and worst of all, extremely unready for this.

His mind was blank; all he could think of was his burning question - where was Draco? And was it he who had let the Death Eaters in? The timing was horribly, suspiciously convenient. Harry felt he could hardly breathe, hardly stand even thinking about it, and yet here he was - in a tiny, crowded room full of desperate people, desperate people whose last hopes were all riding on him. And he knew that he was going to let them all down. Despair clouded his vision and he nearly felt faint.

Ron's hand came under his elbow and supported him. "Steady on, mate," he whispered. "This is it. Just one last push, and maybe it'll be done. Right?"

Harry made himself nod. "Right," he said numbly, but he was still unable to actually grasp the fact that he was about to do this. Attempt it at last - the ending of Voldemort's five-year reign of terror.

Ron gave him a bit of a push and Harry stumbled toward McGonagall, who had beckoned with a quick jerk of her head. "Potter, you are to stay with me," she said firmly. "Is that absolutely clear?"

Harry felt his head nodding again, as though someone else were pulling his strings.
"Yes."

"Yes, Weasley, you can come, too. Just stick close, alright?"

"I will," Ron vowed. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do my best."

"I know you will. Now." McGonagall raised her voice again. "Is everyone clear on what is happening?"

Harry, of course, was not clear on the rest of the plan at all, having missed most of the details there, but it didn't seem to matter all that much. The room emptied - more people exiting than Harry had noticed inside - a magical trick of the room's proportions? - and he hung back with McGonagall. He had to ask. He had to *know*. He turned to her rather desperately. "Do you know where Draco Malfoy is?" he asked, pleading with his eyes for her to take the time to tell him.

She gave him a sharp look. "Potter, this is not the time for - "

"I need to know," Harry said urgently. Ron gave him an oblique look, but didn't say anything. Harry had said nothing to him about Draco and what had happened, but Harry guessed he was catching on now. "Please."

McGonagall polished her glasses on her robes and avoided his eyes. "We really must go. I am sure that he is where he is needed. We really don't have time to discuss the particulars - "

"You don't know, do you," Harry said, staring at her, trying to force the truth out by the force of his eyes alone. "Tell me!"

She floundered. "I'm sure he is with Professor Snape; he has been working with - "

"But do you *know* that he's with Snape this very *minute*?" Harry demanded, interrupting. "Do you know that for *sure*?"

McGonagall sighed and began to walk toward the door. "No," she said, with difficulty. "I don't know where he is. All we can hope is that he is with Severus. That's all I know, Potter." She stopped at the door and faced him and Ron. "Now listen to me. We are going to hang back and wait until Voldemort makes his appearance. You know what you must try to do. Do your best. Think of anything you need to think of to make it work. I believe you have mastered the other Unforgivable curses by now?"

Harry's heart was pounding far too quickly. "Yeah," he said. "I think I - well, I'll try."

"If your wand will not work against him, then use Mr. Weasley's, if you would." McGonagall gave Ron a stern look as though daring him to refuse, but Ron just nodded hard, his expression intense. "Very well, then. Let us depart. Stay quiet, whatever you do."

There seemed to be nothing more to say. Now Harry just wanted to get to the battle front and - see what there was to be seen.

* * *

The Apparating field was exploding with magic; curses, hexes, and spells were being flung about almost randomly, they were so frequent. Those who had been at the barracks were fighting on the side nearest the bunkhouses, while the Death Eaters attacked from the outside. McGonagall had crept along the edge of the trees until they were in front of bunkhouse five, then brought them to cover behind a large shed between the bunkhouse and the field.

Harry gazed at the battle, searching for faces he knew, but most particularly needing to find Draco, and discover with whom he stood. After about thirty minutes of silent watching, Ron took a step toward him. "I don't see him," he muttered quietly. "What happened?"

Harry shook his head. "I fucked up," he said, his eyes still on the battle. "But I still don't

know if - if he was fully on our side or not. I thought he was, but I didn't trust him. I drove him away. If this war comes down to him for whatever reason and we lose, then it was my fault. If that's what happens, then I'm sorry in advance."

"Shut it," Ron said roughly. "If he betrays you, then it's his fault. Pure and simple. Stop thinking like that, you've got a Dark lord to defeat, here." He patted Harry quite hard on the back and Harry was forced to smile slightly.

He turned to Ron. "But all the same," he said, trailing off.

But Ron refused to hear it. "No," he said. "Don't even start that with me."

Harry gripped his elbow. "You have to let me. It's been great. Ever since that day, on the Hogwarts Express. Thanks."

"Shut up, Harry," Ron said, but he smiled affectionately and thumped Harry again.

"Less noise," McGonagall admonished from in front of them.

Harry returned his attention to the battle.

* * *

Three hours had passed, and Voldemort had continually come into sight, but always at the back of the other side, never close enough, and McGonagall had refused to let Harry go anywhere near him. It had been a grim three hours, though.

The Apparating field was littered with bodies, both of their own people and of the Death Eaters, the wounded and the dead. Harry's horror had risen and risen as he'd watched, frustrated once again at being kept back like this. Ron hadn't spoken a word since their exchange, but his jaw grew tighter and tighter, his eyes narrowed and his face grim. People they knew, dying everywhere. Penelope Clearwater, the check-in witch for the barracks. Old Ernie Macmillan. Neville, badly wounded, from what they could see -

hopefully still only wounded; it was too risky for the medical staff to be crossing the lines to retrieve people. One of the Patil twins fell, and the other was killed as she ran toward her sister - who was not dead, but died shortly after the fact. That had been particularly bad. Ron had uttered one hoarse word then - "Padma." And nothing else. Harry thought of Parvati, and of how long ago the Yule Ball in their fourth year at Hogwarts seemed now.

The Order was there, too - Harry had been watching Lupin when he could, anxious and hating himself for leaving him alone out there. Tonks was near him, and Kingsley Shacklebolt was near them both. It was not until much later that Harry first noticed two shadowy, hooded figures watching from the sidelines. Neither were fighting, but there was something familiar-looking about one of them. Harry's stomach turned over. Draco. He was sure that the thinner figure was Draco. But who was he with? The Death Eaters were impossible to tell apart from this distance in their sinister masks; it could be Snape or it could be Lucius. How could he tell? But why wasn't he fighting?

The question answered itself: Harry knew that Snape had not intended Draco to fight; his duties lay elsewhere. But somehow, he doubted that Lucius had intended it, either. Harry's thoughts were interrupted, however, by a flash and a figure Apparating into the center of the battle. A shimmering Shield hovered around Lord Voldemort, held out from his body by his hands alone.

"Potter!" he shrieked, his voice rising above the wind and the noise of battle. Those near him, Order-side or Death Eater, automatically shrank away. "Where are you hiding? Come out and fight me like a man!"

The voice was high and chill, and a frisson of fear ran down Harry's spine, though he gripped his wand tighter than ever. McGonagall turned back to him and their eyes met. Harry's face said plainly that he intended to go, and after a moment, she nodded. Harry ducked around her, instinctively feeling both her and Ron right behind him, and strode out toward the field. He cleared his throat and tried to tell himself that he was not a twenty-four-year-old ignoramus, but rather, a highly-trained wizard who was the foretold end of this monster before him. He raised his voice and his wand both.

"I am here, Voldemort," Harry said loudly, and was surprised to find that his voice carried over the wind, too.

Voldemort started violently and turned in his direction. "Potter!" he hissed, his voice colder than ever. "I did not think you would be man enough to come to this little celebration of mine."

Harry's wand and voice were steady. "No?" he asked evenly. "Strange, since of the two of us, it is you who are the coward. I have found and destroyed your horcruxes. The only one left is that of yourself, and I intend to destroy that tonight, too. I have been waiting for you to show yourself, Voldemort."

"How dare you speak my name, you insolent *boy*," Voldemort spat. "You - "

"What?" Harry asked, drawing nearer. He switched to Parseltongue. "*Afraid to hear how ugly it's become?*"

Voldemort shrieked again, out of sheer fury. "Lucius!" His voice was nearly a scream. "Lucius, finish him off for me! Disprove the Prophecy once and for all!"

A masked Death Eater stepped forward out of the ranks, and at the same time, the other hooded figure - not Draco - leapt to his feet and intercepted the Death Eater, wand extended. And Harry knew that hand, after so many years of watching it point out his mistakes, to missed directions on the blackboard, or lingering over that sallow, lined face in thought - it was Snape. Part of him shuddered in relief, but he didn't have time for relief. Not now. The Death Eater cursed forcefully.

"I should have known, you double-crossing coward," Lucius spat. "The Order's henchman, are you? You never were good for anything more than spying on the secrets of those more important than you, you snivelling, favour-seeking sycophant."

Snape responded by snarling and flinging some heretofore unknown curse at Lucius. Lucius ducked and returned fire, hurling a curse of his own back at Snape.

Voldemort howled. "Well?" he screeched to the rest of the Death Eaters. "Don't just stand there - fight, you useless scum!"

The battle burst into activity again all around Harry. Ron stood his ground beside him, and Harry spared a fleeting glance for the other hooded figure at the foot of the hill. He sat apart and did not move, but something moved in Harry nonetheless. Why hadn't Draco gotten his letter, or if he'd gotten it, why hadn't he bothered reading it?

"Harry," Ron said urgently, "*down!*" He grabbed Harry's arm and tugged, pulling them both down. A large Death Eater had tackled McGonagall and was turning on them. It was all confusion; Harry had only a dim idea of what was going on most of the time. He was struggling to get to Voldemort, but a crowd of duelling pairs and tangled snarls of fighting traffic had come between them. Harry had no sense of how much time was passing; it all seemed vague and rather dreamlike, though he was at the same time completely focused on his task. He had to get to Voldemort. The other questions could wait, though they continued to beat against the back of his mind like the dim beating of a war drum in some ancient epic. Harry slashed his wand violently at another anonymous, masked person and suddenly the way before him was clear.

Voldemort was hanging back, watching Lucius and Snape duel between himself and Harry. And though they saw each other, both were watching the duel. They seemed to be almost deadlocked; each parried the other's spells with such speed and cold efficiency that it was nearly frightening. Neither were speaking anymore - both faces were lined and concentrating furiously on the other's movements. To do anything might be to distract Snape, and Harry was rather fervently hoping to have Snape there to help him once he got his chance. The final stroke, he knew, would be delivered by his own hand, but the Prophecy certainly hadn't specifically indicated that he, Harry, would need to do *all* of the work himself. After all, Dumbledore had already helped destroy the horcruxes - both in terms of his own actions (living and dead) as well as all the help he'd given Harry in showing him what to do.

Lucius flung several curses at Snape at once, and the third one broke through Snape's defenses. He cursed, staggering backward, one hand clutched to his chest. His face was ugly as he hurled a vicious-sounding curse back at Lucius. Lucius was taken unawares; his wand arm had been hanging loosely at his side, watching Snape's pain in satisfaction and clearly not expecting him to be capable of retaliation so quickly. The curse was a blinding blue light, and struck him in the chest as well. There was a gasping sound which Harry realized was the sound of Lucius' lungs puncturing, the air escaping.

At the foot of the hill, Draco, still hooded, had taken several steps forward, wand out, obviously alarmed. Harry looked at him, grim, and wondered what was going through Draco's mind at the moment.

Lucius was moaning, rocking forward onto his knees, and for the moment, Harry ignored him. He went quickly to Snape and dropped to his own knees. "Snape! Are you alright?"

Snape coughed; it rattled rather ominously. "Far from it, Potter. I regret that I will not be able to - " he coughed again, and blood flecked his chin - "help you. Go. Do it. *Quickly!*"

"Harry - !" It was Ron's voice, but it was cut off rather abruptly, as though someone had silenced him. Harry ignored it and stepped over Snape's legs toward Voldemort.

"This is it," he said, very evenly. "No more of this, Voldemort." He raised his wand and took careful aim. "*Accio horcrux!*"

A gash appeared in the center of Voldemort's chest as his heart attempted to wrest its way out of his body to fly to Harry's outstretched hand. He shrieked in rage and pain - particularly rage - and clamped his hand over it. And before Harry could try it again, searing pain shot through his own chest. He looked down and saw a bloody X across his torso - the mark of *Sectumsempra*.

He had never been exposed to it before, on the receiving end. Since the first time he'd tried it, Harry had used it only very occasionally - lately, he hadn't had much opportunity for it, as he kept being pulled out of the more serious battles. It hurt so badly that he remembered again, unwillingly, how close to death Draco had looked that first time he had used it against him. Harry's vision swam and he felt his knees give way. His chest was so wet - why was it so wet? Harry touched it, winced, saw blood. This was it. He was dying. Voldemort was going to win.

Behind him, Lucius cackled, though it still sounded incredibly weak. The four of them were alone in the center of the field, everyone else dead, dying or afraid to move, it seemed. Lucius drew a rattling breath, obviously one of his last. "Draco!" he called. "This is it - your big opportunity! Finish Potter off now, and you will be forgiven. Or else, help the Dark Lord - you wear his Mark, don't forget - and you will win yourself glory for all eternity. You are the only one who can do it. Look at me." Lucius gasped again. Harry just managed to turn his head to see him, saw his hand stretched out toward his son. "I am dying, Draco. Help me. Help one of us. You are my *son*. Help me!"

Harry's vision cleared enough so that he could focus on Draco, and suddenly, everything came clear: what must have been Draco's worst fear, all along, had come true: he was now in a position where he would be forced to choose only one of his alliances over the others. He could choose to help Voldemort - heal one of his wounds, enable him to finish Harry off, for he was currently too weak to do it. He could save his father, who would do the same. He could save Snape, who appeared to be hovering on the brink of consciousness - perhaps even, Harry thought with a somehow-distant pang of alarm, of death -

Or he could save Harry. Harry looked at him, hardly able to breathe through the pain, himself. And pleaded with his eyes. He could practically feel Draco's indecision, but couldn't see whether or not Draco was even looking at him from beneath his hood.

Draco pushed his hood back and walked slowly into the center of the field. His every move bespoke uncertainty.

"Your Mark, Master Malfoy," Voldemort hissed, his hand still pressed against his exposed heart - the house of his final horcrux. "You are my sworn servant. I command you to help me!"

Snape gave another cough, weaker and - Harry cringed - wetter-sounding than the previous few. "Your father is correct, Draco. You have time to save only one of us. The choice is yours."

And Harry, desperate, summoned all of his strength of will to speak, but couldn't do it - he just didn't have the physical strength. All he could do was to plead silently. Everyone, everything else was forgotten but this moment - this strange, lopsided rectangle of the four of them - Voldemort, then Lucius, then Harry, then Snape. Who would Draco choose?

Draco said nothing, but advanced another few steps. He had stopped moving when Voldemort and Snape had spoken. He was in their midst now, between them all. It was obvious that time was of the essence - all four of them were dying. And Draco turned and looked at Harry. "I didn't read your letter," he said, very evenly.

Harry's consciousness gave way then; the darkness began to swirl around his head uncontrollably, and he knew that all was lost. It was all over. And within moments, he would be dead. And then he heard Draco's voice again, twice in rapid succession. "*Episkey*," he said first, and even as the sensation in Harry's chest changed, he also heard something else - "*Avada Kedavra*, you *bastard*."

The darkness took Harry, and he knew no more.

* * *

The sky above him was very blue, so blue that Harry wondered in a detached, emotionless way if he'd ever seen it so blue before. Other senses returned to him then, and he became aware of several things at once. He was outdoors, lying on his back. There was a light breeze blowing across his face, and he could smell the scent of grass drying in the sun and a coppery tang, like salt. Or blood. He hurt all over, particularly his chest, but there was a hand beneath his head and another was passing a wand over his wounds, his robes parted over his chest. He opened his eyes again, and this time, saw not the sky, but Draco.

Harry struggled with this for a moment. Draco. So that meant that Harry was not dead, then. "Draco?" he tried, but his voice cracked and it came out in a whisper.

"Shh," Draco said quietly. "You're still very weak. I'm trying to fix you up."

"What happened?"

Those grey eyes met his briefly, then glanced away again. "Voldemort's dead. Don't worry."

"And - what else?"

Draco's hand restrained him. "The battle is over. The war is over. Just lie still, alright?"

Harry stopped talking, but only because the questions were building up and fighting for supremacy - he didn't know what to ask first. He opened his mouth, intending to pick one and ask it regardless of Draco's instruction, but before he could, Draco put his wand away and turned to him.

"I'm finished," he said. "I think you're going to be okay, if I did it right."

"What *happened*?" Harry asked again. "I thought I was dead for sure!"

Draco answered him unsmilingly. "You're not dead because I sent a quick healing spell at you. It was all I had time for. Voldemort's dead because you wounded him really badly and I finished him off. My father's dead because no one helped him. Snape's alive, barely, because Lupin saved him. But he would have died, otherwise. I would have been too late."

Harry would have sagged in relief, but every muscle in his body was already pretty slack. Draco's eyes met his at last, steadily, and Harry finally found the thing he most wanted to say. "You chose me," he said, and his voice wasn't breaking any more, but it was very weak.

Draco nodded, his eyes not moving from Harry's. "I chose you," he echoed slowly. "I couldn't have not chosen you, Harry."

"But - your father - Snape - "

"It wasn't easy," Draco said, which sounded like a rather vast understatement, and Harry saw smudges of fatigue and grief beneath his eyes as he said it, "but there was really no question about it. Not for me, Harry."

Harry felt his chin tremble. "I don't deserve you. Not after I - "

"Tell me what your letter said," Draco interrupted him. "I didn't have time to read it, because Snape and I were just about to Apparate when it arrived. It's at his house. I

wanted to, but he said there wasn't time and that we had to get here."

Harry swallowed and tried to calm himself. "It was my attempt at apologizing for the Veritaserum thing and for not trusting you. I asked you to come back and to forgive me, and I told you that I loved you in it. I do. I love you. And I'm so very sorry."

For a long time, Draco didn't say anything at all. But at last, he said, "I think we're just about beyond all that now, Harry. But you were right not to trust me. I realized that, after. I was a spy. And I didn't know, until the very end, what I would choose. Not a hundred percent. I know I said it was difficult, but I already knew which way I would choose in the end. I couldn't have lived with myself if I - " he stopped, reconsidered, and went on, more quietly. "I had to save you, Harry. You can't know how I felt, seeing you covered in blood like that. I thought you would die any minute there."

Harry managed to move his hand, found Draco's on his chest and squeezed it as hard as he could. "Yes I could," he said roughly. "I know how you felt."

Draco shook his head. "We're not going to talk about that. It's over, Harry. This is all over. The war, I mean. Not us."

Harry smiled, though he was beginning to feel very sleepy.

"How do you feel?" Draco's face was anxious.

"I feel fine," Harry said. "Just a little tired."

"No doubt of that," Draco said dryly. "Can you get up? I want to take you to Grimmauld Place. They never got Grimmauld Place, did you know that?"

Harry, with Draco's help, struggled to his feet and leaned heavily against him. "How did the Death Eaters find the barracks?"

Draco's mouth twisted. "My fault," he said. "The last time I was at the Manor, I used

magic in the library. Big mistake. I was trying to disguise a book from my father that explained precisely how the *Contego* wards work, and he had detectors set in place to reveal any magic used. They traced all the recent movements of my wand and eventually it led them back here. I never told them, Harry.

"I know you didn't," Harry said, and it was perfectly true. "I know that now."

Draco stopped; they'd been walking slowly off the field. He turned to Harry, one arm still tightly around Harry's waist, and looked him unwaveringly in the eye for a long moment. And he didn't say anything, but after a bit, he turned his head to the side and very gently placed his mouth on Harry's.

Harry's knees nearly gave way. He leaned against Draco in a mixture of gratitude, relief and dizzying love, both arms wrapped around Draco's shoulders, clinging weakly to him, and they were kissing passionately, both of them unconsciously making small sounds of need and something that was almost desperation every so often. Everything else fell away; it was just the two of them and finally, after what had seemed to be the end of the world, everything was right between them again. And always would be, now. Harry knew that with a certainty that permeated into the very marrow of his bones, the essence of his blood. He would never let anything, any doubt or any person, come between them again. He pulled back from the kiss at last, light-headed for lack of breath and sheer joy both. "I love you."

And finally, Draco smiled, but it was a smile of fierce triumph and equally fierce love. He said only one word. "Good."

Still holding Harry, he Disapparated.

* * *

It was morning - two days after the day of the battle, and Harry was perched on the edge of Ron's bed in the barracks Infirmary, Draco in a chair quite close by.

"So tell me again," Ron said, reaching for another shot of potion, "how did old Snape get out of that one? I missed the whole end, seemingly. I saw Lucius moving in your

direction, mate, so I shouted, but someone got me before I could say anything."

"That would have been our dear friend Dolohov," Harry said. "Remember that awful spell he always used to use? They think it was some variation of it - he was always the only one who used that spell, so it's almost certain that it was him."

"Yes, but go on about Snape," Ron said, waving this off. His potion dealt with, he downed a glass of water to chase away the aftertaste.

Draco made a sound that was suspiciously like a snicker. Harry looked at him affectionately; Draco was sitting close enough that Harry could rest his feet on the seat of his chair, and Draco's hand was on his calf. "I don't know if you'll like this, Weasley," Draco said, sounding amused. "But it goes something like this - I had just finished dealing with Voldemort, ran back to Harry and was looking around to see if anyone else was coming or anything. And all of a sudden, Lupin came out of nowhere and got to Snape. He healed him pretty quickly and revived him - he was unconscious by then - and you know how snappy he gets when he's hurt. He just grabbed Lupin's arm and wanted to know what the hell he thought he was doing, and Lupin just said to consider it his thanks for all those years of Snape making his Wolfsbane potion. And then, believe it or not, Snape actually laughed." Draco stopped and looked gravely at Harry. "I don't know if he'll want to hear the rest of it."

"Oh, go on," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "I think I can see where this is going, anyway."

Draco shrugged. "Fine, then. So, Snape sort of half sat up and grabbed Lupin by the neck and kissed him. Snape's still recovering, obviously, but it seems pretty clear that they're going to stay at Grimmauld Place together. Lupin said they were so used to living together by now, anyway, that it would hardly be any different. Only, hopefully they'd both be home a little more often now that the war's finished."

Ron looked confused. "But - what about Tonks?"

"What?" Harry was confused, too, until he got it. "Oh." He patted Ron's knee consolingly. "That's been over for years, mate. Lupin doesn't really go that way."

Ron digested that. Then - "Him and Sirius, then - " he said, working it out, his brain obviously fighting against the potions.

"Right," Harry confirmed.

Ron looked at Draco then, clearly intending to deal with the rest of his thoughts on the subject later. His face grew sober. "So - your father," he said awkwardly. "He's - "

"Dead, yes," Draco said, his voice a little cool. "You do recall, I hope, that I had the chance to prevent his death. And that I didn't."

"I wasn't going to say anything about *that*," Ron said quickly. "I just - I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. Not for him. For you."

Harry looked at Ron in surprised gratitude. Draco just gave Ron a long look, though. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Ron still looked awkward. "And I guess everything's fine with you two, then," he said, looking at Draco's hand on Harry's leg, Harry's hand on Draco's arm.

Harry looked at Draco for a split second, then answered Ron. "Yes," he said feelingly. "Everything's fine. More than fine."

Draco cleared his throat and stood. "We should let you rest," he said. "We're still at Grimmauld Place. Snape and Lupin said we could stay as long as we want, and since neither of us has any other place to go at the moment, we probably will. But we'll be back soon."

"And you can owl me - or both of us - any time, of course," Harry added, patting Ron's knee again. "We'll be here."

Ron nodded, and his fingers caught and twisted a bit of his blanket. "I guess they'll start having ceremonies and memorial services and all that, soon," he said, without looking at

Harry.

Harry found his wrist and squeezed it. "I'm not going to any ceremonies before you can come to them, and they're not having any memorial services before you can come to them, either. I'll see to it personally."

"And when it's time," Draco added, unexpectedly, "we'll both be there with you."

Ron's jaw clenched, and for a second, he gripped Harry's hand. "Okay," he whispered, and he managed to look at Draco. "Thanks."

"Are you still going to stay with Hermione's parents for a bit?" Harry asked softly.

"In a bit," Ron said. A Healer came in then and said it was time for Ron's sedative, and as he was still suffering rather badly from intensive internal bleeding, Harry knew that they really had to leave him to rest and heal. Ron took his sedative and immediately became very sleepy.

"We'll be back soon," Harry said again, and Ron nodded and closed his eyes.

Draco took his hand and led him from the Infirmary. Outside, Harry laced their fingers together. "You were really great to him," he said.

Draco gave him an oblique look. "I know how he must feel, that's all. I know how I would feel if I had been too slow and lost you. He's going to need you. And if he gets you, then he gets me. It's very simple."

Harry smiled. "Good," he said.

Together, they went to the place where the new warding system - invented by Draco and installed by McGonagall - had been cleared to allow for arrivals and departures. Draco looked at him. "Do you feel up to Apparating yet?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so. Not quite yet."

"That's fine," Draco said. Suddenly, he smiled and stepped closer, putting his arms around Harry's waist. "Gives me another chance to get close to you."

"Like we needed more of those," Harry said, but he was smiling. He kissed Draco lightly on the lips, and his imagination put a glorious sunset into the late-afternoon sky behind them. Nothing was perfect, and his life would be extremely chaotic until all of the postwar confusion and circumstance was finished, but for now, he was entirely content. Recalling how Draco had asked him earlier if Harry trusted him to Apparate him to the barracks grounds, and how he'd answered, Harry pulled his face back from Draco's and looked him in the eye. "Take me home."

* * *

They'd eaten dinner with Snape and Lupin down in the kitchen, and it had all been very quiet and very peaceful. No one said anything about anything concerning the romantic arrangements of their household; it was simply assumed that everyone knew the pertinent information. After, Lupin had retired to his room, while Snape had said he would be in his study - giving Lupin a very particularly unreadable look. Harry and Draco exchanged smirks across the table at this, but tactfully said nothing. Now they were up in Draco's room, and Harry was sitting with him as he finally read the short scroll Harry had sent three days before.

Harry was leaning against the wall beside Draco's bed, and Draco was sitting partly between his legs and partly turned so that he could see him. He read it a few times over, then put it down. "There still wouldn't have been any question, if I'd gotten this before the battle," he said.

"I know," Harry said again. "I believe you."

Draco closed his eyes, and his mouth moved automatically to Harry's. After, he slowly, carefully unbuttoned Harry's shirt and made him lie back. "I just want to see what's going on with all this," he said.

"I feel fine," Harry insisted. "Just tired. I think it's completely healed."

Draco's fingers traced over where the X should have been. "There aren't even any scars. Do you feel weak, or just tired?"

"Just tired," Harry said.

Draco's hand was cool on his rib cage. "How tired?" There was a gleam in his eye, and Harry liked it.

"Not *too* tired," he amended, one hand straying to Draco's trouser button.

Draco smiled suddenly, eyes narrowed. "Good," he said, and shoved Harry's hand away. "Take your clothes off."

They were both off the bed in seconds, shaking off their clothes and trying not to take their eyes off each other. Harry still had a few unasked questions, though, and decided to ask one now. "Are you afraid that things are going to get boring now?" he asked, a little worried about Draco's response. "Now that the war's over, I mean, and we don't have all this crap to work around?"

Draco gave him a long and calculating look. "Is that a serious question?"

Harry smiled, relieved. "Yes," he said, trying to shrug, but it was difficult - Draco had taken hold of his cock and was coaxing it the rest of the way into hardness, and Harry was finding himself suddenly short of breath.

"No," Draco said, his mouth very close to Harry's neck.

Harry pushed the fingers of one hand into Draco's hair, found his cock with the other, and closed his eyes as Draco's mouth closed over a particularly sensitive spot and began to suck, his hand still rubbing in exactly the right way. "Why not?" he managed.

Draco snickered softly and moved his face to bite Harry's earlobe, none too gently, either. "Because we're still going to argue constantly."

"About what?" Harry protested, opening his eyes.

A quick movement, and he found himself on his back on the bed, Draco hovering over him - Harry's reflexes clearly had not yet recovered themselves entirely. Draco's expression was one of evil delight. "Who's going to top," he said, his tone very smooth and very seductive. "And tonight, I'm going to."

Harry considered. He could have struggled, and perhaps another time, he would have. But he was recalling their first time together, awkward as it had been, on the floor of bunkhouse eight. Draco had left his tie on and it had been dangling against Harry's neck and chin while he'd been fucking him, and Harry had rather liked it. He had wanted to bottom that time, and he wanted it now. "Okay," he said.

Draco's expression changed, and he smiled. "Are you thinking about our first time doing this?"

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling back.

Draco's answer was not in words, but Harry liked it all the same. He felt strangely light, as though the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. There was nothing stopping this now - no obstacles, no twisted allegiances, no distrustful silences. Just this. It was all he needed. It was all that either of them needed. It was the simplest and the most complex feeling that Harry had ever known. And he loved it.

-fin-