

# Honour Bound

by Draeconin

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**Rating:** Adult

**Pairing:** Harry/Draco

**Spoilers:** Yep.

**Warnings:** m/m, slash, language, AU, OOC

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**Summary:** Lucius acquires a life debt. Draco pays.

**Beta:** Phoenix

## Chapter One

All Harry wanted to do was think: try to figure out just what had happened, and what to do about it. Unfortunately his friends and House-mates weren't having any of it. He wasn't listening to them, but their noise prevented him from concentrating. Absently, without even thinking about it, he began running his fingers through the fine, fair hair of the boy kneeling by his side.

That day, less than a week ago, had begun badly, and had gone from bad to worse. Getting up with the sun, he had showered – far more quickly than was habitually the case due to the unexpected lack of hot water. He had thoroughly dried himself, dressed in warm woollens, and gone down to breakfast, only to find that the house elf assigned to the kitchens had slept in and had yet to start the stove fires. He banged on the door to her cubicle, rousing her and telling her to have a nice, hot breakfast ready for him when he returned. Today would mark the beginning of his sixth year at Hogwarts, but he wanted one last ride before he had to get ready to go to King's Cross Station to meet the Hogwarts Express at platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

The dark stallion he'd ridden all summer, Dementor (whoever had named the horse, likely Sirius, had to have had a wicked sense of humour), had been fidgety and uncooperative until Harry had finally managed to fully outfit the beast with saddle blanket, saddle, and bridle. It had even tried that old equine trick of blowing up its torso

with air in the hopes that his rider wouldn't notice. Then he would have released the air and the saddle would be loose and more comfortable – until it slipped, and the rider went flying. But Harry had already fallen for that one once, and once the house elf in charge of the stables had explained the trick and how to prevent it, he wasn't about to let it happen again. He kneed the barrel torso sharply, forcing the horse to exhale, and quickly tightened the cinch strap.

He'd been riding for an hour, nearing the borders of his estate (formerly Sirius', before his disappearance through the Veil), when he saw a gryphon attack someone else who'd been horseback riding and knocking him from his horse, which immediately beat a hasty retreat. He kicked Dementor into a run and readied his wand as he drew near the confrontation. Just before he got within spell range, the gryphon struck the tall man's wand arm just as he drew it, sending the slender instrument flying. All this in the space of three to five seconds.

Harry didn't want to hurt such a rare beast, which was under Ministry protection in any case, so he merely cast confusion hexes, causing flashing lights and a cacophony of sounds to erupt around the beast. Not having an obvious enemy to defend itself from, it aimed a swipe at the downed man it had attacked, then leapt into the air and flew away.

When he was sure the gryphon wouldn't return right away, he turned to the man on the ground – then stopped, astounded. Lucius Malfoy. The man's fair hair was hidden under a hat which, along with the rapidity of unfolding events and the fact that Harry had been concentrating on the danger rather than the victim, explained why he hadn't recognized him before now.

"Lord Malfoy," the Gryffindor said coldly.

The blond man rose to his feet, holding his injured wand arm, blood seeping from a gash on his ribcage as well. "Potter," he sneered.

"May I ask what you were doing on my property?" Harry asked stiffly.

"I'm not aware that I'm on anyone's property but my own, Potter," the lord said, his sneer deepening. How *dare* this boy question him? What right had he? And what was *he* doing here? But since the damned boy had saved his life, he could humour him.

Harry nodded, indicating a property marker not thirty metres distant.

Lucius noted the marker. "Then I am on the Black estate – my cousin by marriage – not yours," the blond replied haughtily. The Dark Lord would have his guts for garters

if he didn't at least try to kill the boy when he had the chance. There was no one around for at least a mile. Where *was* his wand!

Harry smirked. Oh, he was going to enjoy the expression on the Death Eater's face. "The Black estate. Yes. Sirius Black, to be precise – my godfather. He left me it in his will, along with another property or two. So I ask again: why are you on my property?"

"I don't owe you an explanation, Potter, but the property adjoining is one of mine." Lucius left it at that. He was close enough to the border to claim innocent trespass. And, for the most part, it had been. He had thought to add his wife's cousin's property to his own by right of being his closest family, not knowing that the Azkaban escapee had left a will, or had anyone to whom he could pass it on. So he had been riding the boundaries to evaluate what he'd be acquiring. It was a disappointment to learn that Potter had inherited: one of many disappointments the dark-haired Gryffindor had handed him over the years since he'd come back to the wizarding world. Ah, well. He'd put his solicitors on it, although wizarding law would probably hold firm in the blasted boy's favour.

Lucius' eyes had been scanning the ground at odd moments during their conversation. Ah! *There* was his missing wand! His hopes to take care of this brat once and for all sank. It was damaged beyond repair. That damned beast must have trod on it. He'd have to order another from Ollivander's, and use his spare in the meantime.

Harry nodded, accepting the explanation, for now. He would have it checked out later. As the blond wizard turned to walk back to that property's main house, his horse long gone, Harry spoke up again. "Aren't you forgetting something . . . *Lucius*?" he asked, deliberately being insultingly familiar with the man.

The Death Eater turned back and looked up at the still-mounted young man. "And what, pray tell, would that be, you insolent, foul waste of...."

Harry interrupted the vituperation, smirking. "Life debt, *Lord* Malfoy: I believe you owe me one, now."

Lucius Malfoy scowled. He had hoped the Muggle-raised young man wouldn't know of that custom, and he'd be free to ignore the debt. "So I do," he acknowledged, with what grace he could muster. "What would you have of me?"

Harry's smirk got broader. "I'll let you know," he said.

"Make it quick, Potter. I won't labour under that curse for any longer than I must," the blond man said, sending the bloody 'Boy Who Lived' his best death glare.

Harry wasn't impressed. Although Draco's was a pale imitation in comparison, it had numbed him to the effect. "Would this weekend be soon enough?" he asked, feigning boredom. He actually had no idea what he could ask of the man and get away with it. He needed to seek counsel. Unfortunately, the only person he could take this to, he couldn't completely trust – not any longer. Still, a visit with Dumbledore once he got back to the castle seemed to be in order. Harry sighed. He wished he knew where Remus was. The soft-spoken werewolf would have been a much better choice.

The dark-haired Gryffindor turned his horse and set Dementor to a canter, riding back over the heaths to the mansion, and leaving the blond aristocrat to make his way to his own home as best he could. Because of the incident, Harry now had to cut his planned ride short in order to be able to breakfast and Floo to The Leaky Cauldron, from whence he could take a cab to the train station. Harry smiled as he thought his run of misfortunes had ended. He actually had Lucius Malfoy indebted to him!

And so it seemed. The breakfast the house elf had prepared was delicious, he didn't stumble as he stepped out of the fireplace at The Leaky Cauldron (as he almost always did when he Floo'd: the foreign magic seemed to disrupt his balance), and he made it to platform 9¾ with nary a hitch.

Searching through the train for his friends, Hermione and Ron, he heard a familiar voice: but it wasn't one of which he was particularly fond. He might be enamoured of the boy's looks and have fantasies of doing unspeakably erotic things to him, but that voice had never delivered anything but vitriol to his ears. But what that voice was now saying caught his attention.

"I'm telling you, Blaise, my father is *actually* going to give me to Voldemort!" An indistinct murmur answered him. "Quiet? *You* try to be bleeding quiet with that staring you in the face! I could have lived with the Dark Mark, but that? Queer I might be, but I'm not so twisted as to want *that* touching me! Oh, to blazes with it! I'm damned!"

The door to the compartment suddenly, almost violently, slid open, and Harry was face to face with Draco Malfoy, as the blond aborted his move to step through the door.

The blond paled, then he recovered and sneered. "And what are you doing, Potter? Taken to eavesdropping, have you?" At a question from within the compartment, he looked briefly at the occupant and shook his head before turning again to Harry.

"With the way you were yelling, Malfoy, I could hardly escape hearing what you had to say," the Gryffindor replied.

Draco paled yet again. "Just how much *did* you hear, Potter?" The blond's voice was supposed to be threatening, but came out as strained and tense.

"Enough," Harry said shortly, turning to again go in search of his friends.

Draco stepped fully into the corridor and slid the door shut behind him. "What?" came the blond's mocking voice. "The ruddy 'Boy Who Lived', the famous 'Saviour of the Wizarding World', isn't going to try to save *me*?"

Harry looked at the blond Slytherin. Although the voice was mocking and the mouth was sneering, the eyes told an entirely different story. The light-gray orbs begged for help, and at the same time told of the lack of hope that such help would, or could be forthcoming. Against his better judgment, Harry felt his heart going out to the boy. Snarling, he said, "You've made yourself just so likable, Malfoy – how could I help but want to save you?" he said with heavy sarcasm, unable to prevent himself from verbally poking at the boy. "But as it happens, your father owes me a life debt."

Draco's eyes widened in surprise at that news, then narrowed again. "And just how does that help *me*?" he demanded sharply, refusing to feel hope.

"You're a smart boy, *Draco*. Think about it. If you're interested, you can find me later," he replied, turning to go. In fact Harry had no idea how he could use the life debt to save the blond from his fate; but he knew that if there was a way, Draco had the incentive to find it.

"Potter!" Draco called out urgently. When Harry turned back to look at him, he was surprised to find the Slytherin blushing. "Did you hear – everything?"

Harry decided to play with the blond's mind and stepped near him, smirking. "You mean about your – preferences?" he asked sexily, bringing a hand up to caress the shocked blond's cheek. "Now . . . why would that bother me?" Then he turned and walked away, grinning at having rendered his rival speechless.

A few minutes later he finally found Ron and Hermione – and slowly slid the door closed again, hoping they hadn't heard him. Ron's hand inside Hermione's blouse made it clear his presence wouldn't be welcome. When had *that* happened? If they had just been kissing, he'd have barged on in and teased until they attacked him.

He continued on and found a cubicle with three first-years in it. "H'lo! First Years, aren't you? Mind if I join you? All the others seem to be occupied," he said cheerfully.

The children just looked at him, eyes wide, until he cleared his throat – at which time all three broke out of their shock and vociferously opined that yes, there was probably room for him. They continued to stare at Harry after he'd seated himself. He tried to ignore it, and concentrated on the scenery out the window.

Finally, one of the two boys cleared his throat and timidly asked, "Y-you're Harry Potter, aren't you?"

Harry sighed, then turned to the boy. "Contrary to popular belief," he said as gently as his mood would allow him, "I don't like being the object of hero-worship, incessant questions, or being stared at. I'm just a pupil at Hogwarts – as you're to be – who's had more than his share of bad luck, and managed to live through it."

All three children blushed a deep red, embarrassed.

"But yes," Harry continued, "that is who I have the misfortune of being." Seeing no sign from his companions of further questions, he turned back to the window. When the silence had continued for a few minutes, he groaned to himself and faced them again. "That's no reason for the three of you not to talk and get to know each other, if you don't already." When the children gave no sign of complying, he gave in. "And if it's not about my fame," he said, pulling a face, "or the war between the Light and Dark, I'll even answer some questions. All right?"

They spent the next half-hour getting to know each other, the children making very few mistakes in their choice of questions, keeping mainly to life at Hogwarts, and Harry's part in it. When one did ask a forbidden question, the other two would scowl at him or her (there being one girl among them), at which point the offender would colour and apologise before they started in again. After that time Harry excused himself to rejoin Ron and Hermione, hoping they'd finished their snogging.

He knocked on their compartment door and heard some urgent whispering. Although he couldn't make out what was being said, he could guess. Harry grinned. He could just imagine them pulling themselves together – after they'd pulled apart, of course – in a panic that they'd be discovered. About fifteen seconds later, he heard Ron squeak, clear his throat, then call, "Yes?"

"It's Harry," he called out.

The cubicle door suddenly and violently slid aside. "Harry!" Ron cried out, pulling his best friend into a fierce hug. "Where've you been, mate? Come sit down! Why didn't you owl all summer? Herm and I even went to that blasted Dursley place, and they told us you'd moved out! Why? Does Dumbledore know? Why are you laughing?"

"You're going to pass out from lack of air if you don't stop to breathe, Ron," Harry said through his laughter, as he moved to take a seat.

The redhead blushed, and gave Harry a playful punch in the arm for teasing him, before sitting down, himself. "But really, Harry – where've you been? We've been worried about you!"

"Ron!" Hermione forcefully interjected. "I can speak for myself, you know, and you haven't given *me* a chance to greet Harry."

Ron threw her a rather chagrined, apologetic grin, and sat back.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione said warmly, sitting forward and giving her green-eyed friend an awkward hug.

"Careful there, 'Mione – wouldn't want Ron getting jealous," Harry teased.

Both his friends blushed, looking a bit shocked. "H-how did you know?" Ron asked.

Harry grinned. "I was here awhile ago. You two were . . . um . . . busy, so I found another place to sit for awhile." He took delight in their discomfiture, as only a single person who's teasing a recently-attached friend can. And in this case it was two friends who had attached to each other. *Double* the fun! He added to it by putting one hand inside his shirt and rubbing his own chest, alluding to the activity he'd caught them in, before returning it to his side.

His friends' faces were blazing, now. Harry laughed aloud, gleeful with his successful teasing.

Hermione sniffed, trying to regain some semblance of dignity. "He's only jealous, Ron," she said to her boyfriend, trying to tease in return.

"Bloody right, I am!" Harry said, grinning as, on a sudden impulse, he prepared to drop a bombshell. "But I want my *own* boyfriend!" He sat back, still grinning, although it was no longer genuine, but a mask to hide his nervousness. Harry started counting the seconds. He'd reached 'six' before his words fully registered and they'd recovered enough from their shock to speak. They mustn't have had a clue.

Hermione was the first to speak. "That – rather explains a lot," she said. "Why you never dated – except Cho, of course. And that didn't turn out so well, did it?" She started chuckling. "'Wet'. That's how you described the kiss she gave you. 'Wet!'" Her laughter became almost violent, as so many strange little puzzle pieces finally fell into place.

Ron was looking at his girlfriend as though she'd lost her mind. "Herm! He's just said he's a bloody pouf!"

Harry's heart stopped. Was Ron going to reject him?

Wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, Hermione said, "Oh, grow up, dear. Harry's still Harry. He didn't go and turn into a – a dementor, or anything...." She languidly took her boyfriend's face in her hands, and kissed him. "Besides – what he does in private is *his* business."

"*Huh-hem!*" Harry said, loudly clearing his throat. "I'm still here, mates. Want to talk to *me*?"

Ron had a silly, dazed look on his face as he turned to his best friend. "Well, at least I don't have to worry about you stealing Herm from me, Harry," he said, grinning. Then he sobered. "You're not planning to tell the whole House, are you?" he asked. "Only, I don't think the other blokes would take it so well."

Harry relaxed. His fears, it seemed, had been nearly groundless. A small smirk found its way onto his face. "Oh, I think some of them might take it *very* well," he replied. "But no, I don't plan to tell everyone."

Ron looked dumbstruck by the implication. Despite appearances sometimes, and not always aware of what was going on around him, Ron wasn't nearly as dumb as he looked: his temper just got in the way. "Harry...." he whinged, "you can't just leave me dangling, mate; I'll die of curiosity!"

Harry shook his head. "It's their secret, Ron," he said soberly. "You'll have to wait until they're ready to out themselves."

"'Out' themselves?" the redhead asked, puzzled.

"It's a Muggle term, Ron. It means to stop hiding who and what they are," Hermione explained.

Harry nodded. "Like I just 'outed' myself to you and 'Mione," he added. "I'd appreciate it though, if you kept it to yourselves. I don't think I'm ready for the whole wizarding world to find out, and if more people knew, eventually it would get to 'The Daily Prophet'. And don't go around trying to find out who the others might be, either. Respect their privacy and their wishes!" he warned.



Harry's glare as he said that last was enough to instill at least a little caution into the redhead, even if it might not stop him altogether. "Fine! Fine, Harry; but you still haven't said where you were all summer!" Ron said, exasperated.

Harry smirked. It was unnerving to his friends, who'd never seen the expression on his face before. "On one of my estates," he said simply.

"On one of your.... When did you acquire property, Harry?" Ron inquired sharply. He was more than half sure that his friend was pulling his leg.

Harry sobered. "Sirius," he said simply.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione softly exclaimed. "You inherited?"

The raven-haired young man just nodded. He didn't trust his voice not to betray him, just then.

"I'm sorry, mate," Ron commiserated, leaning forward across the space between the seats and laying a hand on his friend's shoulder.

Blinking back the tears, Harry replied, "I appreciate that. You weren't to know, of course." He then fought off the moment of weakness and smiled, albeit a little tremulously. "It's quite a place, really, this one I just came from. But I spent most of the summer familiarizing myself with the properties and holdings I'd inherited. I got quite a 'crash course' in money management, although I'll leave that up to Gringotts and my solicitors until I've learned enough not to make any mistakes. And I learned how to ride a horse! You mentioned dementors earlier, 'Mione? That was my favourite's name, believe it or not," he said, forcing a small laugh.

The pitying smiles his friends were giving him were *not* helping the situation.

"And you'll *never* believe what happened this morning!" he exclaimed, determined to change the mood. "I actually saved Lucius Malfoy's life!"

*That was much* more the thing. Ron's mouth had dropped wide open, and 'Mione's eyes had gone wide and questioning.

"Harry Potter," Ron said once he had recovered enough to do so, his voice low and dangerous, "you had *best* be taking the mickey!"

Harry laughed. "Well, I didn't know it was him at the time, of course," he said, and was relieved to see his friend's tension level drop. He didn't fancy having to hex his best friend.

"Then just what **did** happen, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I saw a gryphon attacking someone, and scared it off. It was only afterward I found out it was Lord Malfoy," Harry explained.

Ron's grin was a bit wry. "I'd wager he was – oh, just *ever* so grateful," he said, finishing in a falsetto heroine's voice, as he rolled his eyes.

Harry's grin matched his friend's. "Fell down at my feet and swore eternal fealty," he avowed facetiously.

"Harry...." Hermione said tentatively, "doesn't that constitute a life debt?"

Harry nodded. "He wasn't any too happy when I claimed it on him, of course."

Ron's eyes almost popped out of his head. "You had the bollocks to do *that*?"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, reprimanding her boyfriend for his language in front of her, as she slapped his arm.

Ron flinched a bit at being hit, but otherwise ignored her and waited for his friend's response.

Harry shrugged. "He was being such an ungrateful plonker. Would you believe he was looking for his wand the whole time we talked? I think he'd have cursed me – even tried to kill me. But it was broken, so he was out of luck. Of course I had to rub it in, so I called the life debt on him."

"And he accepted it?" Ron asked in awed disbelief.

Harry shrugged again. "He's a bastard, but he fancies himself a man of honour. Once called on it, what else could he do?"

"I'd wager he doesn't like *that* hanging over his head!" Ron exclaimed, grinning as though the feat were his own.

"I have to come up with a way for him to discharge it by end week," the Gryffindor Seeker admitted.

"You could make him your bond slave!" Ron exclaimed gleefully.

"That custom isn't still in practise?" Hermione asked, horrified. She only knew of the old Muggle practise of bond slavery, but if the wizard version was anything like it....

"Bond slave?" Harry asked. "What's that?"

After Ron had explained what he knew – extremely little, as it turned out – Harry shook his head. "I wouldn't want him around all the time anyway," he said, then shuddered. But the discussion had given him an idea that might save Draco.

"Hermione, I need to ask you a **big** favour...."

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## Chapter Two

That night after the Sorting Feast for the new First Years, Draco managed to get Harry alone without anyone seeing.

The blond pushed Harry up against a wall, holding him there and trying to look dangerous. "I can't think of a bloody thing that might make my father's debt to you of use, Potter," the blond hissed.

Draco realised almost immediately that pushing the slightly taller, green-eyed Gryffindor up against the wall had been a mistake. The heat from the body contact, the flash in those brilliantly green eyes as they looked down into his, and the flush on Potter's cheeks was making his cock respond. It didn't help that Harry's breath was caressing his face, either.

"I might," Harry said impatiently, throwing the other boy off, "have an idea, but I have to find out exactly what can and cannot be required of a life debt. Hermione's going to research it, starting tomorrow."

"You told her?" Draco asked in an angry panic.

"No," the Gryffindor bit out. "All she knows is that your father owes me a life debt, and I need to require payment of it by the weekend."

The blond hid his relief that his problems weren't being made fodder for public consumption, commenting instead on Potter's ignorance. "He made you agree to that?" Draco asked with a sneering smirk. "By right, you could have held it over him the rest of his life!"

"I almost forgot that I could call life debt on him at all!" Harry hissed. "And if I had, you'd be in a fine mess, wouldn't you? As is, you have a chance. Don't make me forget to give it you!"

Draco paled, then rallied. "When you have some solid information, Potter, let me know. Until then...." He left the sentence unfinished, but his look said Harry was only slightly better than dirt, before he turned and stalked off. He couldn't help the way his body responded to the Gryffindor, but he could make sure Potter never knew how he affected him.

Harry was seething. If there were any way to make the blond regret his attitudes....

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Two days later, Hermione sent Ron to fetch Harry to the library.

"I think I've found everything that's allowed under a life debt," she told Harry when they were all together. "You are allowed to require up to one-half of his lands and wealth, or you can require that he perform any service that is not likely to end in death or serious injury either for him or anyone else. A task can be required to be performed once, or repetitively, in perpetuity; but as he's a lord, you cannot require he become a bond slave," she rattled off. But she was refusing to look at him.

"And?" Harry asked.

"'And' what?" Hermione said, looking up at him and trying to bluff.

"Half his lands and wealth, Harry!" Ron gloated gleefully. "You could break his power!"

"You're hiding something, 'Mione," Harry accused calmly, ignoring the redhead. "You've never been very good at lying. Not to us, anyway."

"As if you're any better!" she retorted, flustered. She sat there and fumed while Harry just looked at her, waiting. "Oh – fine!" an exasperated Hermione finally exclaimed. "Although *he's* exempt, you may demand a substitute!"

A slight frown graced Harry's brow. "Is there anything short of a binding – a bond slave – that I could request?" he asked.

"What are you thinking of, Harry? Take the bastard's wealth!" the excitable redhead exhorted. Still, he was ignored.

Hermione frowned, suspicious. "Why?" she asked in response to Harry's question.

"Never mind, 'why'. Is there?" the dark-haired Gryffindor inquired.

"Not that I can find, no," she admitted. "Harry, what —"

"I have to speak to Dumbledore," Harry said suddenly, getting up and almost running out of the room, drawing a glare from Madam Pince and leaving Hermione staring after him.

Ron threw up his hands, baffled and frustrated.

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". . .and that's the whole story, Professor," Harry said. "What do I do? I don't want a bond slave, but not even Draco Malfoy deserves *that* happening to him!"

"I'm afraid, Harry, that wizarding law doesn't often provide for half measures, and none in instances of life debt," Professor Dumbledore said ruefully. "Until Draco's majority he is subject to his father's whim: like property. And since there is no proof of this plan, beyond third- or fourth-hand information, I'm afraid I haven't the means to help him, either. You have a choice to make: either leave young Mister Malfoy to his fate, or...."

Harry sighed. "Or demand he be given me as a bond slave," he said miserably, finishing the sentence.

"I'm afraid so, my boy," the headmaster responded in a commiserating manner. Inwardly he was anything but sorry about this turn of events. Not only would it remove a potential Death Eater – Draco – from the playing field, but it could conceivably compromise how the elder Malfoy performed. Since Lord Malfoy was high in the ranks of Voldemort's forces, then if his performance *was* compromised, then much of Voldemort's forces might be as well. Yes, this might just work out very well, indeed. And if the only effect was to remove the younger Malfoy from the fighting forces, that was all right, too. As Harry's bond slave, Draco would help keep him safe until he was needed.

Harry nodded, feeling trapped. He didn't truly have a choice, then. In a choice between two evils, he'd choose the lesser. "Would you mind setting up the meeting with Lord Malfoy for me, sir?"

"Appointing a go-between is in the best wizarding tradition, Mister Potter," the headmaster said approvingly. "Yes, I'll set up that meeting, and be there. I can't say I'm happy with this turn of events," he lied, "but hopefully it will turn out for the best. We'll use one of the meeting rooms here. In the meantime, you might wish to study the binding spell. You'll need to perform a part of it. It would be wise to be familiar with the whole of it, however."

Harry nodded. He hadn't meant it to be a formal thing when he asked the headmaster the favour; he just didn't feel up to facing the elder Malfoy. Not when he was going to be demanding the man hand over his son for enslavement. Never mind that Lord Malfoy had tried to kill him upon more than one occasion: Draco didn't deserve enslavement, bastard attitude or none. "Thank you, sir," he said, and headed back to the library.

The gods must be laughing, he mused bitterly. He'd wanted a way to get revenge for the blond's attitude, but he'd never intended it to be permanent – and not only would this be permanent, *he* wouldn't be unaffected, either!

If Harry had ever heard of karma, he'd have blamed the situation on it.

When he got there, his friends were gone – probably off for a snog, Harry thought. But the books Hermione had been perusing were still on the table awaiting Madam Pince to spell them back to their places on the shelves. Harry sat down, quickly found the spell he needed to know, and set himself the task of memorising it. While he was at it, he perused the collateral rules and effects surrounding it as well.

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Since Harry had specified the weekend following when the life debt had been incurred, Lucius Malfoy insisted he had no time until the Saturday for their meeting. He would be bringing his solicitor, and sneeringly suggested that, "if that brat has half as many brains as he does luck, he'll do the same."

When the Gryffindor asked the headmaster about the need for solicitors, he was told, "If the discharge of the debt requires the exchange of money or property, having solicitors present would be needed to ascertain that the amount requested is fair and proper, that no monies or properties are unaccounted for in the accounting, and that a fair exchange be made. They then file the exchange with Gringott's or the proper authorities. Services don't need legal oversight, but you, Harry, are going to invoke something that hasn't been done for over a hundred years, although Lord Malfoy isn't yet aware of that fact."

"If it hasn't been done in that long, *can* it still be done?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes," the headmaster assured him. "Custom isn't easily done away with in the wizarding world, my boy. And the older families, such as the Malfoys, live their lives based upon it."

"Still, it's a rotten thing we're – I'm – about to do to Draco," Harry mourned.

"Draco', is it?" the headmaster asked, eyes twinkling.

Harry blushed. "Still can't stand his ruddy attitude," he growled, defending himself.

The twinkle faded. "Language, Harry. And the slave bond will take care of the attitude," Dumbledore replied soberly.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"The magic will . . . change . . . the way he thinks."

Harry's harsh, barking laughter caused the headmaster to look at his young charge with not a little concern.

Seeing this, Harry explained. "I've always said the only thing wrong with Malfoy was a much-needed attitude adjustment," he said with heavy irony. Then with determination, he said, "No. I can't do it. I can't be a party to thrashing even *his* personality like that!"

"I'm not sure you understand, Mister Potter; the change is only towards you. As his master, he cannot be allowed to be a danger to you."

"So he can still be a danger to anyone else?" Harry asked bitterly.

Dumbledore nodded, to Harry's surprise. "He must be able to protect you, should the need arise," the old man explained.

The Gryffindor was still shaking his head. "I can't do that to him. It would break him – break his pride," he said. Then the tone of his voice changed, sounding rather dreamy as he continued. "It's beautiful, that pride – like a fierce hawk in flight," he added absently.

Albus eyed the young man before him a little more keenly. 'So that's the way of it, is it?' he thought. Aloud, he said, "That's your choice, of course."

The headmaster's stressing of 'choice' reminded Harry of Draco's other fate – the fate the blond would have if he didn't take his rival as a slave. He leapt to his feet, and exploded. "Merlin's hairy bollocks!" he swore. "May the gods damn Voldemort, you, Lucius Malfoy, and everyone else who plays with people's lives! Damn you all!"

"Then what should I tell Lord Malfoy?" the headmaster asked calmly, ignoring the young man's outburst, but grateful the lad had managed to control his magic. He didn't fancy his office being destroyed yet again.

"Not a damned thing!" Harry snarled. "Draco belongs to me!" Harry turned and rapidly swept out of the headmaster's office with unconscious grace.

Dumbledore smiled to himself. While he abhorred Harry's use of language, he was satisfied with the progression of events. The young Malfoy would now be one less Death Eater facing them when the time came. But young Potter's attraction to the boy....



He would have to keep an eye on that. It had the potential to work either for or against him.

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Harry leaned against the wall outside Draco's last class of the day, Arithmancy, and waited for the blond to exit. When he did, Harry nodded, trying to indicate that he had an answer. When the Slytherin ignored him and continued walking, he caught the boy up and took hold of his arm. "Malfoy! We need to talk!" he hissed, in as quiet a tone as he could manage. He was *not* looking forward to this conversation, but he couldn't bring himself to just enslave the blond without giving him a choice.

"Unhand me, Potter!" the Slytherin said loudly, then quietly said, "Library. The dark corner. Fifteen minutes." At which point he made a show of shaking off Harry's hand, and stalking off.

Half an hour later Harry was cursing himself for a fool. Malfoy *still* hadn't shown up. He got up and was heading for the door when the blond walked in. Harry glared at him, then turned around and returned to the corner. A couple of minutes later, Draco silently joined him.

"So nice of you to join me, Malfoy," Harry growled bitinglly. "After all, it's not for *my* benefit, is it?"

Draco looked at him coolly. "I had trouble ditching the dumb duo," he replied quietly. "My '*father*' has probably set them on me to make sure I don't run."

'Jailors, as opposed to being your bully boys?' Harry thought. 'How ironic.'

"Well, you're not likely to appreciate my news either," the Gryffindor said tightly.

"Which is?" the blond asked cautiously.

"There's only one way I can use your father's life debt to me to save you," Harry said, and paused, reluctant to continue.

"If it will free me from that creature's clutches, I'm all for it!" Draco whispered tensely.

"I said it would save you, Malfoy. But the price is high. Maybe **too** high," Harry replied cryptically.

Draco's eyes narrowed. "*How* high?"

Harry took a deep breath. "I can claim you as a bond slave," he finally revealed. He was ready to duck fists, spells, or suffer verbal abuse. What he got, was silence.

Finally Draco said, "What?" in a quiet, shocked voice.

"I'm sorry, but even Dumbledore couldn't find anything I could do that was less than that," Harry replied. "Would you be willing to talk to the headmaster? Maybe if you told him yourself, he could find another way?"

Draco shook his head. "He's an Earl, Potter," he said, referring to his father. "That takes precedence over wizarding law where I'm concerned, unless he were actively abusing me. And he's avoided doing anything that would allow me to prove that." He heaved a sigh. "You give me a wonderful choice, Potter: Voldemort's whore, or slavery."

There was now no emotion in the voice, and Harry was getting worried. He noticed that Draco hadn't said that he hadn't been abused – just that he couldn't prove it. "I did say the price may be too high," Harry reminded the blond.

"How long before I have to decide?" Draco asked.

"Your father has set the meeting for the Saturday morning, at nine."

Draco nodded, got up, and walked out, leaving a concerned Harry Potter sitting there. And feeling concern for Draco Malfoy wasn't a common sensation for the Gryffindor.

The evening dragged on, and the night seemed interminable, since Harry found it hard to sleep, and kept waking. The next day, Friday, was no better. He couldn't concentrate in his classes for wondering and worrying if Draco were going to be okay, or do something stupid: especially since the blond didn't show for either breakfast or dinner. It might have been better if they had any shared classes that day so he could see whether or not Malfoy was all right – but they didn't, and he couldn't. Finally Harry saw a very drawn, almost haggard Draco Malfoy at supper. The blond met his eyes only once, and nodded. Harry didn't know whether to be relieved, or . . . he didn't know what. His emotions were all awhirl.

Saturday finally came, and a very edgy Harry sat in the conference room with Professor Dumbledore and one of the solicitors from the firm that had handled his parents' affairs, and had helped him take over the reins of the Black estates and other holdings.

Mister Schönjing was, in fact, a senior partner in the firm, and had been thoroughly briefed about the events leading up to the life debt and Harry's plans for its discharge. Although it hadn't been necessary, Harry had also informed the goblin of the reasons for it, which had eased the solicitor's unvoiced misgivings over such an action. He had asked a few questions, and ascertained from the answers that the law had no solid basis for taking the young Malfoy into protective custody. If they proceeded in such an action anyway and lost the case, his firm could go bankrupt from the resulting lawsuits. His client's plan of action was the only way: not that he would have had any say, even if there had been another option available. The client made all the decisions. But custom demanded full restitution. Law could enforce it. He had all the necessary papers to ensure a smooth transition, and would file them with the Ministry afterward.

When Lucius Malfoy finally swept into the room a full twenty minutes late, he strode to the best unoccupied chair in the room and elegantly deposited himself there without so much as a 'by your leave', leaving his solicitor to fend for himself. Nor did he bother with niceties or preliminaries. "Well, Potter?" he spat. "What would you?"

Harry's case of nerves was gone. Malfoy attitude always had the effect of making him angry. But he controlled it and went for the jugular. "I require a bond slave," he stated coldly.

Lucius' eyebrows raised a fraction – the only sign that he'd been taken entirely by surprise. He'd expected to haggle over money or land. But.... "I am a Lord, Potter; I am exempt," he sneered in return.

"I am aware of that. But a substitute can be required," Harry said, smiling. It wasn't a nice smile, at all. "I *have* done my research."

"And just whom, exactly, did you have in mind?" the man demanded haughtily. "I have no subjects." Unlike earlier ages, wizard aristocracy now had few to no subjects under them, although they still wielded considerable political power.

Harry's 'smile' broadened considerably. He wasn't thinking now of Draco, but only of humbling the bastard before him. "Your son – Draco," he said flatly.

"No." It wasn't a protest. It was a denial. He had come prepared to deal with anything but this, and there were plans in place for his poufter son.

"I am afraid, Lord Malfoy, that you cannot refuse," Schönjing said, stepping into the conversation. "Custom, tradition, and law are all quite clear on that point."

"Patterson!" the blond snapped, calling upon his solicitor. "What are my options?"

Trembling, the man replied. "I'm afraid, milord, that Mister Schönjing is quite correct. The custom hasn't been called upon for, I believe, about a hundred years, but...."

Malfoy irritably waved him to silence, and just looked at the gathering, thinking. Finally he gave a short, sharp nod.

'As if he really had a choice,' Harry thought snidely.

"I expect you have all the necessary forms and documents?" the lord said, insinuating with his tone of voice that he thought nobody connected with Potter could possibly be so efficient or prepared. When the papers were produced and placed in front of him, he merely handed them to his solicitor.

"Patterson," he said, in a commanding tone.

The silence that ensued as Malfoy's solicitor pored over the unsigned documents was quite tense. The only ones who seemed even slightly at ease were the headmaster and Malfoy himself. A little less than an hour later, Malfoy's solicitor looked up. "These all seem to be in order, milord," he said. "Most of them are form documents, anyway. Would you care to peruse them yourself?"

The lord would. Since he was looking only for content and not legal context or loopholes (that's what solicitors were for, after all), it only took him about twenty minutes to read them through, after which he called for quill and ink. But, true to form, he had everyone else – Harry, solicitors, and Dumbledore as the witness – sign first, after which he took his time examining the signatures already affixed as though he expected them to be be-spelled or forgeries – in other words, being as insulting as he could possibly be. He looked up only once, giving Harry a sharp look when he saw how the Gryffindor had signed his name. Finally, however, he signed all the necessary documents with his name, title, and honours.

Now Professor Dumbledore spoke up. "Harry, would you please inform the messenger waiting in my office that he may fetch young Mister Malfoy, now?"

Although he'd been dreading this whole day, this was the part Harry had been dreading most.

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Draco had settled into a fatalistic attitude, and was numbly awaiting the summons that would end his freedom. Still, he felt surprise when a second-year Hufflepuff (on this duty for trying to cheat on a Charms test) showed up at the door to the Slytherin

common room, and tremulously informed him that the headmaster required his presence in his office. It was time. He hoped he wouldn't disgrace himself when he was face-to-face with it.

Back in the conference room, Lucius Malfoy looked at Harry and, gaining his attention, said, "Myrddin<sup>1</sup>?" derision quite evident in his voice.

"Direct descendent," Harry said briefly. At the man's quite openly skeptical expression, he took refuge in indignation and anger, saying, "You needn't believe me. You can find out the same way I did. It's all in the records at the Ministry."

"So you changed your name? Had to brag about it, did you, Potter?" the elder Malfoy sneered.

"Not that it's any of your concern, but the Dursleys changed my name. I changed it back," the Gryffindor informed him.

"I suppose you can back up the title as well?"

"Of course," Harry said coldly. "That, also, is on record at the Ministry."

For once, Dumbledore was adrift. "Harry?" he said, requesting information.

Harry turned to the headmaster. "Along with inheriting Sirius' properties and monies, inspecting my new holdings, and learning to ride horseback, I spent some time in the Ministry records vaults researching my family," he informed the old man.

He ignored Lord Malfoy's, "My, you *have* been the busy little boy!" and continued with his explanation.

"Not having had a proper family, I wished to know my ancestry. At the same time, I found that the name I'd been using for years was incorrect. Were *you* aware of that?" he asked sharply.

With a gentle nod of his head, Albus indicated that he *had* been aware of that. "It was a name you were used to, and you were so proud that it was your father's name that I decided to let it go. It did no harm," he explained.

"I'm still proud of my parents, but I'd rather honour them by using the name they gave me," Harry stated.

The headmaster felt a mild up-welling of pride. "And there's a title?" he inquired.

Harry nodded. "It was granted to a distant ancestor, but only fell out of use a few generations ago – probably to avoid notice by Grindlewald or his predecessor. However, it is an inherited title, and mine by right."

"Which is?" Albus prompted.

"Marquis of Greenford<sup>2</sup>," the raven-haired young man revealed, shrugging as though it were of no real importance.

"The Marquis of Greenford, Lord Harald Myrddin Potter," Dumbledore mused. "It has a nice rhythm to it," he opined.

Facing the blond aristocrat, he said, "You are an Earl, are you not, Lord Malfoy?"

"Yes," the man snarled, knowing what the old fool was leading up to.

The headmaster smiled. "Then Harry outranks you?" Lucius Malfoy had been a thorn in his side on several occasions. Albus was enjoying this mild revenge.

Lucius refused to answer, only glaring at the man for pointing it up. His only consolation in this was that his son would not be bound to a commoner.

A few seconds later, the Hufflepuff messenger knocked on the door. Upon the headmaster's "Enter!", he stuck his head in the door. "Draco Malfoy is here, sir," he said.

"Tell him to enter, Mister Jameson," Dumbledore instructed, drawing his wand from his sleeve, "and then you may have the rest of the day to yourself."

A plan of action had already been mutually decided upon. Upon Draco's entrance the headmaster would cast the initial part of the binding spell, which would prevent the young Slytherin from being able to resist the rest of it. Lucius Malfoy would cast his part, which would sever all ties he had to his son and transfer them to Harry. Then Harry would finish the spell, binding Draco to him for life.

All went according to plan. As Draco entered the room, Professor Dumbledore's quickly-incanted spell shot from his wand in a wave of blue and green light, striking the blond squarely in the chest. The initial shock as the first portion of the spell hit him caused Draco to fall to his knees. As his father began the second part of the spell, Draco wondered if he might have made the wrong decision. But it was too late to change his mind. He felt the net of energy about him changing, and as it re-stabilised he felt strangely lighter, as though a weight had somehow been removed from his shoulders.

And then resignation set in as Harry took up his portion of the spell. He felt Harry throughout him, in his mind, his spirit. He felt totally permeated with the essence of Harry Potter. The effect diminished as the spell came to a close, but it did not end. He was now thoroughly attached to the Gryffindor. He could feel, on a slightly distanced level, Harry's emotions and needs. He could feel the Gryffindor's mixed emotions about what was happening. It surprised him that there was so much compassion directed at him. When it was all done, the young blond remained where he had fallen on his knees. His brain felt as though coruscating trails of painless fire were running through it – everywhere, all at once. And then a strange peace fell over him.

Harry walked up to the boy and quietly said, "I told you I would save you, if I could. This was the only way. I'm sorry."

Draco looked up at him, a tear in his eye, and said, "Thank you, Potter," totally shocking the Gryffindor.

Harry was aware, on some level, of the turmoil of emotions in the blond's mind, but the predominant ones at the moment were trepidation, gratitude, and sorrow.

"His name?" Schönjing asked. At Harry's look of inquiry, he expanded on his question. "For the records: what name do you give him?"

Oh. Yes. He remembered reading that. "'Draco' is fine. I don't want to have to learn a different name for him, and he'll have enough to adjust to, himself."

Lord Malfoy gathered his cloak and cane, then headed for the door. "Life debts must be paid," Lucius said coldly to his son as he walked past, in explanation of what had just been done to him. Then he turned to Harry, gave a barely perceptible bow in recognition of his rank, said, "Marquis," and swept out the door.

Harry didn't know a lot about aristocratic protocol, but he knew enough to know that the elder Malfoy had again shown his contempt for him.

Lucius smiled to himself as he departed. His master wouldn't be pleased. In fact, he would probably punish him. But whether Potter knew it or not – and he'd go to pains to make sure the bloody 'Boy Who Lived' never found out – he'd done him a service. It wasn't an ideal solution, but he hadn't been pleased with the thought of his son being used by the Dark Lord. Loyalty can only be pushed so far. Fear had been the deciding factor. He'd be punished for allowing custom and tradition to rob his master of his desires, but he'd likely not be killed, as he would have been had he simply denied Voldemort's demand.

Harry had helped Draco off the floor and into a chair, where the headmaster pointed out the new marks on Draco's body. There was a crowned phoenix in flight limned out in light red, gold, and green on the right side of Draco's neck, and another, fully detailed, on the inside of the blond's left forearm. The crown was red, the head, neck and legs gold, and the body and wings an iridescent green. Harry's emblem: Draco's slave marks. The blond was now property, albeit property with a few rights.

Professor Dumbledore called a house elf and gave him a few orders in a low voice. A low, padded cot would be placed by Harry's bed, but because of the need for another wardrobe, causing a lack of space, it would be only inches away. The Slytherin's trunk and belongings were to be transferred there, as well. With five boys in the room before, it had been cozy. But now....

As a bond slave, Draco had to be near to serve his master, and the dungeons were much too far away. The headmaster had made plans for this eventuality, but hadn't wanted to put them into action unless it actually came to pass. Six boys in one small tower room, along with the accompanying furnishings and Draco's personal belongings, were too many; and all the rooms in the tower were occupied or otherwise in use. However, this would have to do until a more suitable arrangement could be made. It would look as though he were coddling Harry, but it couldn't be helped. Even in the days when bond slaves were common they were owned by adults, not pupils. Harry's situation was unique.

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1: *Myrddin* (pronunciation is close to *meer-thin* [soft 'th']) – the original form of the name 'Merlin.'

2: Pronounced 'markee of grehnferd'. Modern British usage is 'Marquess', but I'm going on the premise that wizard society is predominantly, though quite eclectically, early to pre-Victorian in flavour.

A/N: Bonding ceremony based off that found in Dela Ria's 'Life Debt'.



## Chapter Three

And that brought Harry to the present. Draco's upset at being taken to Gryffindor Tower had intensified after he'd knelt by his master's chair (his own idea, in order to make himself less of a target), and the residents had started in with their indignant questions, comments, and orders to "get the slimy Slytherin out of here!" That's when Harry had started running his hand through Draco's hair. Oddly, the contact seemed to comfort both of them.

The incessant yelling and yammering of questions and comments finally tried Harry's patience too far. "SHUT IT!" he roared. The boy under his hand started. Although Draco had felt his mas- had felt Potter's growing frustration and anger, there was no danger for him to react to, and the outburst caught him by surprise, as well.

The sudden, surprised silence was a blessing. "Draco is here because his father owed me a life debt!" Harry said loudly and strongly. "He gave me him for a bond slave to discharge it," he said a bit more tentatively, not sure how his House-mates would take that.

For the most part, there was silence. Those from well-established wizarding families just nodded. For them, the matter was settled. The practise may not have been in use for ages, but their parents made sure they were taught all the customs and traditions, so they were familiar with the concept, and accepted the reality. Having a real bond slave present, especially Draco Malfoy, was still a curiosity that demanded answers, but otherwise the blond's presence was no longer an issue.

Most of the Muggle-borns were clueless. But Hermione, who actually knew what a bond slave *was*, and Ron, were another matter, if for entirely different reasons.

"Way to go, **Harry!**" Ron exclaimed, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

"How does it feel, Ferret?" he sneered at Draco. "Not so high and mighty any more, are you?" When Draco remained silent, ignoring the taunting, Ron aimed a swipe at the fair head, saying "Answer when you're spoken to, *sla-*!" – and was a bit shocked and surprised when Harry caught his arm, preventing the blow from landing.

"Did I give you permission to touch him?" Harry asked coldly. His friends were the ones he'd most worried about – what their reactions would be, and how he'd have to handle them. This, unfortunately, was almost exactly what he'd thought Ron might be like, considering the identity of his . . . acquisition. "I had hoped you were a bit better than that, Ron," he mourned, his voice softening.

"Draco answers only to me!" Harry said, raising his voice as he informed the room.

"And, Draco," Harry added, addressing the blond, "you have my permission to defend yourself from any abuse, from anyone. But if you provoke it, you'll answer to me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Draco replied, "and I may have your permission, Potter, but I cannot defend myself from *you*, as you should well know," he said, but without bitterness. His tone was flat: almost . . . defeated.

"What's got into you, Harry?" Ron inquired, in a bit of a snit, interrupting his friend from replying to the blond, and redirecting his attention.

Hermione was shocked by both boys' behaviour, but especially by Ron's. She looked at him, then Harry, and decided to let them work things out between themselves. *Then* she'd have her say. President of S.P.E.W, and Harry thought she'd be okay with enslaving another human? The boy had another think coming to him! And it was Draco Malfoy? She shuddered a bit.

After that, she would have a few choice words to share with her boyfriend about *his* behaviour.

"What's got into *me*? Since when have you taken to attacking those who can't defend themselves, Ron? I never took *you* for a bully!" Harry retorted, unwittingly earning respect points from his new slave: not for his 'goody-goody' attitude, but because it was *him* that Harry was defending – and from his own best friend!

Draco was wondering if he'd totally misjudged Harry all these years. He'd felt his raven-haired master's unfocused frustration and anger crystallising when Weasley had started taunting him, and blaze when the redhead had made to hit him. Oh, but he'd wanted to hex the gloating smirk from the Weasel's face! But surrounded by Gryffindors, he'd only thought to duck the blow. When he hadn't had to, he'd been shocked. And now with permission from his . . . master.... But he was no longer under attack, so the permission didn't apply at the moment. He sighed quietly to himself, then comforted himself with the thought that the Weasel would try again, and then....

Ron's face reddened. "I'm *not* a bully! Just getting a little of my own back!" he retorted.

"Do you know how childish that sounds, Ron? You're almost seventeen – act it!" Harry ordered.

"Who are you, to tell me how to act?" Ron replied furiously.

As angry as he was, Harry smiled. Well, his mouth formed the shape, but the expression was almost vicious. He hadn't been going to say anything to anyone, not being one to glorify himself, but this situation called for it. "For one thing, I'm the Marquis of Greenford," he said quietly.

There were a variety of reactions to that pronouncement throughout the room, from incomprehension to confusion, disbelief, and shock, but Harry's attention was on the redhead.

"Bloody hell, Harry! If you're going to lie, you could do better than that!" the redhead scoffed. Harry? The most powerful aristocrat in the wizarding world, and with the largest sphere of influence short of the deceased royal family? Not bloody likely!

Harry kept smiling. "If I were lying, I could have, yes," he agreed, calmly.

Draco looked at the young man whose mark he bore with wide eyes. 'So *that* was why my father said that,' he thought. He had been in shock from the effects of the spell at the time, but he remembered what had been said, even though little else had registered. He remembered his father saying 'Marquis' in parting. But without a reference, he'd simply let the word go by without trying to understand. He ignored that he had been in emotional shock, as well. But the Marquis of Greenford? The holder of that title controlled more of Wizarding Britain than any but the royal family! And since they were dead....

"Damn it, Harry, that's not funny!" Ron shouted.

"He's not joking," Draco said, finally joining the conversation. "My father—"

"Quiet, *slave*," Ron hissed.

The Slytherin bit back the retort he'd been about to make, remembering he was in 'enemy' territory. Then, unable to remain completely silent, angrily muttered "Make up your mind."

Harry stood. "That's the second time you've presumed to order what is not yours," he said to his friend in a very quiet, but steely, voice. "Do you make it a habit to meddle where you don't belong?"

"Harry," Ron started, impatiently.

"You will call me 'milord'," Harry interrupted a bit more loudly, correcting him with just a slight hint of hauteur in his voice. He hated to treat his friend like this, but he had to put a stop to Ron's presumption regarding Draco now, or things could get very sticky later.

"Okay, Harry," Ron said warningly, amazed by his friend's gall, "you're really carrying this jest much too far."

"I suggest you contact your father," Harry instructed him coolly. "He helped me verify it."

"And don't think I won't!" Ron snapped, and headed for the portrait door. When he reached it and Harry still hadn't called him back to say it was a joke he started having doubts, but kept going. A quick fire call to his father, and then he could call Harry's bluff with impunity.

With Ron gone, the questions again started to fly. But now they weren't just about Draco being a bond slave: he was also being asked about his claiming a title. Harry answered a dozen or so as best he could while still trying to kill the left-over anger from his argument with his best friend, but found that everyone was asking the same questions, only the wording being changed a bit – each person wanting to be told personally.

Harry was tired, he could feel that Draco was again becoming stressed, and his own nerves were already frayed to the breaking point, so he loudly called out, "Hold up!" When he had everyone's attention, he said, "I understand that you're all quite curious, but a lot of your questions concerning...." He hesitated. He disliked having to keep pushing the fact in Draco's face, but he couldn't find another way to phrase it, and had to continue. ". . .concerning life debts and bond slaves, can be found in the library. Suffice it to say, Draco submitted of his own free will in order to allow his father to discharge his life debt to me. It was an honourable act." Draco *had* accepted the bond of his own free will, but it had been grudgingly, in the face of a fate he considered to be worse. The rest, although not completely true, wasn't a complete lie, either.

"As for the title," the green-eyed Gryffindor continued: "Yes, it is legitimate: passed down for hundreds of years, and only went into disuse a few generations ago due to a dangerous political climate. I have reclaimed it for my own reasons, but of course it makes no difference here at Hogwarts, any more than Draco's does. All of this is on file at the Ministry of Magic. If you are entitled, you can look it up there. If you are not, then you shouldn't be asking. Now, both Draco and I have had a most trying morning, and would like to have some peace and quiet." So saying, he nodded to Draco to follow him, and made his way to their dorm room.

Hermione followed, although girls weren't allowed in the boys dorms. At the door to the room he shared with the other boys of his year, she spoke up. "Harry Potter, if you think you're escaping me that easily, you'd best think again!"

Harry closed his eyes, groping for his last shreds of patience. "Not now, 'Mione. You're going to spout human rights at me, and you don't know all the facts. If you can find it within yourself to trust me, trust that it was necessary."

"Malfoy?" she said, questioning the blond.

The blond looked to Harry for permission to answer, and receiving a short nod in reply, said, "Firstly, my name is Draco – not Malfoy. Secondly, my father needed to discharge his life debt to Potter. I was willing," he said.

Hermione ignored the name correction as irrelevant, right now – and the blond hadn't said anything more than Harry had stated earlier. "Why?" she asked. "Why would you *want* to be a slave?"

"That, Granger, is none of your business," Draco replied, with some of his old spirit. Harry hid a smirk behind his hand. "And now, if you don't mind, my *master* needs to rest."

Harry frowned. He knew the blond had only said it to irritate Hermione, but he wasn't comfortable with the trappings of a 'master/slave' relationship. It might be a magical and legal reality, but he didn't like having it pushed in his face, any more than he was sure Draco did. They were going to have to talk, later.

"I don't care what you say. Slavery is *wrong*, and I'm going to find a way to break this!" Hermione said, ranting a bit.

Harry opened his mouth, but Draco spoke first. "Good luck, Granger," he said, "but bond slavery has existed far longer than anyone can remember. If a way were found, I'm sure the spells were re-written or replaced to prevent it."

Hermione's jaw set in a way that Harry knew too well. "I *will* find a way!" she swore before turning on her heel, and heading back down the stairs. There was no way she was going to be around Malfoy any longer than necessary, and she wasn't going to let his presence cut her off from Harry, either. He needed to go.

'Probably off to the library,' Harry thought. "She truly *would* have a fit if she knew I also owned house-elves, now," he mused aloud.

"We still have about an hour before dinner," Harry said, turning to Draco. "Let's lie down for awhile." He'd only gone a few steps before he realized that Draco wasn't following him. Turning, he found the blond looking at him uncertainly. "Draco? What's wrong?"

Draco had smirked at Harry's admission to owning house elves, and his all-too-accurate guess about Granger's reaction. But now.... "Lie down?" Draco repeated questioningly. "With you?"

Puzzled, the Gryffindor stared at the blond. He could feel there was no repulsion there, but rather . . . apprehension? Then understanding came. "You have your own bed. Well . . . cot, for now," he said reassuringly. He looked Draco up and down, to tease. "Although, if things work out that way...." he said, smirking.

At Draco's stricken look, Harry quickly tried to reassure him, saying "I'm not serious, Draco! It's true that I find you attractive, but I'm not a rapist!" He had decided that he should be totally honest with the young man – lies or half-truths could lead to trust issues, and they needed to trust each other. A lifetime of mistrust would be miserable for them both.

"You – find me attractive?" Draco asked doubtfully.

"It's only your attitude I don't care for," Harry said, nodding. Actually Draco's almost feminine countenance and slight frame aroused a great many emotions in Harry's breast: tenderness, protectiveness, lust.... Until the blond opened his mouth, at which point he only wanted to shut him up. Unfortunately, his instincts were starting to demand he do that mouth-to-mouth.

"Oh," was the only reply.

Harry showed Draco to his cot, then lay down on his bed.

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, Draco was feeling rather guilty. It wasn't as though he hadn't known exactly what he was doing with his insults and actions. He hated the blasted 'Boy Who Lived' – right? '*Right*,' he reminded himself. Except it wasn't the *exact* truth, he reluctantly admitted to himself. He was angry, yes. Obviously. But he kept refusing to acknowledge the hurt that nurtured that anger. Even now, under the slave bond, he was desperately trying to deny the hurt he felt. It had started with Harry's refusal to shake his hand on the train at the beginning of their first year. Of course he hadn't nursed the hurt – nor was he jealous of the mudblood and the Weasel, who were where he should be. And he hadn't allowed the frustration and resentment from the raven-haired Gryffindor's constant bettering of him when he tried to impress the boy to

build up. Of course not. Not at all. The impertinent, beautiful boy had to be punished for it though, right? *'Right,'* he answered himself.

Then why did he feel like he'd just spotted the tag line of a cruel joke – and it was him?

These thoughts, plus everything else that had happened to him, overwhelmed him. But when he felt tears start from his eyes, he blamed it all on the loss of his freedom. Even so, he couldn't let anyone see, so he turned to lay on his stomach, hiding his face from the young man who was now his master.

Draco couldn't hide his emotions though, and Harry felt them. They made him uncomfortable: not half because he was responsible for them (he thought it was all about Draco's new status – or lack thereof), but also because he didn't know what to do to try to make the blond feel better. He rolled to the edge of his bed and trailed his hand over the edge, stroking the blond boy's hair.

Draco inched away, unwilling to accept comforting right then, and especially not from the person he was upset over.

Harry sighed, accepting the rejection for now, and moved into a more comfortable position.

~\*~

When they went to dinner, Draco asked Harry for permission to sit at the Slytherin table.

Harry was a bit startled, as the green-eyed young man had assumed that's where Draco would be sitting. Thinking back to the books he'd read on wizarding bond slavery though, he knew he'd been foolish for doing so. Harry could control almost every aspect of the Slytherin's life as a bond slave, from how he dressed, to whether or not he continued his education, up to and including permission to wed. "Yes, of course," he replied. "If you need me, you know where to find me."

"You gave me permission to defend myself, Potter: I believe I can do that," was the Slytherin's cold reply. As he said it, he could feel those fiery trails in his mind again, and his resistance to the Gryffindor faltered, then decreased.

"Don't get snarky with *me*, Draco," Harry warned. "When they see the slave mark, things may get difficult."

Looking over at the Slytherin table, the blond could see that he was already getting strange looks from his House-mates just for talking to.... He clenched his teeth, then finished the thought. . . .his master. "I apologise," he said tightly. "May I go, now?" The fiery tickle had subsided, but with Draco's resentment and anger towards Harry and his situation, it now returned, burning out those feelings.

Harry nodded, and the blond stalked off. Even in the mood he was in, he strode gracefully. Harry decided he'd keep an eye on the Slytherin table, just in case.

Turning back to his own table, Harry wasn't surprised to see almost everyone there staring as well. Curious, he looked around, only to find everything from unabashed staring to surreptitious glances aimed either at him, or at Draco. With resentment at his life once again becoming the subject of school gossip turning to a slow-burning anger, he once again faced the Gryffindor table. It seemed the gossip network had been a bit more effective than usual. He understood that it was bound to happen, but that didn't make him like it any the more.

He sat in his usual spot. Fortunately, Hermione wasn't there to nag at him. 'She must be still in the library,' he thought. Ron was looking at him, wide-eyed.

"Bloody hell, Harry," the redhead exclaimed quietly, awe and resentment in his voice, "why'd you wait until we were arguing to tell me?"

"I wouldn't have said anything *then*, if you weren't being such a prat," Harry replied.

"When *would* you have told us?" Ron asked, frowning.

Harry shrugged. "After we left school, most likely," he replied, nonchalantly.

"But that's almost two years off! Why?"

"Look how you're acting, Ron," was the reply. "You know I don't like to be put on a pedestal, and here you are, in awe just because I've found I have a title! If I live through this little thing with Voldemort," Harry rolled his eyes when most of those in hearing range flinched at hearing the name, "then I'll need it for its political pull. But I doubt they're going to listen to a school-bound teenager who has yet to reach his majority, even *with* a title. So what use is it now? But you had to get your back up, didn't you?"

Ron turned a deep red colour. "Yes, well: about that...." he stammered. "Dad almost came through the Floo after me, when I told him what happened. Mum was worse after Da told her. So I.... I'm sorry, all right?"



Harry paled. He hadn't once thought of what his unofficially adoptive parents would think of what he'd done. As usual he'd been too independent and not thought of the consequences. "Did they . . . say anything about . . . that?"

Ron considered, for a moment, lying to his friend to see him squirm, but decided he was already on shaky ground. "Well, I can't say they looked happy, but they didn't say anything," he admitted.

"D'you think they're angry?"

"I don't think so...." Ron said thoughtfully, but then decided not to say anything more. Ron wouldn't lie, but he still felt vindictive enough to let Harry stew, a bit, by withholding the fact that his father had seemed almost pleased with the news.

"I need to write an owl," Harry muttered.

"Harry?" Ron said, making a bid for Harry's attention. When the youth looked up, he asked "Why do you care about Malfoy, anyway?"

Harry's wry smile was without mirth. "He's not a thing, Ron. Yes, according to every custom, tradition, and law he belongs to me, but he's still a person."

"Then why did you enslave him?" Hermione asked flatly.

He hadn't seen her coming, his concentration on the redhead. Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to think of what to say. There was nothing for it: he'd have to tell her the whole story. "Not here, 'Mione. Seventh floor, after dinner," he decided.

She understood the reference to the Room of Requirement and nodded once, sharply.

"Anyway, Ron," the dark-haired youth continued, relieved that Hermione had decided to be patient, "if you must think of him in terms of property, think of him as **my** property – and like my Firebolt, you don't have anything to do with him unless I give my permission. Okay?" His eyes begged his friend to understand.

Ron had been staring at the raven-haired teen trying to figure out what was going on, but eventually nodded his head. The only way he was going to be able to handle this was if Malfoy weren't a person. Property it was. "Right. Your property. Don't touch," he repeated. Then a little of the old mischief came back into his blue eyes. "Anything else, Papa?" he teased.

Harry laughed, relieved. "Yes," he said with mock-seriousness. "Baby touch, baby get spanked!"

Ron gave an exaggerated pout, then laughed.

The distaff portion of the Golden Trio watched this with a growing sense of outrage and betrayal. This was a *human being* they were talking about! Yes, okay, he was an obnoxious, insulting waste of space, but.... She felt her resolve slipping. No! Malfoy or not, it wasn't right to make him a slave. Although he might actually do something useful, for once.... If only it wasn't Harry! She set her jaw against her own traitorous thoughts, and set herself to eating her meal.

Harry had been keeping an eye on Draco at the Slytherin table, and although there was some arguing going on, it wasn't anything more than he'd seen before, and the blond seemed to be holding his own. Then a surreptitious movement to his left made him shift his attention in that direction. A normal action wouldn't have drawn his attention, but his life had made him sensitive to any movement that was meant to be sneaky or hidden.

It was a seventh-year Slytherin named Wolmsley – or something like that. He had just finished pulling his wand. Harry pulled his, his friends watching him curiously and with concern, and watched as the young man started to aim it. When he was sure that Wolmsley meant to cast something at *his* blond, he quickly aimed his own wand, and shouted "*Expeliarmus!*" Not only did the young man's wand go flying, so did the young man.

"*Expeliarmus!*" Harry heard, and his own wand went flying. Without thinking, he quickly summoned it back to him. Fortunately only two people – professors – saw that, everyone else's attention being either on the Slytherin table and the seventh-year who was dazedly trying to sit up, or the approaching authorities.

"Potter!" called a very angry Professor Snape as he strode towards the Gryffindor table – Professor McGonagall close behind. "Thirty points from Gryffindor, and two weeks detention for attacking another student without provocation!"

"Wrong on both counts, Professor," Harry replied calmly. "I was—"

"I don't want to hear your phony excuses, Potter," Snape growled.

"No, I'm sure you would much rather further the Slytherin reputation for fairness," the green-eyed young man replied equably. After the events of the previous year and everything he'd had to learn over the summer, Harry had matured considerably. He'd had to deal with all sorts of people and learn methods of dealing with them. This might

not be the smartest way to handle the potions master, but Harry was tired of being pushed around by him.

The potions master's eyes narrowed. "None of your cheek, boy!" he snapped.

Harry affected a confused expression. "I'm sorry? I give you a compliment, and you accuse me of cheek?"

Minerva McGonagall chose to intervene at this point, although it seemed she was fighting a small smirk. "That will be enough, Mister Potter," she said, amusement clear in her voice. "Would you care to explain yourself?"

Harry saw the Wolmsley boy getting to his feet, and looking for his wand. "Of course, Professor," he said politely, "but if you could see to it that Wolmsley doesn't cast anything at Draco, first?"

A quick look from both professors showed the brunet's murderous glare in Harry's direction shift to his fellow Slytherin, then back. Snape's visage suffused with rage at the possibility of being proven in the wrong.

"I believe you may have a point, Mister Potter," McGonagall murmured. "Mister Wolmsley!" she called out sharply to the Slytherin, "Please report to my office, immediately!"

The young man just stood there, glowering defiantly.

"He is from my house, Mrs McGonagall; I shall deal with him," Snape snarled.

"For his attempted action, or for getting caught?" Harry asked.

"Mister Potter!" McGonagall snapped. "Five points from Gryffindor!"

Harry met his Head of House' eyes, then lowered his head briefly in acknowledgement of his Head's reprimand, smiled apologetically, and nodded.

"Sorry, Professor Snape," he said, looking at the greasy-haired man. "That was uncalled for, and I apologise."

Snape raised one eyebrow – quite high. Manners? From Potter? "We shall see, Mister Potter," he said, then turned to his charge. "Mister Wolmsley!" he snapped. "*My* office! Now!"

The brunet's face paled, but he turned and headed for the doors of the Great Hall.

"If you would excuse me for a moment?" Harry requested quietly, rising without waiting for a reply, to the great astonishment of both professors, and walked over to the Slytherin table, ignoring the glares, threats, and insults that came his way. Upon reaching his destination, he quietly said, "Draco, if you're not through with your dinner, you may bring it with you," then turned and walked back, retaking his seat.

The blond raised his head haughtily, but recognised the implicit command and started gathering his place setting, ignoring the remonstrations against his obeying, outraged comments against 'bloody Potter', etc.

"What do you think you're doing, Potter?" Snape hissed, as Harry rejoined them, and again took his seat.

Harry looked coolly at the Potions instructor. "Draco was about to be the target of a spell. For all I know, a Dark curse. Therefore, I'm going to have him close, where I can more easily protect him," he explained calmly.

Harry's House-mates had been looking on in amazement since the start of the incident, and Ron had been half-trying to get Harry to shut up. Hermione was nonplussed, but merely watched. So far, the Gryffindor Seeker hadn't done anything for her to be overly concerned with, other than this slave thing: and that, in her book, was huge. Even if it *was* Malfoy. Actually, *especially* because it was Malfoy. She loathed the blond and couldn't stand his presence.

With Harry's explanation, Snape's face had become darker. He had been informed just a short while ago of Draco's change of status, but it hadn't had a chance to sink in yet, and his feelings of helpless outrage were searching for expression. However, it wouldn't do to hex the impertinent youth into the hospital ward as he felt like doing, so he turned and cursed a suit of armour, which slowly melted into a puddle of metal on the floor. It would have been more satisfying to explode it, but he wouldn't risk injuring innocent bystanders.

Draco had arrived, plate, tumbler, and utensils in hand. "Where shall I sit, master?" he asked, too calmly.

"Here beside me is fine," Harry replied equably, a small frown creasing his brow. "But don't call me 'master'. 'Harry' will do, for now. There are other situations, where.... Well, we'll talk about that later, shall we?"

"Yes – Harry," the blond replied.

Looking back up, he saw the two professors still standing there, both with strange, but slightly different expressions on their faces. Deciding to tackle the potions master, Harry said, "Will I be allowed to explain myself and get those House points restored, sir?"

Snape nodded, shortly. "One hour. My office," he replied.

"Thank you, sir."

Both teachers turned and made their way back to the head table, Minerva with a slightly quizzical expression. This was *certainly* a different Harry than the one she'd been lecturing the past five years: far more self-possessed and confident.

"You heard, Hermione," Harry said, turning to his friend. "How about three-ish?"

Pursing her lips irritably, the bushy-haired girl nodded. "But don't think you can keep putting it off, Harry," she warned. "And I can't believe you baited Professor Snape that way!" So saying, the girl abandoned her meal, grabbed up her book bag, and flounced out of the Great Hall.

Harry just shrugged, turning back to his almost-empty plate, eating what was left of his now-cold meal.

"Loathe as I am to say it, that was quite well handled," Draco commented.

"Which? Wolmsley, or 'Mione?"

The blond frowned. "I wouldn't have thought Bartholomew would act like that," he commented candidly, "but I meant afterward."

"How much did you hear?" the Gryffindor wanted to know.

"Most of it."

"So I'm not quite as thick as you thought, eh?" Harry said with a small grin.

"As long as we're not talking Potions...." Draco grudgingly admitted, with a small smirk.

"If Snape weren't so eager to grind me into the ground...." Harry growled.

"I must admit that although I've rather enjoyed watching him twit you, his automatic dislike of you took me by surprise – at first. But you must admit that you do occasionally cock up . . . Harry," the blond said earnestly.

Yes, he made the occasional mistake or got distracted, but then Snape would completely overreact. But that was a fruitless conversation, so he dropped it in favour of exploring the reason for Draco's hesitations. "Is it so hard to say?" the Gryffindor asked. "My given name?" he clarified.

The blond gave a small shrug. "It's an intimacy I'm not sure I'm ready for," he admitted.

Harry could no longer ignore the yammer of recriminations, congratulations, and comments on his sanity from his House and table-mates, which had started as soon as the professors had walked away. "Have you had enough?" he asked the Slytherin, nodding at his empty plate.

Looking slowly around him, then back to Harry, Draco said, "More than."

Despite himself, Harry smirked. "Then we need to talk," he said, rising from the table.

## Chapter Four

Although a bit overcast, it wasn't too chilly, so Harry took Draco out to sit on the wide, sweeping risers outside the front doors of the school. Previous to the incident with Wolmsley he'd been planning to have this talk in the Room of Requirement. But now, with his upcoming meeting with Snape, it didn't make sense to go all the way up there only to have to trek all the way to the dungeons a short while later.

Harry was trying hard to think of some way to say what he wanted to say that wouldn't automatically make the blond shirty. Finally, he thought he had it. "I don't need a slave, Draco, so—"

"You're selling me," Draco said dully, interrupting.

"What? No!" Harry exclaimed. "And I couldn't, anyway; we're bound!"

The blond smirked. "Just pulling your chain, Potter," he said.

The Gryffindor didn't think so. He had felt the sudden, cold despair coming from Draco, and then the desperation to cover up his mistake, but he didn't pursue it. Even if it was possible, he had no intention of selling the blond. "As I was saying, I don't need a slave – but that doesn't mean I'm going to get rid of you!" he added quickly. He could feel that Draco had mixed feelings about that, but that he was, nevertheless, reassured. "I'm sure you don't like being reminded of . . . your new status, and I don't like being reminded of it, either. I only did it to keep Voldemort from you. So unless the situation absolutely calls for it, don't call me 'master'. I'd appreciate it if we could try to be friends." Now he felt astonishment radiating off of the blond. He could also tell that Draco didn't want to believe him.

"You should be wallowing in your victory over me – sir," Draco responded. He couldn't disobey a direct order, like being told not to call his master what he was, but he could wriggle around it.

Harry pursed his lips in annoyance. "In formal situations you may call me 'sir', 'milord', or any proper variation of respectful address you like regarding my title and position. Otherwise, call me 'Harry'."

"Yes . . . Harry." He had struggled to find another way to address his master, but he had been given a direct order, and had to obey. He was also trying not to notice his master's pursed, but still kissable lips.

Due to his father's expectation of the Dark Lord's eventual triumph and the return of the old traditions, Draco had been instructed to study all of those traditions thoroughly. The only time a bond slave could disobey his or her master's direct order was when such an order would put the master (or mistress) in possible jeopardy. Keeping the master safe overrode all other concerns.

"And why should I lord it over you?" Harry inquired. "That would imply that I needed to prove myself better than you. That was never the case, Malfoy."

Draco was stung. "So you *always* thought yourself superior? I thought so!" he accused, hurling the words at 'the Golden Boy'. Fiery trails in his brain began to burn out the anger towards Harry.

The green-eyed youth was astonished by the accusation. "No! Look, Malfoy—"

"My name is Draco," the blond interrupted. "You named me."

"Yes, but look, I—" Harry hesitated. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, distracted from his original point.

"You only gave me one name. My name is Draco, and only Draco," the blond replied matter-of-factly.

Harry sat, stunned. "Oh, gods, Draco. I didn't think! I knew I had to name you, but I just assumed...." He sighed, looking at the bent blond head beside him, and unthinkingly laid a hand at the base of the graceful neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take your surname from you."

"It's done, Harry," the blond replied resignedly. Despite himself, he reveled in the Gryffindor's touch. He cursed the fate that had made proximity to 'the Golden Boy' not only necessary, but permanent – as long as the bond wasn't transferred.

"Fine," Harry replied in the same tone, "but as to that 'superior' accusation: I'm not. I'm just like everybody else." At Draco's snort of disbelief, he added "Okay, so I have an inhuman madman and his fan club after me...."

This time Draco's snort was one of suppressed laughter. *'Fan club? Good one, Potter!'* he thought.

". . .and had some adventures that I somehow survived, and...." Harry trailed off, as memories of his life started playing out in his mind. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "maybe I'm not so normal. My life has been hell."



"Right; Dumbledore's pet?" the blond scoffed.

"Dumbledore's weapon and tool," Harry corrected.

"Huh?" *'Oh, right - that was a brilliant thing to say,'* the blond thought. "I mean – what are you going on about? The old git lets you get away with things for which any other student would be ejected!"

"Draco, if you had an intelligent, magical pet that was really good at defending you, would you punish it for every rule it breaks, or would you only pay attention to the important rules, try to keep it happy, and keep training it to make it better at the job?"

"What are you saying? That Dumbledore is just using you?" Draco asked disbelievingly.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Harry replied. "Oh, he *might* like me, but he wouldn't hesitate to let me get killed, so long as I got the job done."

"What job?" Draco asked with a small sneer.

"I'm the one that's supposed to kill Voldemort – or get killed by him," Harry said, voice low and husky, laden with emotion. He raised his eyes to the gray ones next him. "Haven't you ever wondered why I'm the one they keep coming for?" he asked.

Draco was shaken. He couldn't doubt what was being said to him; he could feel the emotion. "I- I just thought it was revenge . . . for – you know – when you got . . . that," the blond stammered as his eyes fixed on Harry's scar, his face paler than normal.

Although very few knew the whole of the Prophecy, most knew some of it, so, "No, the prophecy is what prompted that. He came after me when I was one year old. That's your father's precious Dark Lord, that he'd make war on babies. Dumbledore says my mother's love saved me from all but the head wound that left this stupid scar, but that doesn't really make sense, since a lot of other parents died trying to protect *their* children as well. But since then so many have died, needlessly. The stupid thing is, if he'd ignored that idiotic prophecy, I'd probably never have had reason to want to kill him."

"Truly?"

Harry shrugged. "Impossible to say, really, but I don't think so. But I need to go speak with Snape. Is there anything you'd like to do? You may come with me, or go back to

the dorm." He paused, thinking. "On second thought, scratch that last option – at least until they get used to you being around. But perhaps the library or somesuch?"

Draco hesitated. Here was his chance to get away from his rival, and the reminder of his new status for a time. Yes, he had some inches he needed to write for a couple of classes, since his master didn't seem inclined to deprive him of his education, but thanks to the rumour mill, he'd likely be the target of insults, taunts and deprecating remarks if he went to the library. Not that he hadn't before, but then he'd at least had the prestige of his name and the backing of his House. Now he'd lost the former and his House would be amongst the worst, as the 'discussion' and incident at dinner had proven. "I think I'd like to see how you fare with Professor Snape," he decided.

"So tell me something, Draco," the green-eyed young man asked, as they made their way to the dungeon, "would you have taken the Dark Mark?"

The blond tensed. "You know what would have happened to me," he replied.

"Yes," Harry said simply, "but before you knew of that. Would you have?"

"My father expected it of me."

"You're not answering me," the Gryffindor observed.

"To prevent being tortured and killed? Yes!" Draco hissed venomously, hating being forced to confess it. The fire trails in his brain returned, then died away, leaving him angry that the decision to take the Dark Mark would have been forced on him, but not that the question had been asked, since the magic wouldn't allow him to be angry with his master.

"Is that the only reason?" Harry asked, unaware of what had just happened. He could still feel Draco's anger, but wasn't sure what was causing it.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He's insane," Draco said flatly. "If the only way you can rule is through fear, then you are not worthy of being followed, no matter how good your cause."

"You agree that Muggles and Muggle-borns should be killed, then?" Harry asked, saddened to have that fear confirmed.

The blond paused, gathering his thoughts. "No," he finally answered, "but I don't think pure-bloods should be held back so mudbloods can catch up, either."

"Don't say 'mudbloods'. It's not their fault they were born to Muggles. But what are you talking about?"

"Remember your first flying lesson, Po- Harry?" the blond asked.

Puzzled, the dark-haired young man replied, "Yes. So?"

"Didn't you wonder about my being able to fly so well?"

Harry shook his head. "I was rather concentrating on other things, at the time. Besides which, I think I assumed that you were a natural, like me."

"I wish," Draco muttered. Aloud, he said, "I'd been flying since I was five, Harry. And casting spells you learned in first year since I was seven. Most other pure-bloods the same, saving Longbottom. Probably his grandmother's doing, though the gods only, know why."

"So," Harry said slowly, working through the implications....

"So we were mostly bored to tears, waiting for something new to be taught."

"So the whole of first year was a waste for you?"

"No," the blond admitted. "In Potions, Herbology, and a couple of other classes we were learning new things, but we could have been learning a lot more if Dumbledore hadn't been trying to make mu- Muggle-borns our equals."

They had reached their destination. "We're here," Harry said unnecessarily, outside of Snape's office. He had a lot to think about, but for now he was glad to put it aside.

"Enter!" was the response after he knocked on the door.

As Harry entered, followed closely by his bond-slave, Snape looked up from the papers he'd been grading. "Sit," he ordered.

"Woof!" Harry responded under his breath as he sat in the small, leather, bench-like couch provided for the potions master's infrequent visitors. Evidently he hadn't said it quietly enough, because the professor raised an eyebrow at him, and Draco was fighting to repress a smirk. "Sorry, Professor," he said, without meaning it in the least.

Snape sat back and looked at him. "Don't bother, Potter. I don't expect civilised behaviour from you," he sneered.

"I treat as I am treated, Professor," the Gryffindor replied in a neutral tone of voice. "But I would rather not fight with you when I am here to clear up this noon's misunderstanding. I take it you have spoken with Wolmsley?"

Snape's face had darkened slightly, but he nodded, not saying anything.

"Then I imagine you would like to hear my version of events before making a decision?"

Again, a noncommittal nod.

"I was talking with Ron and 'Mione – Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger—" Harry began.

"I am well aware of their names, Potter!" the professor snapped impatiently. "I've had the misfortune of trying to teach you lot for five years, now."

Harry clenched his teeth for a moment, restraining his temper. To his own surprise, it wasn't as hard as he thought it would be. "Yes, sir," he said, tensely. "Anyway, I saw Wolmsley taking pains to not be seen as he took his wand out, so I readied my own, not knowing what he meant to do. I didn't act until I saw him take aim at Draco. You know the rest – sir."

"And why did you not inform a prefect or professor, Mister Potter?" the professor inquired snidely.

"I'd have looked a right berk if all he'd been doing was summoning the salt cellar, wouldn't I, Professor?" Harry answered in kind. "After he took aim, it was either act or risk Draco's wellbeing – and he's my responsibility, now." He felt the mix of emotions coming from the blond: resentment, surprise, grudging gratitude . . . respect? He was surprised by that last, but refrained from looking at the Slytherin, allowing him at least the illusion of privacy.

Snape gave a short, sharp nod. "Mister Wolmsley claimed you attacked him without provocation, but accused Mister Malfoy of being a House traitor, and couldn't satisfactorily explain the presence of his wand outside of its sheath. Your House points are restored, Mister Potter. You may leave."

Harry didn't move.

Raising an eyebrow, the dark-haired professor looked at him. "Is there something else, Mister Potter?"

"The detentions, sir?" Harry said, reminding him.

"Dismissed," Snape hissed, fuming to himself, then pointedly went back to grading essays, ignoring the two teens. Wolmsley was going to regret making him look the fool.

Once outside the potion master's office, the dark-haired teen allowed himself the luxury of a pleased smirk before once again starting to make his way out-of-doors, the blond following.

"You surprise me, . . . Harry," Draco remarked.

"Oh?"

The blond nodded. "If I may speak freely?"

Harry stopped, looking at him, and thinking. "If it's not for the purpose of gratuitous insults, certainly," he said, starting off once more.

Draco nodded again, accepting the condition – not that he'd been planning to insult the other boy, anyway. "It seems to me you've matured quite a lot over the hols," he commented. "You've been handling yourself quite differently than I'm used to seeing."

"Impressed?" Harry asked facetiously.

"Quite frankly, yes," the blond replied seriously, to the Gryffindor's obvious surprise. The Gryffindor Seeker had always had qualities that drew Draco's admiration, but how Harry handled difficult situations had never been among them – until now. "You seem to have learned how to control your temper," he commented.

Harry laughed wryly. "Not really," he confessed. "Just not to show it so freely."

"That's half the battle, mas- Harry. The rest is learning not to care."

Harry didn't reply, and they walked along silently for a while. Arriving at the steps once again, they sat.

"I'm not sure I could do that," Harry said. At Draco's questioning gaze, he explained, "Not caring."

Draco tilted his head slightly to one side as he regarded the green-eyed youth that now controlled his life. "Why should you care what strangers think of you?" he asked. "I've never truly had any myself, but I can see how you might care what your friends think of you – but strangers and acquaintances?" He shook his head. "If you're working with them you need them to respect your abilities, but their opinions of **you** don't matter."

The Gryffindor looked at Draco as an idea occurred to him. "You know how everything works in this world, don't you?" he asked, almost as a statement.

"I was educated in politics, investments and such, if that's to what you're referring," the blond replied, curious now.

Harry came to a decision. "I need you to teach me," he said firmly.

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When the time neared to meet with Hermione, Harry again gave Draco a choice. "Would you like to go to the Room of Requirement with me? I need to talk to Hermione about all this," he said, indicating the both of them with gestures, and by implication, the bond between them. "Or you may have the next couple of hours to do with as you wish," he offered again.

The blond thought about it, but it didn't take much thinking to know he wanted to see how Harry handled the situation with his do-gooder friend. He'd already found that Harry wasn't exactly the same boy that he'd gone to school with the past five years. He'd matured: become more independent. It would take time to find out exactly how much he'd changed, and how much he remained the same. "If you don't mind, I think I'd like to accompany you," he said.

Hermione was already in the Room of Requirement when they arrived, and started right in on the green-eyed Gryffindor before he'd had a chance to seat himself. The room looked like a large dungeon room, with chains on the walls, a whipping post, and what looked like blood stains in what would have been appropriate places, should it have been one that had seen extensive use. That it had a few chairs and a fireplace in it as well didn't detract from the atmosphere.

"All right, Harry Potter – what *possible* excuse could you come up with to justify such an inhuman act as enslaving a fellow human being?" she inquired angrily, going on the attack.

Looking at and listening to his long-time friend, and taking into account how she must have deliberately had the room look, Harry was struck with how manipulative it was, and how irritating and controlling she could be. Suddenly he didn't feel in the least like explaining anything to her. "When did you take the youth potion, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

The teenaged girl stopped her haranguing as though hit with 'Silencio', her mouth hanging open for a moment while she took in what Harry had said, and then, "What? Are you off your trolley, Harry? I'm the same age as you!" she said sharply.

"You're acting as though you were my mother," Harry replied, enjoying having thrown her off-stride.

Glaring, Hermione walked up to Harry and slapped him, hard. "How *dare* you!" she exclaimed.

Harry had made no move to avoid the blow, which had made Draco flinch in sympathy, having been on the receiving end of one of the girl's punches. He didn't think her slaps would be much softer.

"Actually, 'Mione, the question should be, 'How dare *you*?'," Harry replied calmly, the white area on his face rapidly reddening where the slap had landed. "You and Ron are always questioning my every move, arguing my every decision, worrying about every emotion I show.... There have been times in the past when that has been beneficial, but it gets tiresome when that becomes almost the entirety of our relationship. It may come as a shock to you, but I **am** capable of taking care of myself. Instead of trying to be my handler, why don't you try being just my friend?" Harry turned to go, and then turned back.

"Oh. And the decor? Nice." With that, the dark-haired Gryffindor turned and walked out, a smirking blond Slytherin hot on his heels, and leaving a shocked, bushy-haired girl behind.

She was a little ashamed of herself, but the abrupt way Harry had told her off had totally shaken her. He may have been right, but.... But anything less, and she'd have likely not paid attention to it, she admitted to herself, ruefully. "I'm going to find out everything there is to know about that bond, Harry Potter," she swore to the otherwise empty room, "and then you'll see how much a friend I can be." She'd free of him of that blond git, no matter what it took.

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"I know that, by now, you have all heard rumours concerning Draco Malfoy and . . . Harry Potter," Professor Snape announced at the beginning of potions class on Monday, "ranging from the Imperius curse to. . ." he paused, his eyes narrowing as a barely-perceptible shudder shook him, ". . .a love match, love potions, or an arranged marriage between them."

The potions master glared at the youth with the lightning-shaped scar. "Perhaps, Mister Potter, you would like to set the record straight?" he commanded.

Furious with the greasy-haired man, but sending an apologetic look towards Draco, Harry stood, and faced the class. "Lord Malfoy owed me a life debt. Draco was his means of paying it," he said shortly and sat down, glaring at the potions master, who ignored him.

"You mean you forced him to give you Draco as your slave!" Blaise Zabini accused.

Harry looked at him, then at his bond slave, knowing this partial truth had to have come from him. "Draco – tell them the truth," he ordered the blond.

The blond's head came up proudly, though Harry could feel that he wasn't anywhere near as sure of himself as his posture would indicate. "While he forced my father into giving him me as a bond slave, he did so only after I had agreed to it," he stated.

"Why would you possibly—" Theodore Nott started to yell, and was interrupted.

"This is a potions class, not a discussion forum!" Snape said sharply. "I hope this puts to rest all those vapid rumours! Now! Today's potion...."

As could be expected, glares, snide comments and insults flew the entire three-hour period – usually in such a way that the professor could pretend he didn't know what was happening. With Snape ignoring his House' poor behaviour, Harry knew the man was only awaiting an excuse to dock points from Gryffindor or give him detention. So for this time he gritted his teeth and endured. Then he remembered Draco's words earlier about caring, and decided to give it a try. He shoved his emotions to one side and cleared his mind, as he'd been taught for Occlumency, and found that it was much easier than he had expected. Draco had been right; there was no reason to allow others to effect his emotions. However, he knew that he'd have to correct the impression his dear potions professor had left with the class, or trouble would follow.

At Snape's "Class dismissed!" Harry stood and yelled "Hold up!" surprising a great many people, and shocking one potions professor. As Snape was about to bite a certain Gryffindor's head off, Harry spoke up again. "So now you all think you know all the



answers, do you? Well, I have an eye-opener for you! Draco's choice was between this, and certain torture and probably death, from Voldemort! At that, it took him two days to decide! Given the same choice, what would *you* have done?" Ignoring the flinching and sharply in-drawn breaths at the mention of the Dark Lord's name, Harry made sure Draco was with him, then stalked out, also ignoring Ron and Hermione's attempts to get his attention.

Draco wasn't sure how he felt about Harry's outburst. Yes, it had made him out to be stronger than he was, but it had probably also raised questions in his House-mates' minds, such as – why had he been marked for torture and death? He didn't think he could bear to tell anyone that he would have been He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's sexual torture toy. The most obvious conclusion everyone would come to would be that he had defected or betrayed the wrong person, or something similar. It was too much to bear thinking about.

After stowing their school supplies in their wardrobes, they made their way to tea. At Draco's silent inquiry, Harry shook his head. "I won't trust them with you until I know you'll be safe," the Gryffindor explained.

"Why do you care?" Draco asked, frustrated.

Jade green eyes met gray, just for a moment. "Let's sit, first," Harry said. He chose a spot that was relatively distant from anyone else: far enough that they'd have a modicum of privacy.

Once settled and served, Harry took up the blond's question, having used the intervening time to reflect on it. "Why do I care?" He shrugged. "I shouldn't, I suppose, but nobody deserves – *that*. And now?" Harry shrugged again. "Now, I'm responsible for you."

"And that's all?" Draco asked, a little bitterly.

Harry looked at the blond curiously, then decided to test the waters. "If you were less . . . abrasive – and interested...." he hinted.

The blond was more than a bit surprised. He had thought Harry had been mocking him, those few times. "You weren't making light of me?"

Harry's cheeks showed a hint of pink. "Well, yes and no," he replied. "I enjoyed teasing you, but...."

Draco leaned in closer, so his words wouldn't travel. "You're not interested – that way – in girls, either?"

Harry shook his head.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" the blond asked, curious.

"No. You?"

Draco shrugged. "Not as such," he said. "Blaise and I used to help each other out."

"Blaise, too?" Harry asked.

"Not really. Just a bit bi-curious, I suppose." At the Gryffindor's look of askance, he expanded on his reply. "Willing to experiment, but more interested in girls."

"Oh. – Did you and he ever...?"

Draco looked at his master. "I'll answer if you order me to, but that's getting a bit intrusive," he replied.

Harry was tempted to order an answer anyway, but resisted the urge. "Sorry," he said. He stood there for a moment searching the blond's face, then decided to take another chance. "If it's at all possible, I *would* like us to become friends," he offered for the second time that day.

"I thought you just said you wanted me to be your boyfriend, Harry," Draco said with a sly grin.

"That too," Harry said solemnly, an intense look in his eyes, "in time."

People had looked at Draco hungrily, before. He was used to seeing lust-filled eyes looking at him, but had only indulged himself with one, and that one only manually. Well, there had been that one time Blaise had sucked him off.... But Harry's gaze held a hunger deeper than that: not just for his body, but for all of him: his spirit, his heart – his very soul. It was too intense, and Draco felt his face becoming very hot as he looked into those deep green wells that threatened to swallow him whole. "Just like that? I don't think so," he said coolly. "I'm a slave, remember?" He had to keep 'The Boy Who Lived' at arm's length, or he feared he'd lose himself completely. It was practically the only control of his life he had left.

"It wouldn't be the first time," Harry said, somewhat cryptically.

Draco wanted to let that comment go, but his curiosity demanded satisfaction. "What wouldn't be the first time?"

"We're all slaves, Draco," the Gryffindor replied obliquely. "It's just less obvious with most."

"I beg to differ," the blond objected.

"It's true," Harry insisted quietly, "although I'll grant you that it's usually not obvious. Everyone has their masters, whether they will or not. For most, it's simply earning a living, and keeping their families fed and comfortable. For you, it's a magical bond: for me, it's a prophecy and a secretive, manipulative old headmaster: for your father and the other Death Eaters, it's Voldemort. Sometimes it's voluntary – sometimes it's not. But everyone has their masters."

"Then who's Dumbledore's master? And Vol- the Dark Lord – who's his master?"

The dark-locked youth shook his head. "I'm not sure about Dumbledore, although I have my suspicions, but Voldemort's is power, hate, and vengeance."

"What do you suspect?"

Harry grinned wryly. "I'm not ready to say, just yet." A small frown appeared. "Especially not when we're in his power base."

"What does that have to do with anything?" the blond demanded, his frustrated curiosity making his voice a little waspish.

"Haven't you ever wondered how he seems to know everything that goes on, here?"

Draco nodded. He had to admit that it *was* strange.

"Well, so have I," Harry said. "The only thing I can think of is that the ghosts, portraits, and maybe even the castle itself, must report to him."

"A building? You're losing...." Draco stopped himself, dropping his eyes. "Sorry, Harry," he said.

"Draco," Harry said softly. When he didn't get a response, he reached over, curled his index finger under the blond's chin, and lifted Draco's head so he could see his eyes. "Draco, we've been having some very decent conversations today. I'm enjoying talking with you – getting to know you. It'll take time, but I hope we have that. I said no gratuitous insults; I didn't say you couldn't speak your opinions."

Draco took heart. "Why do you think the castle might have the ability to report to the old git?" he asked.

"How many buildings are as magical as this one?" Harry asked, in response.

The Slytherin frowned. It was a good question. It seemed everyone took the magic here for granted: the moving staircases, the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, the multitude of ghosts, warded portals . . . almost everything aside from the floors having some magical quality about it. "I don't know of any," he admitted. "Not to this extent, at any rate."

"And there are magically created items that are sentient, aren't there?" Harry asked, thinking specifically of the Sorting Hat, but knowing that there were a great many other things in the wizarding world, as well.

Draco nodded, eyes widening as the implications of what the Gryffindor was saying sank in. "By Harga's garters," he breathed. "But it would take hundreds of wizards to create a sentient object as large as Hogwarts!" he protested.

Harry shrugged. "We'll probably never know how it was created," he admitted, "but it all fits, doesn't it?"

Draco looked around him at the walls of the Great Hall, then up at the clouds scudding across the ceiling, and nodded.

"And with Dumbledore tied into the school wards, it's possible," the Gryffindor Seeker concluded, clinching his argument. "Are you finished with your tea?"

The blond nodded again. Too many shocks in one day.

"Then I suggest we get started on our assignments," Harry remarked, gathering his books and supplies bag.

Draco put a hand lightly on Harry's arm, stopping him. "You still haven't said," he reminded the dark-haired young man, "what wouldn't be the first time?"

"That someone fell in love with their master," Harry replied, colouring slightly, and not looking at the blond.

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**A/N:** I thought of JKR's Ministry law against minors using magic, but upon reflection it seemed to me that if that law existed in a real Harry Potter universe, it would be scoffed at by the older families. In fact, it just

didn't make sense – period. I could see a restriction against minors doing magic past a certain level of complexity, since they wouldn't be mature enough to use them wisely (much like driving a car), but wizarding families would **never** have allowed a law that prevented their children from learning and practicing *any* magic. Things like flying, simple levitation, cleansing and grooming spells, etc, would be a part of everyday life. JKR couldn't have been thinking of anything but making Harry's life difficult when she wrote that in. So in my AU world, it didn't happen.

## Chapter Five

Draco hadn't taken well the revelation that Harry Potter, his erstwhile rival and enemy, and now his master, actually had *those* kinds of feelings for him. Not that he showed it. No, he kept his feelings to himself. It had been a mild torture, during the time he'd been trying to gather the courage to relay his decision, to know he'd be the slave of the boy he had somewhat lusted after when he thought him unattainable. Now, not only had he found out that Harry was a woofter as well, but had similar feelings for *him*. But if he indulged himself with his master, he was afraid he'd lose his last semblance of freedom. It was going to be torture. He knew that eventually he'd probably lose the struggle with his feelings and desires, being forced to be in Harry's company most of the time, but he was going to fight it as long as he could.

About a week after the bonding, both boys were studying in the sixth-year's dorm. Draco had been studying his new master rather closely, since he had the opportunity, and had become curious enough about the change in him to act on it. "Harry, may I ask you a question?" he inquired of his master.

Harry, who had been studying his Transfigurations textbook, looked up at the blond. "Of course."

"You seem much changed from last year." Yes, he had remarked on it before, but now he wanted to know why.

The Gryffindor stilled, knowing Draco wanted to know the cause of his new outlook and attitude, and gazing at the other young man, he tried to decide how to react. Finally he took a deep breath and replied, "Do you remember the attack on the Ministry last year?"

Draco knew it all too well. That's when his father had been caught and put in Azkaban. He nodded.

At the blond's acknowledgement that he knew what Harry was talking about, he spoke again. "My godfather was killed."

"The only one killed there was my black sheep of a cousin," Draco replied doubtfully. At the green-eyed teen's nod, realization hit. "*He* was your godfather?"

Harry nodded again, solemnly. "And the only family I had left. The Dursleys, or at least my aunt and cousin, may be blood relations, but I don't consider them family. Anyway, you remember how angry and depressed I was afterward?" He didn't wait for

a response this time. "It finally occurred to me that Sirius wouldn't want me behaving like that, so I started pulling myself together. A wise man once told me that emotions like those I was having could either destroy a person or temper them." He snorted amusedly. "I told him that I already had enough temper – I needed control."

Draco laughed, remembering how easy it had always seemed to be to provoke the raven-haired boy. When he again looked at the green-eyed Gryffindor, there was a dark, brooding look in his eyes, so Draco waited silently.

A few moments later, Harry shook himself, and smiled reassuringly at his charge. "When I found out I'd inherited his estate.... Well, I couldn't very well make his spirit proud of me by brooding and ranting all the time, could I?" He didn't mention the time it had taken him to recover from the shock of receiving the then-unwanted gift. He'd wanted his godfather back, instead. He still did, but had resigned himself to the facts. "So I set myself to learn what I needed in order to take care of everything. Not much along those lines you can learn in six weeks, is there? But I tried, and I did learn to ride horses. I've a lot yet to learn, though." He looked up, his face brightening somewhat. "Thank you for agreeing to help me with that."

Harry's face now radiated a quiet happiness; one the blond didn't wish to break. But he had one more question. "How did my father incur a life debt to you?"

The Gryffindor sighed, and looked into the other boy's gray eyes so that, along with the emotional bond, he'd know what was being said was the truth. Harry then proceeded to relate the tale, leaving out nothing – not even his suspicion that the man would have tried to kill him, had his wand not been broken.

Draco sighed, and nodded. Harry could feel his sorrow as the blond's head bowed.

"So. You saved his life. I know he's not a good man, Harry," Draco whispered, "but I tried so hard to be proud of him. Tall, handsome, strong, powerful: there was a lot about him of which I could be proud. I so wanted him to be proud of me, too. I . . . turned a blind eye to those things about him I couldn't like. I blamed all that on other things: other people. Even you. Especially you. But after he went to Azkaban, no matter how I fought the realization, it became harder to deny that he wasn't the man I had believed him to be – or rather, the man I so wanted him to be."

It was deplorable that Lucius had been able to bribe his way out of the prison. If officials had been less corrupt, his son might not have been offered to the Dark Lord, leading to their present predicament. Harry sat, thinking for a moment. "Draco," he said, hesitantly, "why are you telling me all this? It doesn't seem like you."

Draco sighed, his body sagging. His head remained lowered, refusing to look at the dark-haired teen. "You're my master, Harry. You own me. For life. What does it matter if I tell you now, or years from now? You'd find out eventually."

When there was no response, the blond looked up to find the beautiful green eyes of the Gryffindor brimming. And now, belatedly, he noted Harry's sorrow. "Harry?" he queried. "Why?" Insofar as he could see, nothing had happened in the last few minutes to cause the tears.

The green-eyed boy shook his head, then changed his mind and answered. "This is what I was afraid of," he said quietly, "why I didn't want to take you as a bond slave."

Draco was both surprised and puzzled. He would have thought his now-ex-rival would be pleased to have him under his thumb; but what had caused the sorrow?

Seeing the Slytherin's blank look, Harry expounded. "Your spirit; your beautiful spirit...."

Comprehension dawned. The Gryffindor thought he was broken! He refrained from laughing out loud – it would have been undignified – but he smirked broadly. "It will take more than this to break *me*, P- Harry," he drawled. Damn it, he was *still* bound by order to call the beautiful, green-eyed teen by his given name. The slight, momentary grimace must have given him away.

Harry's green eyes glowed with hope. "If it would make you feel better, you may call me by my surname, until you are comfortable enough to use my given."

Why did the ruddy arse have to be *nice* to him? Although, truth be told, the Gryffindor had been, ever since.... It must have been since he'd been told of the bond slave option. Genuine gratitude was almost a foreign concept to him – or at least showing it, but. . . "Thank you, Potter."

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That Friday at supper, a school owl delivered a note to Harry.

*Mister Potter:*

*Please meet me after supper in my office.*

*Prof. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster*



"What's it say, mate?" Ron asked.

"The headmaster wants to see me after supper," he replied.

"What have you done now, Harry?" Hermione asked. She was still a little miffed with her friend, but not enough to snub him. It didn't help that she still hadn't been able to find a way to break the slave bond so Harry could be shut of Malfoy.

"Nothing I can think of," Harry replied. Almost as an afterthought, he found himself resenting her assumption.

"You don't think it's...." Ron hinted broadly, pointing to his own forehead.

The Gryffindor Seeker shook his head doubtfully. "My scar hasn't hurt at all, lately," he replied. "I suppose I'll find out later."

O~~~~~O

"Merlin, Harry! How do *you* rate?" Ron exclaimed enviously.

The meeting with Albus Dumbledore had merely been to inform Harry that a separate room had been renovated for him and Draco. It was still in Gryffindor Tower, but a floor above the boys dorms. It was no better, nor worse, than the seventh-year boys individual rooms, which meant it was a good deal better than the sixth-year boys dorm. But it did have two beds, and a fireplace. And because it could have presented a hardship to have to traverse the stairs in the middle of the night, or when ill, a toilet and large shower were present in a small, attached room.

"I don't, really. Professor Dumbledore said it was because our dorm was too crowded with six boys in it."

"I don't suppose you'd trade?" the redhead asked wistfully.

"You really want me to inflict my nightmares on everyone, Ron?" Harry asked laughingly.

"I suppose not.... But maybe you'd lend it to Herm and me once in a while?" he asked hopefully.

Harry pictured his best friends going at it on his bed, and cringed. With that as his reaction, he could imagine Draco's. He didn't have to imagine much, as he could see the blond's expression, just out of Ron's line of sight. He forced a laugh, saying, "You'll just have to struggle along like everyone else, Ron. I'm not going to risk expulsion by letting

our room become. . ." He paused and looked around melodramatically, then continued in a stage whisper. ". . . a den of iniquity," then cringed from an imaginary person over his shoulder, as though he'd been caught saying it. As he'd hoped, Ron started laughing. If anything, Draco's expression became even more dour.

"Yeah, mate – okay," Ron said through his laughter.

Harry relaxed. "So why didn't 'Mione come see the room as well?" He had a fairly good idea where she might be, but wanted to be sure that she hadn't decided not to come because she was holding a grudge.

"You know Herm, Harry; she's in the library again," the tall redhead replied, rolling his eyes at his girlfriend's eccentricities.

"Still trying to find . . . you-know?"

"You needn't walk on eggshells on my account, Potter," Draco inserted. "It's a slave bond, and I'm a slave."

"Don't say it, Weasley," he added, as the redhead opened his mouth.

Harry merely nodded in acknowledgement of the blond's remark, then looked at his best friend. "Besides which, Ron, you **do** know that he retains his title?"

Ron's mouth hung open a moment. "You're having me on!" he accused.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not," he declared. "Draco is Malfoy's heir, unless he begets another."

"Not likely, given...." The blond stopped talking. "Never mind," he said.

"Given what, blondie?" Ron asked snidely.

"Give it up, Ron; he's allowed his family secrets," Harry said quietly.

"Why are you coddling him?" the redhead asked sharply, rounding on his friend.

"I'm not 'coddling' him. It 's called common courtesy."

"Thank you, Harry," Draco said softly.

Ron goggled at the blond, then turned back to the raven-haired youth. "Did I actually hear *Malfoy* say 'thank you'?"

Harry nodded. "We're getting along. Mutual respect, anyway." He wasn't about to tell his hot-tempered friend how he truly felt, even if nothing ever came of it. The long-standing Weasley/Malfoy feud had been going on so long, nobody knew how it had started – or so Ron had claimed, when asked.

The youngest male Weasley saw the look on Harry's face and wisely dropped that line of conversation, returning to the one of moments before. "What about money, and lands?"

"I'm not sure. Draco?"

"When my father dies, or becomes unable to govern the property, the title will be passed along to me. I inherit. However, what I own, Lord Potter owns through me . . . and controls."

"Just 'Harry', or 'Potter', Draco. We're in private."

Draco shook his head, but didn't vocally disagree. "Anyway, the property belongs to Lord Malfoy, not Lucius Malfoy. Therefore when I become Lord Malfoy, the property also becomes mine. As my owner, you then own and control that property, unless I produce an heir of my own. Then the title and everything that goes with it passes to him or her upon the heir's majority."

"That seems a rather fine distinction," Harry pointed out, "belonging to the title rather than the person."

"But an important one," the blond insisted quietly.

The green-eyed teen looked to his friend. "Is that how you understand it, Ron?"

Ron looked at his long-time friend, again reminded of Harry's new-found status. "It's weird to think of you as being of the peerage, even maybe royalty, Harry," he complained. "But as much as I hate to have to agree with the Fer—" Harry's glare stopped him mid-word. "With *him*, yes; it is."

Harry was dissatisfied with how his friend had corrected himself, but let it pass, figuring there might be too much bad blood between them for Ron to be able to give it up. He held onto a grudge like a dog holds onto a fresh bone. But. . . "Royalty?"

"A Marquis is just a step below the immediate royal family, so you'd have to be related, right?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know, Ron. I'm rather new to all this, remember? I found I've inherited the title, but I haven't had time to research much else. I've had a lot of other matters to take care of as well."

"Harry? If I may?" Draco requested. At a nod from the raven-haired teen, the Slytherin expounded. "You were quite likely related, as were most of the higher nobility, but you're only deemed royalty if you're a part of the immediate royal family."

"'Were'?"

"The royal family were murdered by Grindlewald and his followers."

With that announcement, the conversation dwindled, and died. Harry and Draco continued to unpack, and Ron wandered off to see if he could pry his girlfriend away from the library for awhile – even if she *had* rather been giving him the cold shoulder, lately.

After a few minutes, something occurred to the Gryffindor. "Isn't there supposed to be a line of succession? Who's next in line for the crown?"

"We don't use crowns, Harry," the blond replied.

"You know what I mean. So who is it?"

Draco stood still a moment, staring into his wardrobe, deep in thought. A small frown crossed his brow. "I'm not entirely sure. That wasn't something deemed too terribly important in my family."

"But...?"

The silver-eyed teen turned and looked straight into his master's eyes. "As I said, I'm not certain; but I think your family would be close." In fact, it was almost certain.

"The gods forbid! I've already enough on my plate, thank you," Harry replied fervently, as he gave a little laugh.

Puzzlement flickered across the blond's face. This wasn't at all as he'd pictured the 'Boy Who Lived'.

Living in close quarters as they had been had seemed quite intimate. Draco would have said 'crowded'. Now that they were no longer sharing a room with four other young men, it seemed even more intimate; especially at those times when one or the other of them would be less than fully clothed. Before, the other boys had acted, albeit

unwittingly, as chaperons. However, Harry was all too aware of the power he had over the person to whom he was so attracted, and refused to do anything that might be construed as coercion. If Draco was interested, it would have to be he who made the first move.

The situation was trying to Draco's libido as well. But as he kept reminding himself, he was a slave, and the slave bond presented a problem for him. If he had been free.... But then if he had been free, they would never have been thrown together, and nothing would have happened anyway. He would never have allowed himself to get to know the raven-haired seeker so that his physical attraction could grow into a more avid interest. The Gryffindor owned his body, and his mind had been altered by the magic of the bond. The only thing he had left was his heart and spirit, and if he weren't careful, he could rapidly lose his heart. Although, truth to tell, it was slowly slipping away from him anyway. But so long as Harry didn't know that, he could pretend to more independence than he truly had.

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"There *can't* be that many books on the subject!" Harry complained. He'd been wanting to spend some time with Ron and Hermione, but for the third week in a row, the girl was nowhere to be found. Well, he knew where to find her, but it wasn't in the common room. Turning to Draco, he inquired "Care to see what 'Mione may have found on the bond?"

"Why would I want to do that, Potter?"

"It *does* impact our situation, you know."

Draco sighed. "I don't know why she's wasting her time. I've already told her—"

"That slave bonds can't be broken," Harry finished for him, interrupting. "Yes, I know."

"That *this kind* of slave bond can't be broken, anyway," the blond replied, correcting him.

"So do you want to come along, or not?"

"I've nothing better to do," Draco decided aloud. "I'm all caught up with my lessons, so why not?" he said, shrugging indifferently. He wasn't as disinterested as he pretended of course, but appearances must be maintained.

It wasn't hard to find her. There was a small mountain range of books around her on a rather large table. Sitting, and indicating that Draco should sit as well, Harry inquired, "So how are you doing, 'Mione?"

Hermione glared at him, then heaved a large, exasperated sigh. "I've gone through everything here three times. Did you know there are thirty-two different kinds of slave bonds? All but six of them are for generic situations and are meant to be temporary, of course. But for life debt slave bondage? Do you think I could find a single instance where the bond was broken? Nothing! Transforming, yes; breaking, no."

At the girl's words, both boys' ears perked up. "Transforming, Granger?" Draco inquired.

"Nothing you'd be interested in," she said wearily, rubbing her temples.

"Mind telling us anyway?" Harry requested, interrupting the blond's retort.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione replied, now gently rubbing her tired eyes. When she opened them again, she found both young men still staring at her intently, and somewhat impatiently.

"Just references about spells for masters and slaves who fell in love with each other, all right?" she said impatiently. "They transmute the slave bond into a heart bond, or sometimes a soul bond."

Hermione's eyes widened a fraction as she saw their reactions. It wasn't much; a slight flush, Harry looking a bit uncomfortable.... Draco had more control, but there was something.... "You're not, are you?" she asked hesitantly. "In love with each other?" She dearly hoped not; that would be too much.

Their vociferous – and in Draco's case, scathing – denials did nothing to allay her suspicions. They were *too* vociferous.

It was another week before Harry could bring himself to broach the subject with Draco again. Another week of constantly being around each other; eating together, studying together, being in various states of dress and undress, and sleeping in the same room.

"So. . ." Harry said, suddenly at a loss for words after playing out, in his own mind, dozens of scenarios of this discussion, ". . .this transmuting the bond idea; it would give you more freedom."

Draco looked at him, taken by surprise by the subject matter, and not sure what he should say. *He* wasn't even sure how he felt about it. "Physical freedom, yes," he said, feeling his way into the conversation, "but the sorts of bonds Granger was speaking of are, in some ways, even stronger than the slave bond."

"I've been reading up on the subject; your mind and emotions wouldn't be controlled any longer."

"Nor would I regain what I've already lost," Draco pointed out.

"I can reverse the orders I've given you: give you your free will back in those areas."

"But the slave bond has burned out my enmity for you, Harry. That, I'll never get back."

The Gryffindor looked surprised. "Why would you want to? I'm not affected by the bond that way, but I no longer dislike you, either."

"I didn't let it go, as you did. It was taken from me."

Harry nodded his understanding of the distinction. "Do you think you would have let it go, if you'd had the choice?"

Draco sat silently for a while, studying the handsome, dark-haired young man before him. Finally, he shook his head. "I wouldn't have been allowed," he said, avoiding a direct answer.

"Damn it, Draco," was the quietly intense reply, "if it were only you and me in the world, would you have?"

The blond dropped his head, refusing to look at the other boy. "Probably," he admitted.

"It can only get worse the longer you're under the slave bond, can't it?"

Draco nodded.

"Then wouldn't it be better to get out from under it as quickly as possible?"

"Do you really want to marry me?" Draco asked suddenly, with angry intensity. "Because that's what those bonds are for!" Because he was angry with the situation and not with his master, the magic of the slave bond did not react.

Harry was taken aback. "Would we really have to be married?"

The blond sighed. "No, Potter. No ceremony is required. Being heart or soul bonded is considered intent to marry, and is registered as being a marriage."

The green-eyed teen sat and thought for a couple of minutes. "We're neither of us marriage material for a woman, so what does it matter? It wouldn't be a real marriage, and we don't have to . . . sleep together . . . if we didn't want to," he said finishing weakly, almost shyly.

"You're mental, Potter. No insult intended; just my opinion." Draco studied the other teen for a minute, then cursed the bond for making him try to 'protect' what might be his master's best interests.

"I think you'd best talk to Granger about this. If she can't talk you out of it . . . then yes: I'll do it. I'd love to have my own will back again." *'And maybe get something better...'* he couldn't help adding to himself.

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Harry had left Draco writing a paper for Ancient Runes, and asked Hermione to take a walk with him outside. They were following the border of the Forbidden Forest when he explained what he had in mind.

"Are you out of your bloody mind?" Hermione shouted.

Harry was shocked. He had rarely heard her curse. "Hear me out, 'Mione," he pleaded. He was tired of being on the outs with his friend, and didn't want this to widen the gap.

"But heart-binding with Malfoy? Are you out of your bloody mind?" she demanded, repeating herself.

"You've already said that," Harry mumbled. "Look, I don't like him being my slave any more than you; I didn't know there was an alternative. Not that I probably would have considered it, then," he admitted.

"Have you told Ron?" she demanded.

Harry stared at her. "You really *do* think I'm nutters," he said wonderingly. "With something like this, I tell you, first. If *you've* reacted this badly, what makes you think I'd tell Ron?"



Hermione ignored that. "Why? Why are you even considering this?" she asked angrily.

"You've researched it, 'Mione. You know what the bond does to his mind, his will. That shouldn't happen to anyone."

*'Not but what the alternative was worse,'* Harry reminded himself.

"But you're willing to . . . to have that kind of relationship with him? Are you bugging him now?"

"*'Mione!*" Harry gasped, goggle-eyed. It wasn't the language she used that shocked him, it was because it was she, using it.

"Well, are you?" she asked, undeterred.

"Not that it's any of your business, but no," he replied, glaring.

Unaffected, Hermione regarded him for a few moments. "Then why?"

Suddenly, Harry grinned. "Because I'd like to be," he admitted boldly. He then sobered as he added, "But not if there's any chance that I'd be forcing it on him."

"You know that heart bonding is considered marriage?" she inquired hotly, refusing to consider his words.

The green-eyed Gryffindor nodded. "But it wouldn't be as though it were a real marriage; it's more to stop his will from being destroyed."

"Do you love him?" she asked suspiciously, hoping against hope that Harry's only motive in this was a noble, selfless one.

Harry considered the question. "I don't know, 'Mione," he confessed. "I think I could, though, in the right circumstances. These past weeks I've seen a side of him that, until now, I thought didn't exist." He blushed as he said, "I always thought he was hot. Now I know there's a likable person there, too."

No! This couldn't happen! "Enough for marriage?" she asked, trying to put a shock into her friend.

"Enough to free him from his slavery," Harry said reprovingly.

With her own ideals thrown back in her face, there was little Hermione could say.

## Chapter Six

Harry was getting more and more frustrated with his House. With very few exceptions they were showing themselves to be narrow-minded, and in their own way, as bigoted as most pure-bloods were painted as being. Race or birth origin meant nothing to most of them, but Slytherins seemed to all be painted with the blackest of brushes, and for no other reason than that they were Slytherins. The fact that the headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, seemed to subtly encourage this viewpoint made it all the worse. Harry had to admit to himself that he'd bought into the same attitudes for far too long, but now.... He thought of going to Professor McGonagall, but while she didn't seem to participate in this nefarious attitude, neither did she seem to oppose it; all of which left Harry without a support system.

Even his best friends were affected. Well, Ron had always been that way, if Harry were to be honest with himself, but he'd expected more of Hermione. But while she seemed, on the surface, to be open minded, there were all these subtle overtones and undertones that he never seemed to notice until he ran their conversations over in his head later, as he lay in bed. There was always that subtle resistance that seemed to pop up: always questioning, always making him doubt himself.

But this past summer's experiences had given him a great deal of self-confidence. Instead of doubting himself now, he was questioning the motives of Hermione, and others who tried to stand in his way. Not that he was getting paranoid: sometimes he found the questions held merit. Still, he was getting very tired of having his every move questioned.

And now here he was, cooling his heels in the headmaster's office after having been summoned for unknown reasons. The timing was rather suspicious, though. He'd just decided to do the bond transformation yesterday, and then the summons. He had a feeling that Hermione had decided to pass the responsibility. And this 'cooling off period' was designed to make him nervous, he was sure. All it made him, was bored. After talking with a few of the portraits of former headmasters for awhile, he noticed that the Sorting Hat's cupboard was standing open. Actually, he wouldn't have been aware it *was* the Sorting Hat's cupboard if it hadn't been standing open, and he'd spotted the headgear. On a whim, he took it out and put it on, just to have 'someone' else to talk to.

"Well! Harry Potter, as I live and breathe! Or not, as the case may be," the Hat said in an attempt at humour.

"Hello, Hat. It's been a long time," Harry replied cheerfully.

"Ah, I see I was right, after all."

"What?"

"It was borderline back then, but you definitely should be a Slytherin, you know," the hat explained.

Harry shrugged. "A bit late now, but I was wanting to talk—"

"So you admit it, then?" the Hat said, interrupting.

"You can see what's in my head, so you know I do. But it would cause too many problems, to switch houses," Harry replied, accepting the topic.

"You're Slytherin material, my boy," the hat replied. "You're being damaged by being in the wrong House."

Harry shrugged again. "Like I said—"

"I won't have it!"

That sudden, explosive exclamation from a well-known and hated voice had Harry tearing the Sorting Hat off his head as he spun to face its source. "Professor Snape?" he exclaimed.

"I will not have you poisoning the minds of my Slytherins!" The potion master's face was flushed, his voice low and almost threatening.

"Severus!" Professor Dumbledore remonstrated with the potions teacher as he stood, one arm full of scrolls, in a small doorway, opposite. "I'm sure Harry would do no such thing."

"I won't have him in Slytherin House!" Snape insisted, his face slowly fading back to its usual sallow colouring.

"He's a Gryffindor; why should he be in the Slytherin living areas?" Evidently the headmaster had missed all that had gone before the potion master's last outburst.

Snape spluttered, almost speechless. "The bloody Hat just re-Sorted him!" he finally spat out.

"Nonsense! I'm sure you're mistaken, Severus. We don't re-Sort pupils." Focusing his attention on Harry for the first time, Dumbledore saw the battered, old, formerly conical leather hat in Harry's hands. "What *are* you doing with the Hat, Mister Potter?"

"Just talking," Harry replied, trying to be very nonchalant as he turned to replace the hat in its cupboard.

"You see, Severus? Perfectly harmless," the headmaster said cheerfully.

"Ask the ruddy Hat!" Severus demanded, incensed that his word should be doubted.

The headmaster frowned at the directive, and the language, but since it had been put to him, he had no reasonable recourse but to accede to the demand. "Hat? Did Harry put you on?"

"Yes, and we had a lovely little chat, Headmaster," the hat replied.

"And Professor Snape's claim?"

Harry was muttering "Please don't," over and over again.

The Sorting Hat ignored him, this time. "Definitely Slytherin material, Headmaster. Could have gone either way, the first time; so at that time I put him in the next best place for him when he refused his rightful House."

"Next-best place, it says," Harry muttered, his head in his hands.

Snape, vindicated, was smirking at the dismayed headmaster, until he remembered what this would mean, and scowled. "I can't have him in the Slytherin dorms, Albus," he protested. "Someone could get severely hurt, or killed."

"It's unprecedented," the headmaster said absently, still in shock that this had happened. "*No one* has ever been re-Sorted." Suddenly, he came back to the present. "No," he said decisively, "you're quite right, Severus. He's in the books as a Gryffindor, and a Gryffindor he shall.... Oh, my. The books!" In a flurry of activity, he dumped the scrolls on his desk then went over to a nearby bookcase and pulled out a heavy tome. Placing it, also, on his desk, he turned the pages quickly to the entries for this year, then to 'P', and then ran his fingers down the list of names until he reached Harry's. His shoulders sagged as he stared at the page, then raised his eyes to the potion master's. "It's been recorded. We have no recourse," he said, voice low.

"How could it be recorded?" Harry asked dubiously. "It's only just now said anything!" he objected, referring to the Sorting Hat.

"This is the book from which we get the names of potential students. They just appear, if they're eligible. If they enlist, then when they're Sorted, the book updates itself. Other books keep track of scores, points, detentions, etc."

"And just because the Hat says so, the books all say I'm a Slytherin now?" Harry had a feeling of hopeless outrage building. Once again his life was being turned upside down.

"I'm afraid so, my boy," Dumbledore said sadly. Snape had slipped gracefully into a chair. The fact that he was silent, spoke volumes.

"You do know that most of that House hates me?" Harry said, presenting arguments to prevent this event.

"And whose fault is that, Potter?" Snape sneered.

"I admit I mightn't have helped the situation, but both you and Draco must accept some responsibility as well," Harry declared, glaring at the greasy-haired professor. "At any rate," he continued quickly to prevent Snape's rejoinder, "moving into the Slytherin dorms would hardly be conducive to either my *or* Draco's health and well-being."

"No, you're quite right, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "However, you can no longer stay in Gryffindor Tower, either." He seemed lost in thought, his voice seeming vague and wandering as he spoke.

"Severus," Dumbledore eventually said slowly, "do you think that suite of rooms might be available?" His eyes were twinkling madly now as he looked at the greasy-haired man.

"What suite...?" Snape's eyes widened in comprehension. "No!" he denied. "You can't be thinking of.... He's just a student!"

"He's a Marquis, Severus." Albus was smiling widely, now.

"You know as well as I that rank and title mean nothing while attending the school!" Snape retorted.

"True, but that rule was for the sons and daughters of the rulers, not the rulers themselves," Dumbledore argued mildly.

"You're trying to wriggle around the rules, old man, and I won't have it! And Potter is no ruler!"

"Technically, he holds sway over most of the wizarding world, Severus."

"I'm still in the room, you know!" Harry interjected forcefully. "If you're going to discuss me, you might let me know what you're going on about!"

"Your new accommodations, Harry," Albus replied.

"What's this about ruling most of the wizarding world?" Harry asked.

"Not a thing, Potter. The peerage no longer holds that kind of power," Snape sneered.

"Perhaps they should," Harry replied, just to poke at the obnoxious man, "at least as a system of checks and balances."

Snape opened his mouth to give a biting reply, then a thoughtful look came over his face, and he closed it again. Then he shook his head and said, "No. It would never work."

"You took me seriously?" Harry asked, amazed.

Snape looked at Harry thoughtfully, and for once, with a minimum of disdain, then turned to the headmaster. "We can see if the rooms will accept him, anyway," he said.

"Accept me? What are you talking about?" Harry said, frustration again plain in his voice. He was ignored.

"'Rightful House'," Snape muttered, sounding offended.

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Harry was pacing rapidly back and forth, swearing up a storm; literally, although he wasn't aware of it at the time. Clouds were piling up, outdoors. Draco was just sitting on his bed watching Harry, an inscrutable expression on his face. When Harry finally wound down and sat down, Draco looked at him. "And what, pray tell, was *that* all about?"

"The fucking bloody Sorting Hat decided my life wasn't screwed up enough, and re-Sorted me!" Harry swore disgustedly. "*Your* effing Head of House heard it, and that idiot, Dumbledore, is going to make me do it!"

"Would it be presumptuous of me to remind you that language like that is not appropriate to your station?" Draco ventured.

Harry looked at him, an expression of disgust on his face. "No, but it *is* piss-poor timing," he replied.

Draco didn't acknowledge that, asking instead, "Could you start at the beginning? Like how you came to put the hat on in the first place?"

When Harry was through recounting the tale, Draco had yet another observation. "And Dumbledore never got around to talking about what he summoned you there for in the first place?"

Harry's head snapped up, eyes blazing. "No; he didn't," he said, his voice full of repressed violence. "And if he hadn't left me cooling my heels in the first place, none of this would have happened. I'm in bloody Slytherin!" He glanced over at the blond. "And what are *you* smirking about?"

Draco's smirk grew wider. "Rather ironic, isn't it?"

Harry grinned, suddenly, surprising the blond. "It is, really," he admitted. "Escaping that House by the skin of my teeth, fighting with it – you, really – for years, only to wind up in it anyway."

Draco was frowning, confused. "What do you mean, you 'escaped' Slytherin?"

Harry's cheeks coloured. "Um.... The Hat wanted to put me there, first year," he admitted sheepishly. "Evidently I was an almost borderline case between it and Gryffindor, so when I asked it not to put me there...."

For once, Draco's expression was unguarded as he observed 'The Boy Who Lived' with pure disbelief. "You just – asked – to be put in another House," he said evenly, "and the bloody Sorting Hat listened to you?"

"Well, . . .yes."

"Do you do *anything* normally, Potter?"

Harry's facial colour deepened, then he gave a cheeky grin. "Not much," he replied. "I'm even 'marrying' a boy."

"It's not a love match, Potter," Draco replied coolly, but his reddened cheeks were saying something else. Actually, his emotions were quite confused. He knew Harry was interested in him sexually, but he wasn't sure what the Gryffindor's feelings were for him. Was it just lust? He knew his own feelings *had* been just lust, but now, while he

wasn't ready to say that he was even fond of Harry Potter, he was definitely interested in exploring the possibilities of a more in-depth relationship. The fact that they had been thrown together, and the nature of that relationship, were complicating factors however, even if one were to disregard their past history; which he couldn't. At least.... Well, maybe. He kept forgetting that the Harry Potter he used to know had changed, and this new one was a better match. If he were to consider making a match, that is, which he wasn't. Was he? His body seemed to think so, at any rate. Making sure he wasn't observed, Draco adjusted himself.

Draco changed the subject to get his mind off that particular line of thought. "Well, at least you're not a goofy, goody-goody Gryffindor any longer, Potter."

"Nice alliteration," Harry commented dully. That particular fact, that he was no longer a Gryffindor, was going to become a major complication in his life. He was sure of it.

A thought hit Draco. "Um, . . .Harry? He's not going to allow you – us – to continue living here. Is he?" It was more a statement of dread, than anything, which was confirmed when Harry shook his head negatively. "He can't be thinking of moving us to the Slytherin dorms?" Draco's relief was palpable when Harry again shook his head. "So where...?"

Harry frowned. "They wouldn't tell me. We're being collected after supper."

Draco's developing frown matched Harry's. "Why the mystery?"

Harry shrugged. "They made mention of the rooms needing to accept me, first," he said.

Draco's eyes widened perceptibly, but Harry wasn't watching, and didn't see. So when the blond said, "*Those* rooms?" the snap of his head as he turned to look at Draco was almost audible.

"You know? *Which* rooms, then?" Harry asked, intently.

Draco shook his head. "There may be other suites – it would be unlikely that there wouldn't be – but...." He looked at Harry. "It would have to be either a suite belonging to one of the founders, or the one set aside for visiting royalty. Those are the only ones I can think of that might have that sort of security."

Harry stared at his bond slave. "You know where they are?"

Draco shook his head. "I've only ever heard stories of them."



"You don't even know, then, whether they truly exist or not?"

"Not really," Draco admitted grudgingly, "but I've never heard even rumours of anything else in the castle that might have security like that."

Harry pulled his own hair fiercely in frustration, then slumped. "Let's go to dinner. We still have classes, and then we'll need to pack."

"Have the house elves do it," Draco suggested with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Harry nodded. "Good idea."

Despite himself, Draco felt a surge of pride, that Harry had complimented him, then was disgusted with himself for taking pleasure in so insignificant an accomplishment.

"Parflak!" Harry called. Although he'd have preferred Dobby or Winky, Parflak was the house elf that was taking care of the sixth-year boys dorm rooms this week in Gryffindor Tower. Except for the kitchen elves, all the Hogwarts elves rotated duties so none were stuck dealing with people or jobs that were too onerous for too long. The kitchen elves didn't do so because their duties required more than physical labour; they required a knowledge of human cuisine, and how to prepare it.

"Mister Potter, sir?"

Harry jumped, not having heard the elf pop in. In fact, since he'd been listening for it, that fact puzzled him. "I didn't hear you arrive, Parflak?"

The elf's green skin darkened. Was it blushing? "Sorry, Mister Potter, sir," it replied, not offering an explanation.

Draco, also, was eyeing the elf with suspicion. "You don't actually need to make that 'popping' sound when you pop in and out, do you?" the blond accused.

"Parflak is being new to serving humans, Mister Malfoy, sir. Parflak is sorry not to announce his arrival, sir," the elf said, groveling.

*'Announcing their arrival and departure?'* Harry thought. *'That makes sense.'*

"No, that's all right, Parflak," Harry said aloud. "But I do have a task for you. It seems...." Harry eyed the house elf in exasperation. "Oh, do get off the floor; it wasn't that bad!"

When the elf had pulled himself together, Harry continued. "It seems that I'm to be moved from Gryffindor Tower. Draco will be coming with me. We need you to pack our belongings, carefully, and then leave them until we know where in the castle we'll be. Can you do that for us?"

"Oh, yes, gracious master! Thank you for not punishing Parflak, Mister Potter, sir!" and he kept going on in that vein, for far too long.

The elf's effusiveness was rapidly becoming annoying. Draco's patience ended before Harry's.

"Oh, pull yourself together before *I* punish you!" the blond snapped. Harry didn't say anything, but he did raise an eyebrow at him. Draco looked him straight in the eye, not backing down an inch. Technically he was within his rights, unless Harry decided to take it away.

"I'd prefer you didn't, Draco," Harry replied, to that look.

It wasn't an order, but it almost felt like one, to Draco. But testing his will, he found that his slave bond hadn't interpreted it as an order, so he relaxed.

Dinner was beef sandwiches on freshly baked, whole-wheat bread, and a thick potato soup flavoured with onions, celery, and American-style bacon.

Lessons went fairly well, save for the occasional taunt or insult – most aimed at Draco – and these came from people from all four Houses. Draco had been less than popular in Hogwarts.

After classes were over for the day, he caught up Hermione, Draco in tow.

"So, Hermione; are you going to do that bond conversion for us?" Harry asked, to Hermione's evident surprise.

"Didn't you talk to the headmaster?" she asked, confused.

Harry looked at her, acting as though he had no idea what she was going on about. "He saw me this morning, yes; but what has that to do with my question?"

"He didn't say anything about it?"

Harry frowned, continuing the charade. "Why should he? How would he.... Did you talk to him about it?" He was having a grand time, leading her on.

Hermione gathered herself, putting on a bold front. "As a matter of fact, I did. I don't think it's such a good idea, Harry."

He shrugged, and almost lost his composure when he saw Draco wink at him over the bushy-haired girl's shoulder. He controlled his laughter, however. "Well, he mustn't have thought it important, at all. We talked of other things."

"What could be more...!" Hermione stopped her outburst. "He didn't mention it at all?" she continued more calmly. Inwardly, she was seething. The headmaster had said he'd talk to Harry!

Harry shrugged again. "Not a word! But you know, if you're so against it, I'm not sure I could trust you to do it correctly, Hermione," he said in a hurt tone. "And I'm not sure...." He stopped, and looked at Draco. He hadn't discussed this with him, but he hoped the blond would play along. "Blaise is still your friend, isn't he, Draco? Do you think he'd do the bond conversion for us?"

He could see Draco's familiar blank mask fall into place. "I'm sure he would," he said, firmly. "He's not as good as Granger, but I'm sure he could manage."

"Don't you think for one minute I don't know what you're doing, Harry Potter!" Hermione said, flouncing a bit. "But if you're that dead set on this . . . all right. I'll do it. I wouldn't trust anyone else not to foul it up – and maybe put you two in the same body!"

Harry looked at her, wide-eyed. "That could happen?"

Hermione smirked. "No, but who knows *what* could happen if it were fouled up?" she purred, sweet, but deadly poison in her tone. If she could, she'd make *sure* it didn't go as expected.

"Is there anything special you need, or can you do it now?" Harry asked. He wanted it done before anyone found out that he'd been Sorted out of Gryffindor, or where he *had* been placed – especially Hermione. He had no idea how she'd react to that news, and didn't want to take the chance that she'd refuse to help a pair of Slytherins.

Hermione gave him a suspicious frown. "Why the rush?"

Harry thought quickly. "The less time Draco's under this slave bond, the less chance of his will being eaten away," he replied reasonably. Draco gave him a slight nod, showing his approval.

The young woman continued to look at him for a few more moments, then nodded. "Dried rose petals, rosemary, willow leaf, and a stone bowl," she said. "The Room of Requirement should provide everything needed, though." Everything *she* needed.

Just to be on the safe side, Harry decided to activate the room himself, concentrating on needing all the supplies for a bond transformation, as well as a suitable environment. Although he believed he could still trust Hermione not to do anything that would harm him, or even Draco, he wasn't so sure that she mightn't ask for an environment to try to dissuade him. And while he had no idea what that might be, he knew that the wrong frame of mind might distort the magic.

Harry not letting her open the Room of Requirement frustrated Hermione, but she bent her will towards the Room anyway, hoping it would be enough.

The view, when they entered, surprised all of them.

"Harry?" Draco queried. "Is this what you had in mind?"

Harry shook his head. "I just asked for a suitable environment," he said, his voice sounding somewhat awed.

It was a lush forest glade, the breeze scented with the perfume of many sorts of wildflowers. At one end was a deep, clear pool, with a swiftly moving stream leading up to it which ended in a three-foot waterfall that poured into it. At the other end of the pool was a wide, flat rock. A rather deep depression in it made a natural bowl, and shallow scoops in other areas had caught leaves, flower petals, and other detritus.

Upon closer inspection, that 'detritus' turned out to be the material needed for the short ceremony that would transform the bond between the two boys. There, each caught in its own depression, were the rose petals, rosemary, and willow leaves. But there were two other depressions as well, one containing mugwort, and the other, three feathers, each distinct from the other. Harry recognized one of them as being a phoenix feather, having been around Fawkes often enough to make the identification. The other two were unfamiliar, but obviously from different sorts of birds. A light breeze was blowing, and small frogs could be heard chirping.

Hermione took charge. "Harry, you take the right, or dexter position, and Draco, you take the left, or sinister, position."

"Was that supposed to be funny, Granger?" Draco asked threateningly, with a scowl.

The girl sighed exasperatedly. "No, Malfoy, it's—"

"I don't have a surname any longer, Granger. It's just 'Draco'," Draco interrupted, annoyed with not only being reminded of the fact, but that Granger knew that, had been reminded of it before, and still managed to call him by his former surname on a regular basis.

"Fine! Draco! Harry has the strong position – the dexter position – because he's your master. There's only one other position, isn't there?" She hated having to talk to the git; must he *always* be so disagreeable?

"You don't want to antagonize her now, Draco," Harry put in.

Draco scowled again, but moved to take the indicated spot. "Why the other two ingredients?" he asked suspiciously.

It was Hermione's turn to scowl. "I don't know," she said, hating to admit ignorance. "But we only need the three, so that's what we'll use." She took up small portions each of the rose petals, rosemary, and willow leaves, and put them in the larger, deeper depression. She then reached into a pocket in her school robes and withdrew a parchment upon which she had written the spell she intended to use if the Headmaster was unable to dissuade Harry from this course of action – likely, given Harry's mistrust of the man – and unfolded it.

"When I've finished the incantation, take each other's hands over the bowl – depression – whatever. The leaves should ignite. Don't let go; it won't burn. If you do let go.... Well, I'm not sure what will happen if the magic is interrupted, but all that energy has to go somewhere, so it probably won't be good. Do you understand?"

The spell should make their magical cores reject each other, and with her guidance, transfer Harry's altered bond from Draco to her.

Both young men were looking very nervous now, although both were also trying to hide it, but they nodded their heads. Hermione nodded her head too, once, sharply, determination obvious in her demeanour. Then she closed her eyes. Harry and Draco looked at the vegetation in the bowl-like depression. When Hermione opened her eyes, her irises had changed their colour to a silvery green; but neither boy, lost in his own thoughts, noticed.

Hermione's voice started incanting a spell in a language neither knew. After a few moments they looked each other in the eyes and just stared at each other, each wondering how this would change their relationship. The breeze picked up, little eddies and miniature whirlwinds making an appearance – and unnoticed by them, emptying

all of the herbs and petals – as well as the mugwort and the feathers – from the small depressions, and into the natural bowl.

Finally Hermione's voice stopped speaking. It was time for their part, although all they had to do was hold hands while a cold, magical fire burned. They reached out and firmly took hold of each other's hands. The material in the bowl glowed, then a column of blue flame shot up. But instead of just burning around their wrists and hands, it clung to them and rapidly spread up their arms. Although painless, this behaviour was totally unexpected; and instinctively, both young men leapt back from the stone. At least they tried to. They had been warned to not let go of each other: they hadn't been told they wouldn't be able to. The flame kept spreading rapidly, reaching their shoulders in just a couple of seconds.

"Hermione!" Harry shouted, triggering Draco's own efforts to get the girl's attention. Despite their clamouring, Hermione didn't move, standing there as still as a statue. Now the flame had reached their faces, so they closed their eyes and mouths, hoping by that action that they wouldn't be damaged, but soon had to breathe. To their surprise, they were able to breathe without interference or complications from the magical flames, and there was no pain. Soon both young men stood there, completely covered with blue flames. The bowl in the stone kept spewing them forth for another five minutes before they died down, at which time the flames on the boys also died out, leaving them and their clothing unharmed.

During this ordeal both had felt a strong tingling of energy moving over, around, through, and between their bodies. Shortly after that sensation halted, Harry opened one eye a slit. Finding the flames gone, he tried again to let go of Draco's hands – and this time, he was successful. Draco opened his eyes when he felt his hands dropped.

"What the hell was that, Hermione?" Harry yelled, turning and raging at his friend.

Hermione opened her brown eyes, looked at the both of them, gave a slight smile, and collapsed.

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## Chapter Seven

Harry was cursing and pacing as Hermione drifted into consciousness in the infirmary. When he noticed, Harry lunged towards the bed, only to be brought to an abrupt halt by an imperious voice.

"You will **wait**, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey said with cold power.

"Is she going to be all right?" Harry asked worriedly. He might still be upset with her, but that did not obviate the years of friendship behind them.

"For the hundredth time, yes."

"Oh, sit down, Potter. Flitting around like a pixie isn't going to do *anyone* any good," Draco said impatiently from his seat on a nearby hospital bed.

Harry glared at him, but sat down next to him.

"Relax, 'dear'; you'll live longer," Draco said smarmily.

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, 'Draco'. And relaxing could very well kill me, if the wrong sort were around," Harry retorted.

"Stop bickering, you two. This is an infirmary, and your noise is not conducive to healing," Madam Pomfrey said scoldingly.

"You'd think they were an old married couple wouldn't you, they way they go on?" she commented to Hermione as she turned to the bushy-haired girl once again.

Hermione grinned faintly at the mediwitch, her eyes still somewhat unfocussed. "Newlyweds," she whispered hoarsely – and then as she became more aware, a small frown appeared. Why had she said that? What had gone wrong?

Both young men's faces pinkened, but not completely in embarrassment as Poppy raised an eyebrow in askance. But she didn't push the issue when an explanation wasn't forthcoming.

"When can I talk—" Harry was interrupted as Draco backhanded his ribs, glaring at him. "When can *we* talk to her?" Harry said, amending his words and sending an irritated glance at the blond.

"Tomorrow," the mediwitch said with finality.

"Look, Madam Pomfrey; this involves a quite powerful, and personal, matter of magic," Harry argued, "which did *not* go as it was explained to us."

"So you have said. I've already examined the two of you as you requested, Mister Potter," Poppy replied, "and there is nothing wrong with either of you. It can wait."

"I appreciate your viewpoint, Madam," Draco interjected, before Harry could further irritate the mediwitch, "but you may have heard of the slave bond on me?"

At Poppy's impatient nod, he continued. "The magic involved was supposed to transmute it into a heart bond. Miss Granger had kindly consented to conduct the ceremony, which is why she is here, now. She collapsed afterwards."

"So has been said before, Mister Malfoy, and I still have heard nothing which would have me change my mind. Miss Granger needs time to recuperate before talking to *anyone*. And I believe the headmaster, and your House Heads, will have questions for the three of you, as well."

"Head of House," Harry muttered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Head of House," Harry repeated a little louder, his cheeks tinting. "I rather got re-Sorted into Slytherin."

One of Madam Pomfrey's eyebrows rose, and her eyes widened slightly at this, registering her surprise, but what she said, was, "And Miss Granger got re-Sorted, as well, did she?"

"No," Harry replied, his face flushing completely at having just made a fool of himself.

"Then it is still 'Heads' of House, is it not?"

Harry didn't reply to the rhetorical question, but he nodded a bit sheepishly.

Draco didn't look at him, but he was smirking at Harry's predicament.

"Well? Why are you hanging about? Off with you!" Madam Pomfrey ordered.

Scowling, feeling like a chastised five-year-old and resenting it, Harry rose from the bed. "Coming?" he asked Draco.



The blond's smirk grew as he also got to his feet, amused with Harry's attempt to regain control of the situation, if only in part. "And where, may I ask, are we going?" he asked.

Harry answered as they made their way to the infirmary door. "We haven't a choice, do we? Dumbledore's office. He has yet to find lodgings for us. And maybe *he* can tell us what happened, since he's tied into the ruddy castle."

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"I'm afraid I can't help you, gentlemen," Professor Dumbledore told them, after being told of everything that had happened, and being asked his opinion.

"Can't, won't, or don't know?" Harry asked flatly.

"I beg your pardon?" the old man asked, trying to intimidate the young man with his position and reputation.

It didn't work. "I asked you if you can't tell me, won't tell me, or if you don't know," Harry replied, expanding the wording of his question.

"I hate to nose in, Harry," Draco said, not looking sorry in the slightest, "but may I remind you once again that there are two of us involved, here? I'd appreciate it if your language reflected that."

"You still have lousy timing, Draco," Harry growled.

Albus had been watching their interactions ever since they'd entered his office. "I must say that the two of you don't act as though you've been heart bonded," he commented.

He instantly had their attention. "What do you mean?" Draco demanded.

"A heart bond involves the emotions: love, to be exact. You're not acting the part, are you?"

"Why should I? I'm not in love with Potter!" Draco declared, but he felt a strong twinge in his chest as he said it.

Harry felt a childish impulse to echo Draco's sentiments, but refrained; not least in part because he wasn't sure if he'd be lying, or not.

"And your slave bond?" Dumbledore asked, gently.

"As far as I can tell, it's gone," Draco said, triumphantly.

The headmaster drew his wand. "A few tests?" he said, asking permission.

Harry nodded. Draco shrugged.

A quarter-hour later, he sat back down, putting his wand away. "It's a soul bond," he said bluntly, "but such a one as I've not seen before." He looked up just as both young men were about to start asking questions. "Tell me everything that happened once you arrived at the Room of Requirement."

After they had done so, he asked a few more questions to clarify a few things, then, "Were the feathers and mugwort still on the slab afterward?"

"I don't remember," Harry said, concentrating. "Draco?"

The blond shook his head. "I didn't have much of a chance to look around before Granger fainted, did I?" he said. "Events became rather rushed, after that."

"And neither of you can place the language of the spell?"

Again, they shook their heads, negatively.

"I speak French, am very familiar with Latin, and have a passing knowledge of several other languages used in magic, and otherwise," Draco said, expanding on his response, "at least enough to recognise them when I hear them. But what language Granger was spouting..." He shrugged, indicating his lack of understanding.

"But it *was* her voice?"

"What are you getting at, Professor?" Harry asked, growing impatient with all the questions, and with receiving no answers of his own.

"Not a thing, Mister Potter. I'm simply trying to ascertain the facts, and narrow down the possibilities."

Harry subsided. "Yes, it was definitely her voice, and she didn't sound as though she were being controlled," he said, trying to anticipate the next question. "Her tone wasn't at all stilted, stiff, or unnatural in any way that I can recall."

Dumbledore nodded at him, but he said, "I think you'll find, Mister Potter, that what Miss Granger remembers happening will not be what actually happened – if she remembers anything at all. Do you remember what the feathers looked like?"

"Yes, but—"

"When Miss Granger recovers," the headmaster said, riding over whatever Harry might have been going to say, "the three of you might want to spend some time in the library identifying both them, and the language Miss Granger was speaking."

Harry was frustrated, angry, and suspicious that the old man was once again keeping secrets that affected him. In fact he was almost certain that was the case. He could feel his magic leaking, and tightened his control. But he could impart one piece of information, anyway. "One of the feathers was that of a phoenix," he said, hoping that with that piece of information, Dumbledore would be more forthcoming with what he knew, or suspected.

Dumbledore's reaction was to lean forward. It was only the smallest fraction of an inch, but even that much reaction meant the information was important. "You're sure of that?" Upon Harry's nod, Albus consciously relaxed back into his chair. "Very interesting," he remarked, but he refused to divulge anything more.

That the old man had earlier suggested a course of action that might answer his questions was all that kept Harry from taking Draco and leaving Hogwarts altogether. *'Wait. Did I just think that? Take Draco and leave Hogwarts?'* During their weeks as slave and master, Harry had got used to the idea of having to take care of the blond, along with the frustration of not being able to justify trying to further a relationship with him so long as he was a slave, but the emotional overtones of this last thought was more as though they belonged together, rather than that they had to be together, for whatever reason. He looked surreptitiously at Draco, trying to gauge what had changed.

Draco met Harry's eyes and blushed, then became terribly confused about that reaction.

"And now, I think, I should show you to your new quarters!" the headmaster said, cheerily changing the subject.

*'If he thinks I'm going to forget about this that easily, he's sadly mistaken,'* Harry thought. Still, they did need to find new quarters. Harry did think that Dumbledore was being just a bit optimistic though, if the rooms in question had the deciding vote on who stayed in them.

They were joined at the foot of the spiral staircase by Professor Snape, then were led to a relatively unused portion of the fourth floor, stopping before a bas relief of a fleur

de lis. Harry felt a small frown on his face. He had a sense that this place wasn't for them – not yet. But it was only a feeling, so he didn't say anything.

"Put your hand in the middle of the fleur de lis, Harry," Dumbledore urged with a confident smile.

Harry did so. The symbol glowed, but nothing else happened. He looked at the professors. Dumbledore had a small, puzzled frown on his face. Snape was smirking.

"I told you he wasn't royalty, Albus," Snape gloated.

"If he weren't royalty, the fleur de lis would not have acknowledged him," Albus refuted.

"Well, it didn't let him in, did it?" Snape sneered.

"Not yet," Harry said softly.

"What was that, boy?" Snape demanded.

Harry didn't reply, for a couple of reasons. For one, he was a bit distracted, trying to chase down in his own mind just where this information was coming from. He was unsuccessful. The other reason was that he mightily resented being called 'boy', as his Muggle uncle constantly did, and refused to answer to it.

"Harry?" Draco said, in a bid for attention.

"Just a feeling I got," Harry replied, his hand absently seeking out the blond's. Draco allowed it.

"Taking advantage of your slave, Potter?" Snape jibed.

"I'm not his slave," Draco responded sharply, to Snape's surprise. "Not since this afternoon, anyway."

"And how did you manage that?" the potions master demanded.

"Bond transformation ritual in the Room of Requirement," the blond answered, shortly.

"What sort of transformation ritual?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business, *Severus*," Draco replied.

"What *is* your interest, Professor?" Dumbledore asked with deceptively mild curiosity, finally taking a part in the conversation.

"Potter!" the greasy-haired man snapped. "I want to know what the hell he's done to my student!"

"Oh, this is just going to be wonderful," Harry moaned. "Sorted into a House where even the Head hates me!"

"That's right, Professor," Draco chimed in, "or had you forgotten that Harry is a Slytherin as well, now?"

A slight tint to the potion master's cheeks said he had, but otherwise he ignored the jibe.

Dumbledore had been studying Harry during most of this. "The Hat allowed you to take and use the Sword of Gryffindor: shall we see if that suite will accept you?" he finally asked, the twinkle in his eyes restored as his long legs started off down the corridor.

With little other choice, the other three followed; but as they passed a narrow, dark passageway on the second floor, Harry came to an abrupt halt. "This one's closer, sir," he said. Then a look of consternation crossed his face at his temerity, especially in the face of the fact that he hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

"What are you pulling, Potter?" Snape hissed.

Draco looked confused – Dumbledore, intrigued.

"Lead the way, Mister Potter," the headmaster suggested.

Harry gave a mental shrug, then following his instincts, turned into the narrow passage and led the way until it ended at a fountain of a huge king cobra spitting water into a basin. It reared up five feet, its head as wide as two fists, its somewhat stylised hood spread two feet wide, and the rest of its body wound around the basin the water was falling into. There was a door on the walls to each side, but Harry faced the fountain, and the snake. He gave a shallow bow, then spoke to it in Parseltongue. "*Greetings, O king of snakes. Is it permitted that I should enter?*"

The water stopped flowing. The snake regarded him, and then, as though it *weren't* made of stone, bowed deeply. "*You are recognized, Master, O Heir of Slytherin and Gryffindor.*" It then resumed its former stance, but the wall moved, sliding towards

Harry for half a metre, then tilting inward as any normal door would. The fact that it had to be more than two tonne of stone slab made that an impressive achievement, however.

Harry stood there, shocked by the statue's words.

Draco shivered, shaking off the almost erotic effect of the sounds he'd heard. ('Almost', my arse!) "Parseltongue? What did you say to make it open?"

"I... I just asked if I were permitted," Harry said, still shaken.

"So what's got you so shaken, Harry?" the blond asked.

"These are the rooms of Salazar Slytherin," Dumbledore replied with a frown. "Only the heir and those with him or her are allowed entrance."

Wide-eyed, Draco looked at his bonded with different eyes. "You're Slytherin's heir?"

Harry slowly turned to look at him. "And Gryffindor's, if that snake's to be believed," he said.

"Shite! You really *don't* do things by halves, do you, Potter? Royalty, and heir of two of the founders?"

"You don't know the half of it," Harry muttered. Parseltongue was a complicated language. It didn't have a lot of different sounds, so a lot was communicated by intonation. But what the snake said couldn't be possible; the founders had died centuries ago, and he knew who his parents were. But what the snake had said.... He was *their* child – Salazar Slytherin's child, out of Godric Gryffindor. He'd have to have a long talk with the snake later, when he could be alone to ask the questions.

Draco moved to enter the door, but a hiss from the stone snake made him hesitate. The next thing he knew, Harry had grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "He said you were dead if I didn't bring you in, and introduce you."

The pale young man paled even further. "Then do it, Harry," Draco said nervously.

*"This is Draco. He is bonded to me, and will live with me,"* Harry told the statue. *"The old one is the headmaster of this school, Professor Dumbledore, and the greasy one is my potions master, and the Head of Slytherin House, Professor Snape."*

*"You have a fine mate, if a bit rude to assume entrance without permission. He should provide you with much happiness - and perhaps an egg or two?" the statue replied. "But the other two.... They do not smell right. I do not trust them."*

*"I'm not sure I trust them either, but as far as I am aware, they mean me no harm. They are not to be harmed unless they prove untrustworthy."*

*"They will not be allowed free entrance; only when you allow them entry," the guardian decided.*

*"That is acceptable," Harry replied.*

*'Draco provide me with children?' Harry was thinking to himself. 'Not bloody likely, even if our relationship gets that far.'* In actuality, that comment from the snake had him feeling better. Such nonsense made its other comments so much less likely. He'd never heard of a mentally incapacitated guardian, but there was always a first for everything. As long as it did its job....

*"Well? What did it say, Harry?" Draco asked, impatiently.*

Harry looked at them. He knew for a fact that Snape and Dumbledore wouldn't like what the snake said, and was trying to find a way to put a nicer veneer on it. "Because you're bonded to me, the guardian will allow you free entrance," Harry said, answering Draco's question, "but will only allow anyone else in if I invite them personally." That was close enough to the truth. The two men might not like it – and from their expressions, they didn't – but they couldn't take it personally.

Draco now had a small smirk gracing his face, which he was fighting to keep from growing larger.

"I don't believe that would be wise, Mister Potter," Dumbledore replied. "If you were to have one of your visions, and no one could gain entrance to assist you...."

"Draco can get help if needed," Harry replied.

"I think you should instruct the guardian to let us in, as needed," the headmaster said more bluntly.

"What do you think I was saying, sir?" Harry tried his hardest not to put any inflection into that question. He didn't want to lie, only mislead.

The old man looked at him shrewdly. "I wouldn't know, Mister Potter. I don't speak Parseltongue."

"I assure you, sir, that I in no way gave instructions to bar anyone from these rooms," Harry said honestly. That would change, of course, as soon as he had time.

During this exchange Draco had wandered into the suite, but not without staring warily at the snake statue guardian and giving it as wide berth as he could as he passed it, and was now looking around. "Not bad, Harry," he commented. "The house elves must have been cleaning here. Not a speck of dust. Everything is so old they're antiques, but quality furnishings, nevertheless." Draco quite approved of antiques, provided they were of value. And remembering what he'd learned from his mother, most of these items were quite definitely of value.

Harry decided that a show of hospitality was called for. "Would you gentlemen care to take a look around? I find that I'm more than a tad curious, myself."

The short corridor gave upon a walk that skirted a sunken living room. Wooden, open fretwork panels hid most of the walk from those in the room. Three wide, semi-circular risers led the way in from three sides, the fourth, a wall, being enchanted to show a woodland scene. (Later they would deduce that it showed an actual spot in the Forbidden Forest.) Into one corner was set a fireplace. Although not alight, the grate was laid with kindling and split billets in preparation for such an eventuality. On either side of it a larger-than-life brass cobra stood guard. A nearby cupboard showed that it stored more wood to feed a fire, as Draco was just finding out as he leant over to investigate. Harry caught his breath at sight of the material stretched tightly over the blond's arse.

"Enjoying the decor, Potter?" Snape sneered.

"A very inviting view," Harry agreed, even though his cheeks were tinting. A smirk graced his face as the potion master's countenance went dark with anger.

Draco laughed as he stood from his inspection. "A Slytherin through and through, wouldn't you say, Professor?"

Snape's expression didn't alter, but he said, "So it would seem." He wasn't inclined that way himself, but he had nothing against homosexuality. He just didn't like the idea of Potter, of all people, 'pawing' his favourite student.

Harry wasn't sure how to react to that exchange, so he remained silent. He wondered if Draco was aware that it had been *his* backside that had been being discussed, just previous. He rather thought it likely, though. Draco wasn't dense.



A quick tour showed a bedroom with a bed half again as wide, and over a foot longer than the Dursley's king-sized bed, and a separate toilet and bath, the bath being approximately the same size as the prefect's bath. But there was no shower. The concept hadn't yet been discovered when these rooms were last occupied. There *was* a study and a library, however. And considering how slyly the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets had been hidden, Harry had a suspicion that there might be *at least* one hidden room, here.

All of the sudden, he was tired of it all. He was hungry, and needed a break. "What time is it?"

Draco cast 'Tempus'. "Half seven."

"Good. I'm half famished."

Draco looked at him queerly, trying to decide whether or not Harry was trying to be witty. He decided not.

Harry asked Dumbledore, while they were on their way to the Great Hall, where he should sit.

Dumbledore walked silently for a few paces, then said, "Your being re-Sorted is going to cause all sorts of havoc, Mister Potter. I suppose—"

"If Snape hadn't walked in.... For that matter, if you hadn't tried one of your mind games on me, then none of this would have happened," Harry interrupted with quiet bitterness.

"Mind games, Mister Potter?" Albus queried, a slight edge in his voice.

"Oh, please, Headmaster; are you going to pretend that you weren't trying to make me nervous by letting me cool my heels in your office so long? You're always very punctual, unless you're trying to make a point."

Albus' cheeks tinted just the slightest bit, but his voice held nothing but a bit of wounded dignity as he said, "I haven't a clue what you're inferring, Mister Potter."

Harry rolled his eyes, catching Draco's eyes in the process. Both young men grinned, slightly.

"Regardless, there's still the problem of seating arrangements, sir," Harry said.

"You may sit with your old House-mates tonight. I'll announce your change of House after supper."

"Could you do it tomorrow at breakfast, sir? I'd rather tell my friends myself, rather than spring this on them."

Dumbledore gave him a rather condescending look, then said, "Breakfast and dinner are rather haphazardly attended, but I suppose I can make the announcement tomorrow, supper."

Harry grit his teeth to prevent himself from reacting to the condescension. After all, Dumbledore *had* granted his request. But it grated, all the same.

Supper was French Onion soup served with toasted baguette slices, roast mutton with mint sauce, baked carrots, broccoli, bread rolls with fresh creamery butter, and the usual choice of tea or pumpkin juice (coffee was considered too strong for sub-adults, save at breakfast).

Harry was sitting with Ron and his other House-mates, Draco just across the table from him. Madam Pomfrey had decided to keep Hermione overnight, but wasn't giving out any information other than she was now all right. If the mediwitch knew what had caused Hermione's collapse, she was keeping that information behind tight-locked lips. Ron immediately missed her presence, and had assumed she'd got stuck into some book or another in the library.

Harry foolishly disabused him of that notion. "She's in the infirmary," Harry told him.

"*What?*" Ron exclaimed, jumping up from the table.

Harry caught his sleeve. "She's all right, mate: just a bit of backlash from a spell. She'll be right as rain; Pomfrey just wants to make sure she rests, so she's keeping her the night."

"She's all right?" He'd heard Harry just fine, but he needed reassurance.

Harry gave it to him. "Pomfrey says so, yes,"

"I've got to go see her," Ron said, needing to see with his own two eyes.

"You're going to miss a supper like this?" Harry said in a teasing voice. It was a good acting job. He was far more tense and nervous than he was letting on.

Meanwhile Draco just sat there, taking a nibble of baguette, then a spoonful of soup, and watching Harry with a slightly amused expression on his face.

Ron looked torn, but in the end he grabbed a few bread rolls, tore them in half, buttered them, stuffed them with meat, drizzled a bit of mint sauce over them, and made to take off with his makeshift sandwiches.

"Um, . . . Ron?" Harry ventured. "There's something rather important I have to tell everyone tonight, so after you've seen 'Mione, could you come right back to the commons?" Ron looked at him as if Harry was losing his mind. "It really can't wait, and you can go back right afterward," Harry said, trying to be convincing.

"Can't you tell me now?" Ron demanded.

Harry was looking a bit uncomfortable. "Not here, no."

Ron sat back down. "I don't think Herm would take it well if I took off just minutes after arriving," he said, in explanation, "but this had best be damned important, Harry," he added with a glare.

Harry looked at his own supper, then sighed. He'd have to try to get something from the kitchens later. "Let's go."

"What?"

"You don't want to keep 'Mione waiting, and I'm not going to talk here, so let's go," Harry said impatiently.

Harry noticed Draco's questioning look, and shook his head. He needed to do this alone.

Ron looked annoyed, but Harry had just about had enough. Too many things had happened too quickly, and he had yet to have a chance to sit down and process any of it. He really didn't need Ron's attitude on top of it all, right now. He was too immersed in his own emotions to notice that his own attitudes weren't at their best. He stood and walked towards the huge double doors of the Great Hall. After few paces, he noticed he was all alone. Looking back, he saw Ron still sitting there, seemingly lost in thought. "Well? Are you coming?" he asked the redhead.

Ron seemed to jerk to life at that, and his quick movements told of his strong annoyance as he rose to his feet and started to follow Harry. Harry didn't wait any longer than to see that Ron was following before he turned back towards the doors and made

his way out. Once out in the corridors, Harry made his way up to the third floor landing. There, he figured, there was less chance of late supper arrivals interrupting them.

"Well? What's so bloody important, then?" Ron snapped.

Harry looked at him. "I have some bad news," he said, trying to remember that this was still his best friend.

Ron paled. "It's Herm, isn't it? What's wrong with her?"

Ron's evident worry and caring softened Harry's attitude. "No, Ron; I didn't lie to you. 'Mione's just fine. It's about me."

"You're not dying, are you?" Ron asked, now worried about Harry.

"No, but you might wish I were," Harry said.

Ron's face screwed up with puzzled anger. "Don't be sodding ridiculous, Harry!"

"That meeting with Dumbledore this morning?" Harry said to open up the subject. At Ron's nod of remembrance of that news, he continued. "Dumbledore left me cooling my heels, and I wound up talking to the Sorting Hat when I got bored. I got re-Sorted, Ron."

Ron stared at his best friend, then snorted and started chuckling. "Right, mate. Nobody gets re-Sorted, Harry. It's just not done!"

"Ron – stop. Think for a minute to whom you're talking. If something weird is going to happen to someone, to whom does it usually happen?"

Ron considered. "Yeah, all right," he conceded. "But you're no Hufflepuff; so it put you in Ravenclaw?" he asked, hopefully.

Harry slowly shook his head. "I should have been Sorted there to begin with, but I wanted so badly to stay with my new friend, and I'd heard such terrible things about Slytherin...."

"It Sorted you into Slytherin," Ron said with a dangerous calm. Then his hand came up, and he gave Harry a little push to the chest. "It Sorted you into Slytherin?" His other hand came up, and he shoved Harry a little harder. Harry was trying to tell him that he'd argued against it, and even Dumbledore didn't want him to go there, but Ron's blood was pounding his eardrums, and he wasn't really paying attention, anyway. "You're a bloody Slytherin?" he shouted, with another strong shove.

Unfortunately, neither young man had been paying much attention to where they were, at the head of the stairs, and Ron's final shove sent Harry reeling, then tumbling down the stairs. Ron's grab for Harry's robe slipped off the material as he tried to stop what was happening.

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## Chapter Eight

"It's a good thing you've a thick skull, Potter," Draco said sardonically.

That's the first thing Harry heard as he regained consciousness. "What a wonderful bedside manner you have," Harry replied, aware that he *was* in a bed, and then was shocked by how rusty and weak his voice sounded. He received another shock as he opened his eyes, just in time to see the blond wipe a tear from his face. "Are you crying?" he asked, his surprise showing in his weak voice. Through their link, he could feel Draco's relief, but tears?

"Of course not, Potter. Don't be ridiculous," the blond replied. "In the first place, Malfoys don't cry; in the second, why would I be crying over you?"

"Don't you believe it, Harry," came Hermione's voice, as she pushed through the curtains surrounding his bed. She completely ignored Draco's instructions to 'shut it' – meaning her mouth. "Poppy says when he brought you in here, he could hardly see where he was going, from the saltwater pouring from his eyes."

"I did no such thing!" Draco protested, face red.

"All right," Hermione admitted, "I exaggerated. But it wasn't long after." It had been very gratifying to see Draco brought low. That it had been over Harry had been exceedingly strange, but nevertheless....

Draco just glared at her.

"No," Harry argued, "just now."

Hermione looked at the blond shrewdly. Then, ignoring the death glares Draco was giving her, said, "He's probably just glad you're alive." Anything she could do to twit the prat was all good.

Harry was shocked. His injuries had been *that* bad? "How bad?" he asked.

"What did I tell you two? 'If he wakes, call me immediately', didn't I?" Madam Pomfrey interrupted as she also pushed through the curtains. "Now leave us a bit; I have some tests to do."

"Later," Hermione mouthed. Hopefully Malfoy would be elsewhere, and she could talk to Harry in peace.

Draco looked as though he'd like to protest, but minding his image, he just got up and exited.

"How are you feeling, Mister Potter?" Poppy inquired briskly.

Harry frowned. He hurt, and he was thirsty. He said so.

"Not hungry?" the mediwitch asked, as she started performing diagnostic spells and noting down the results.

Harry shook his head, and was immediately sorry he'd done so, as pain shot through it.

"I shouldn't think you'd be wanting to move your head just yet, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey said, "but you should be able to speak without a problem."

*'Thanks for the warning,'* Harry thought sarcastically. "I think I just found that out," he whispered.

"I thought you might have a bit of a headache," she said cheerfully. "You rather gave it something of a bump! Here," she said, offering him a vial. "Pain potion," she explained, to his look of inquiry. "It should help your voice, as well. I'll be back in a moment with some Bone Mend and an anti-inflammatory potion. How are your eyes?" she asked, just as he downed the pain potion.

"Fine," he replied when he could, grimacing at the taste of the potion, and just before he realized that they shouldn't be. Where were his glasses? "My glasses?" he asked.

Madam Pomfrey frowned. "Is something wrong with your sight?"

"No," Harry said, puzzled. "Why is that?"

"I'm afraid that when you fell, your glasses broke. The glass punctured your right eye. We were able to save it, but the healing corrected the shape of your eye and cornea as well, correcting the sight in that eye. It didn't make sense not to correct the other at the same time."

Harry felt a bit lost. Those glasses, or ones like them, had been a part of his life ever since he was quite small. It felt strange not to be wearing them, but all he could think of to say was, "Oh."

"So your eyes are all right, then?"

Harry gave her a little smile, to reassure her. "Yes. No problems that I can tell, anyway."

"Good. We'll have you fit as a butcher's dog, soon enough."

"What else?"

Poppy had seen Harry in this infirmary often enough over the years that she should have known he'd want to know all the details. Almost everyone else just wanted to be fixed up and let go. They didn't care about the details. But Harry had always wanted to know. Whether it was from morbid curiosity or for some other reason, she'd never determined. "Numerous contusions – bruises – you had a twisted ankle, and a broken wrist, and ulna. Other than your eye, the worst damage was a rather large crack in your skull."

Well that explained Draco's remark, anyway. "And now?"

"I'll need to keep you here another day, at least, to make sure your head finishes mending properly and that there are no side-effects from the injury. Other than that, everything else is mostly mended."

Harry frowned. He knew the wizarding world had good healing spells and potions, but it still seemed too fast. "How long have I been here?"

Poppy stopped what she was doing and looked Harry squarely in the eyes. "Three days," she said.

Harry closed his eyes tiredly, then opened them again. That explained the 'quick' healing. He felt a feeling of reassurance in the back of his mind coming from a large presence he wasn't familiar with. He opened his eyes wide in surprise, at that. The feeling became one of amusement. '*Who are you?*' he thought at it. He knew the feel of Voldemort's mind, by now. This wasn't he. And it didn't feel malevolent or dangerous, at least.

*'I'm all around you,'* it thought back at him.

*'A ghost?'*

The feeling of amusement grew. *'I'm hardly so insubstantial,'* it said.

"Are you all right, Mister Potter?" Poppy inquired, watching his facial expressions.

Harry was startled. "What? Oh – yes, thank you."



Poppy frowned, and made a notation on his chart. Harry ignored it, concentrating on the puzzle of the presence in his mind. Not a ghost: that ruled out a great many possibilities.

*'Then who...?'*

*'You call me "Hogwarts",'* it said.

"What?" he exclaimed loudly, in astonished disbelief – and winced as his head throbbed painfully for a moment. But the pain potion he'd taken a few moments earlier quickly subdued it.

"Mister Potter?" Poppy questioned, mildly alarmed.

Poppy would think he was delirious. "Could.... Could I speak with Professor Dumbledore, please?" Harry asked. If there had been anyone else to turn to with this, he would have. But he couldn't think of anyone else who might know as much about the castle, or as intimately, as Dumbledore.

*'I've never spoken with him,'* the voice said.

"A vision?" Pomfrey asked, worriedly.

*'Just a second, please,'* Harry 'said' to the voice. "No, just...." Now he was in quandary. Was the voice that of the school? He didn't think it likely. It was just a building. But—

*'A quite magical building, thank you,'* the voice said, sounding a bit offended. *'And....'* The voice stopped itself, just as Poppy spoke up again.

"Just what, Mister Potter?" The mediwitch looked as though she might be becoming annoyed.

Harry ignored her. The voice could be anyone – anything. But if it *were* the school, Dumbledore would find a use for his ability to speak with it. He already felt too much like a tool in the headmaster's hands. He didn't want yet more manipulation from the old man. *'Can you prove to me that you're Hogwarts?'* he asked.

Of a sudden his mind was flooded with impressions. The foremost impression was that of being huge and mostly hollow, and with oddities that rather twisted him, but not unpleasantly: likely high thaumaturgic concentrations. Little moving things – people, he realized – were in many parts of him, many of them doing magic: the 'waste' magic,

and the ambient magic that naturally seeped out of the people being soaked up by him. But quite a lot of him had no people in him, nor had there been for many, many years.

Just as suddenly, the impressions ended.

"Mister Potter!" Madam Pomfrey was no longer annoyed. She was sure Harry was having problems due to the head injury.

Harry looked at her. So tiny. Then with a feeling of being twisted through reality – an odd feeling in itself – his perceptions returned to normal. "I'm just fine, Madam Pomfrey. Just . . . just thinking. I'll have a lot of lessons to catch up to." It was true, but it hadn't really occurred to him until he needed something to tell her.

She looked at him suspiciously. "No dizziness? Your balance is all right?" She wasn't satisfied with his reassurances, although how Harry was supposed to tell if his balance was okay while he was laying in a bed escaped him, and peered closely at his eyes, then ran a few more diagnostic spells. "Well, there doesn't *seem* to be anything wrong with you, but if you notice the slightest thing off, tell me."

*'If I told you I was talking to a magical castle, you'd have me locked up in St. Mungo's and throw the key in the ocean,'* he thought to himself. He 'heard' a giggle. *'Liked that, did you?'* he asked of the voice. He got a feeling of humourous agreement back.

Madam Pomfrey then left to get the other potions she'd mentioned. Harry hoped she'd remember something for him to drink, as well. Not two seconds later, Draco 'casually' sauntered back into his curtained off area.

"So what's the verdict, Potter? Is 'The Boy Who Lived' going to continue that bad habit?"

Harry wasn't going to cater to that old behaviour pattern, even if Draco's tone of voice was more bantering than adversarial. He changed the subject. "So you carried me in here, did you? I would have thought Ron would do it himself. I know he pushed me, but he tried to catch me when I fell."

Draco's face flushed. "He had rather a hard time carrying *himself* about, once I was through with him!" he said angrily.

"You beat him up?"

Draco looked at him with disdain. "What do I look like, Potter – a thug? No. I just hexed him into next week." At Harry's look of alarm, he quickly added "Oh, don't worry; I didn't kill him. Pomfrey had *him* sorted out in just one day."

"So you were there?"

"Not in time," Draco mumbled.

Now Harry was intrigued. "Did you follow us, then?"

The blond shook his head. "Not until I . . . felt your apprehension. I got there just in time to see the Weasel push you down the stairs."

Harry was amazed. "You felt it? You saw it? You must have been running all out, to get there that quickly."

"Here you go, Mister Po- Mister Malfoy, I thought I told you to wait without," the mediwitch scolded, as she put a glass of what looked like pumpkin juice on the side table, as well as a couple of small potion flasks.

Harry reached for the juice.

"You might want to save that to wash down the taste of the potions, Mister Potter," Poppy warned. Harry desisted. He'd tasted some of the medical potions before. She was right; he'd want something to get the taste out of his mouth.

Draco was sitting there with a frown on his face, but he had made no move towards leaving.

"Where's 'Mione?" Harry asked.

"She had a lesson to write," the blond said absently, still frowning, "or so she said."

Harry couldn't ignore that behaviour. "What's wrong, Draco?" he inquired, as the mediwitch handed him the first vial to drink.

"It's the anti-inflammatory," she told him. Harry drank, trying not taste what he was swallowing, as Draco answered his question.

"When I was put under the slave bond, you only gave me one name. I'm not bonded as a slave anymore, but that name is still the only legal one I have on record at the Ministry."

"Is there anything I can do to change that?" Harry asked, again grimacing at the taste of the potion.

Madam Pomfrey handed him the next one. "Bone Heal," she said, identifying it.

"When I was still a slave? Maybe. But now? I don't know. I don't think so," Draco replied.

"As a free person, you should be able to petition to change your own name, Mister-Draco," Poppy said, joining the conversation. "Drink, Mister Potter!"

Harry made a face at her, causing her to smile, but obediently downed the potion. The taste of this one was, if anything, worse than the first. "Pumpkin juice! Now, please!" he begged.

Draco, after due consideration of Madam Pomfrey's words, said, "It's something to look into, anyway."

In the meantime Poppy had handed Harry the juice, then left to go about her other duties. Harry made short work of the juice, after using the first sip to rinse his mouth.

"So where *is* Ron?" Harry asked the blond.

Draco shrugged. "Detention, most likely," he said carelessly.

"For what?" Harry asked curiously.

Draco looked at him as though wondering if Harry's mind had been scrambled, after all. "For almost killing Dumbledore's favourite student," he said carefully.

"But it was an accident!" Harry protested.

"I can't believe, after all he's put you through, that you're defending him!" Draco exclaimed quietly.

Harry sighed. He wasn't quite sure why he was either, except, "He was by my side for most of five years, Draco. He risked his life for me on more than one occasion."

"So you've said," Draco replied calmly, "but he's also turned his back on you a few times, hasn't he? And this time his temper almost killed you. If I had been even another ten minutes getting you here...." Draco's face paled as he closed his eyes against the scenes he was seeing in his mind.

Harry was shocked that it had been that close, but he was moved by Draco's reaction to it and reached over, taking the blond's hand in his own. "But you weren't, and I didn't," he said softly and reassuringly. He resisted the urge to again insist that it had only been an accident. Draco was in no mood to hear it right now.

*'He will make you a powerful ally and life mate.'* The school was back. Or rather, it was talking to him again.

Life mate. Soul bond. *'Did you have anything to do with what happened in the Room of Requirement?'* Harry asked.

*'I gave you what you needed, yes,'* it – she, Harry decided – replied.

*'But the spell?'*

*'That was a bit of a risk, I'll admit, overtaking your friend to perform the fae soul-binding ritual rather than the transformative heart-binding spell she was going to use,'* she replied. *'And,'* she continued, overriding Harry's impending hot reply, *'it was well I did. She was going to try to replace him with herself in the bond.'*

"What?" Harry exclaimed aloud, in his shock. "But she's with Ron!" Even so, he wondered at Hermione's daring. If she had tried and failed, or merely got herself added in, or – gods forfend – actually succeeded!

"Harry?" Draco questioned, alarmed. Had Harry's head injury truly affected his mind?

"Just a minute, Draco," Harry instructed a bit impatiently.

The blond frowned. Well, Harry was responding normally enough – wasn't he? "I'm calling Madam Pomfrey," he told the injured young man.

Harry looked a bit exasperated. "I'm fine, Draco; just . . . I'm talking to someone, all right?"

Draco looked at him suspiciously. "Who?" If he was having a conversation with Voldemort....

"Um.... You wouldn't believe me," Harry said, somewhat sheepishly.

"Is it 'You-Know-Who'?"

Harry almost laughed. "No, it's not Voldemort."

"Hearing voices now, are you?" Draco said, trying to tease, despite his worry. As long as Harry was responding normally to him, maybe he was okay, but....

*'Can you let Draco hear you?'* Harry asked the school.

*'I can try. It took a mighty knock on the head for you to be able to hear me,'* was the reply.

*'Did you arrange that?'* Harry asked, his temper starting to rise.

*'No, that was an accident. But while the damage was healing, I guided a connection that I couldn't have made, otherwise.'*

"Harry?"

"Sorry, Draco. I was just asking it if it would talk to you. She's not sure if she can."

*'There's a block, there. I can't tell if it's natural or manufactured, though.'*

"She says there's a block. She can't get through to you," Harry told the blond.

"Who, Harry?" Draco was losing patience.

Harry blushed. "The school," he mumbled.

"Tell me you didn't just say Hogwarts was talking to you, Harry?" Draco requested.

"Well, we did discuss it being probably the most magical building in the wizarding world, and possibly sentient," Harry said, defending himself. At the same time Harry was realizing that, healing potions or no, he was feeling far better than he should be. But be that as it may, he wasn't going to question good fortune.

Draco looked dubious. "And now it's talking to you?"

"Um.... Yeah. We were just discussing the...."

"I don't think I want to know, Potter," Draco interrupted.

"The ritual to transform our bond?"

Draco considered it. "I've changed my mind. Even if it's just you talking to yourself, *that* I want to know more about. So what does your fevered mind think it was?" Draco responded.

"A fae soul-bonding ritual," Harry responded, ignoring the slight to his sanity. If someone else had said something similiar to him, he'd be thinking the same thing.

Draco sat heavily back in his chair. He was silent for a few moments staring into space, then said, "That makes so much sense, it's frightening." He focused on Harry again. "But what was that about Granger?"

"Hogwarts. . ." *'We have to come up with a better name for you. I can't keep calling you blemishes on a pig,'* he said in a silent aside. He received a feeling of amusement in return. ". . .says that she was going to do the bond transformation as requested, but she was going to try to replace you in the bond with herself."

Draco's face clouded with anger before he remembered himself, and his face smoothed over. The continued flush on his face told the true story, however. "It would have been nice to be free," he commented calmly, "if it didn't mean that it would leave me vulnerable to Vol- to 'You-Know-Who', again. Are you sure your little girlfriend isn't a Death Eater, Potter?"

Harry fought his temper down. "I'm sure. I'm also fairly sure she was only thinking of the bond, and not the consequences to you, other than freeing you. And she is not now, nor has she ever been, my girlfriend."

"Yeah, all right," Draco conceded with ill grace. *'She would have been, had she succeeded in her intentions. But Harry doesn't like girls that way, so....'* He halted that line of thought. It hadn't happened, after all. He turned to more fruitful matters. "But a faery soul bonding?"

"Do you remember any of the words? We could look them up. If they fit, that should prove I've not gone barmy," Harry said.

He'd been far too distracted by Harry to pay any attention to the words that Granger was spouting at the time, but Draco wasn't about to admit that fact. "Does this voice say anything about the feathers and mugwort?" he asked, both because he wanted to know, and to avoid answering Harry's question.

Hogwarts related the information to Harry, and he relayed it to Draco. "The feathers were all to aid in your relationship," Harry said, echoing, verbatim, what the school was telling him. The 'listening' quality of Harry's expression and body language went a long way towards convincing Draco that this may not be the product of a deranged mind, after all. "Phoenix feather for renewal and healing, a griffon feather for bravery and constancy, and a hippogriff feather for love in the face of great odds. Mugwort is the universal herb of protection and prophecy, and has broad powers of healing and psychic

protection. It also assists in inducing prophetic dreams, confers psychic powers, and increases strength, fertility, and libido."

Harry blushed at the end of that recitation. "Her words, not mine," he said, excusing himself from responsibility.

"All right, *now* I believe it's not just your fevered imagination talking," Draco said, smirking. "But here, now: If all that was granted during the transformation, then why haven't I got it?"

"How did you know I might be running into trouble with Ron?" Harry asked, pointedly.

"The bond, of course," Draco said impatiently.

Harry just met the blond's gaze, and waited.

Draco's eyes widened slowly in realization.

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"So how are things between you and Ron these days, 'Mione?" Harry asked, allowing only a casual amount of interest to show.

Hermione had stopped by just an hour before curfew, after completing the assignments she'd been given that day, and had brought a small plate of sandwiches with her for them to snack on. She hadn't looked surprised to see Draco still there, but her indifferent attitude was a bit strained. She nattered on a bit about the goings-on in the school whilst they had eaten before Harry asked his question.

She shrugged. "We're on the outs," she replied. "After his attitude towards Draco, and then pushing you down the stairs...." She shrugged again.

"You do know that me falling down the stairs was an accident, don't you?" Harry said, ignoring Draco's 'I beg to differ' glare.

"That's what he said, but his temper! What if we were together and I made him angry? Or we got married and had children, and *they* made him angry?"

"Granger, please!" Draco broke in. "Just the *thought* of yet more Weasleys!" He shuddered, a look of distaste on his face.



Hermione smirked, then gave Draco a slight frown. That, more than anything, told Harry that the excuses she had just given were just a smokescreen. She was amused by the slight to Ron, but wasn't pleased with the speaker – Draco. A slight frown graced his brow as he gazed at her.

She caught it as she glanced at him, and immediately became nervous. "Curfew is soon. I'd best be getting back to the Tower," she said, as she rose to her feet.

Then she looked at Draco. "I suppose you'll be spending the night here again?" she asked, her voice tension-filled.

Draco's cheeks pinked as he glanced at Harry, but his reply was coolly indifferent. "It's a possibility."

Hermione pushed through the curtains, and was gone.

Harry looked at the blond curiously. "'Again'? You've been spending nights here?"

Draco straightened his spine and gathered his dignity about him. "So?"

"Why?" Harry asked. He thought he knew, but he wanted to make Draco admit it.

Draco's face became quite red. "It's of no importance," he bluffed.

"Did you hurt yourself?" Harry asked with fake concern. He doubted it – or that it had been serious, if Draco had.

"I strained a muscle in my back carrying you, if you must know," the blond claimed. It was an outright lie. He wouldn't have been able to carry Harry without casting a weight reduction charm.

"And it's taking this long to heal?" Harry asked with obvious disbelief, a grin creeping across his face. "Is Poppy losing her touch?"

Draco squirmed in discomfort at this grilling. "Look, just drop it, Potter. It's nothing, all right?"

Since Draco wasn't going to say it, Harry decided to put it to him plainly. His delight was evident, however. "You were worried about me, weren't you?"

"Go to sleep, Potter. It must be past curfew, by now," Draco huffed.

"There's still a half-hour," Harry said.

Draco looked at him sharply. "Then what was Granger on about?"

"I caught her in a lie, and she knew it," Harry explained, with a shrug. "She isn't worried about Ron's temper. She's more than a match for him."

Draco nodded, rubbing his jaw subconsciously as he again remembered the one run-in he'd had with her, and jumped to a few conclusions. "So she really did, or rather does, want you then? What are you going to do about her?"

Harry shrugged. "Nothing."

Draco cocked his head at him, then consciously corrected his posture. "She nearly cocked it all up, Harry," he pointed out.

"She could have," Harry admitted, "but she didn't. And now we know to be wary of her. I wouldn't have thought it of her, but...." He didn't finish the sentence, but he looked a bit sad. *'Thank you, Hogwarts,'* he sent, *'for your help – or interference.'*

*'Liloriennne,'* the school replied.

*'What?'*

*'Liloriennne. It was my name before I was embodied in the castle.'*

That statement made Harry's mind race. *'So you were a witch, and your spirit was bound into the castle? Was it voluntary?'*

*'I was of the fae. But yes, it was voluntary. I was dying. I got caught by a wasting curse. Your parents saved me.'*

*'My parents?'* Harry asked, surprise evident in his mental tone.

"Harry!" Draco said forcefully, finally getting Harry's attention.

Harry looked up, a bit disoriented.

"Is the old lady talking to you again?" Draco asked, referring to the castle.

Harry nodded, then frowned. "She says she used to be a faery, and her spirit was bound into the castle. Her name was Liloriennne."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Well, that makes more sense than a magical construct of this size," he opined.

"But wouldn't that make her a ghost?" came a new voice.

"Weasley!" Draco spat, shooting to his feet, his wand suddenly in hand. "I thought I told you—"

"It's all right, Draco!" Harry interrupted. Then looking at the two young men glaring at each other, he wondered if it really was.

"How many times do I have to tell you . . . Draco . . . that I didn't mean to push him down the stairs?" Ron said, his voice tense with the strain of keeping his temper. "I just want to apologise."

"Draco, please?" Harry's request was almost an order. Draco subsided, re-taking his seat, but without taking his eyes off the redhead, and without in any way backing down from him. "Thank you," Harry told him.

"Thank you, Harry," Ron said, sneering at Draco.

Harry noticed the sneer. "Draco's trying, Ron. Can't you?"

"That Death Eater scu—? Um.... Sorry. I didn't come to fight." Ron looked genuinely repentant. And knowing how Ron had a habit of wearing his heart on his sleeve, Harry believed him. "Look, . . .I'm sorry about the stairs, Harry. You just – gave me a bit of a shock, you know? I wasn't thinking about the stairs when I shoved you," he said pleadingly.

"Yeah, all right. I can see that," Harry replied. "But Ron? The world changes. You can't go flying off your nut every time it does."

Ron looked thoroughly abashed. "Yeah, all right," he muttered, unable to meet Harry's eyes.

"You're the closest thing I've ever had to a brother, Ron; and you almost killed me 'cause you couldn't keep your temper," Harry pressed on.

Ron's head flew up, finally meeting Harry's eyes. "Don't you think I know that? I've had night terrors!"

Harry looked at Draco to see his reaction to that. Draco had one eyebrow raised, and had relaxed back into his chair a bit; and although he still looked angry, he didn't look quite *as* angry. Sometime during the previous conversation he'd also put his wand away.

Harry looked back to his friend. "So do you think if I handed you another shock, you could keep your temper?" he asked.

Ron's look turned to one of wary inquiry. "Such as?"

"Such as something concerning the bond Draco and I have," Harry told him.

"He's your bond slave. So?"

So Hermione hadn't told him. Harry looked at Draco. "Draco, would you mind giving Ron the chair? You can sit on the bed, if you like."

Draco didn't say anything; he simply got out of the chair, and sat on the bed. Ron took his place.

"Take hold of the arms, and don't let go, Ron," Harry instructed. He noticed Draco unobtrusively getting his wand in hand – probably a good idea, given Ron's history of reactions to news that unsettled him, but he hoped the blond wouldn't use anything more powerful than a 'Stupefy', if it became necessary.

Harry took a deep breath.

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"Well, that went better than I expected," Harry remarked, some time later.

"Quite impressive, if a bit barbaric," Draco replied.

"I think Ron was as surprised as we were."

"A bit hard on the furnishings, though, if that's what he's going to do to control his temper."

Harry nodded. "Imagine; tearing the chair arms off, that way."

"Good night, Harry," Draco said, as he settled into the cot he'd transfigured from the aforementioned chair.

"Good night, Draco."

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## Chapter Nine

Harry was released from the infirmary just before dinner the next day. The first thing he did was to head towards Gryffindor Tower.

"You're going the wrong way, Harry," Draco informed him wryly.

"I need a shower, Dra- Oh. Right," Harry said sheepishly, as he recalled Salazar's apartment.

Draco smirked, but all he said was, "This way," and headed for the second floor, and their new quarters.

"I remember where it is," Harry muttered irritably, "I just forgot about it for a bit. I *was* knocked silly for three days, you know."

Draco immediately felt repentant, but didn't allow it to show. "I know," he replied. "I was with you, remember?"

Harry couldn't help but try to get a dig in at the blond. "Why didn't you sleep in our rooms? Couldn't have anything to do with that bloody great snake guarding them, could it?"

Draco flushed. Apparently, it could. "Damned thing wouldn't let me in," Draco said, excusing himself.

"Really? Because he said he would, you know. I'll have to have a word with him."

Draco still hadn't looked at him, so he didn't see Harry's teasing smirk. His face took on a deeper shade of red. "No need for that," he replied. "I'm sure it was just temporary forgetfulness."

'*Gotcha*,' Harry thought smugly. He decided to ease off, anyway. "All right. If you say so."

"I do," Draco replied firmly. '*Damn. I knew lying would get me in trouble someday. Almost did, this time*,' he thought, resolving to be more creative with his misdirection.

"Now, Draco, don't be getting the cart before horse," Harry said teasingly. "I haven't asked you, yet."

Draco stopped dead in his tracks, as he immediately caught Harry's implication. When Harry looked back at him, a questioning look on his face, Draco very seriously warned him, "Don't tease about things like that, Harry."

Harry slowly turned to face him, searching the blond's face for clues. Why was he so touchy? To anyone else, Draco's face would have looked either totally impassive or, to the more observant, mildly annoyed. But Harry looked past all that, and saw the blond's angst. Little things that he'd noticed, but disregarded, slowly started falling into place, creating a picture that surprised him. "All of that – that animosity – that bluster – it's just a façade, isn't it?" he said, more than asked. His voice was quite serious as well; curiosity and a bit of wonder the only hints of emotion showing. He walked back to Draco, and stood quite close to him, but without touching. "It's all to protect yourself," he said slowly, sure of his analysis.

"Nonsense!" Draco retorted, trying to bluff. "And how you can come to such a conclusion from my correcting your abysmally poor taste in humor is beyond me."

Harry ignored it. He didn't say anything. He simply took Draco's slightly moist hand in his own and continued along to their apartment, tugging the blond along, and ignoring his protests.

When Harry exited the bath, dressed only in clean trousers, Draco was still pouting. Yes, in a way he was glad that Harry had seen through him, but he would much rather have picked his own time and place, doing it in such a manner that he had control of the situation and could use it to his advantage. He'd now lost the initiative.

Harry smirked at the sight. "You're sweet," he told the disgruntled blond.

"I am *not* . . . sweet, Potter," Draco growled, while a light blush graced his cheeks. Harry's naked torso was *not* helping Draco keep his hormones and emotions in check.

Harry was drawn to that blush like a cat to cream. He almost stalked Draco as though he were prey as he approached, the blond's widening eyes and heightening signs of apprehension acting only to whet his interest.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Har- Potter?" Draco said, trying to sneer, but failing miserably. Danger he could face. He could deal with being tortured, although he'd rather not. But this.... This unnerved him. He had no experience dealing with something like this where his own, more tender emotions were involved.

Harry didn't answer. As he reached the blond, he slowly leant forward, Draco leaning back at the same speed, eyes wide, until he was laying back on the couch. He put his

hands up to fend Harry off, but there was no strength left in his arms. Harry kissed him lightly, running his fingers through the blond hair, then withdrew a few inches to see Draco's reaction. Draco drew a deep, shuddering breath, eyes closed. "Damn," he breathed. He was lost. He opened his eyes, meeting the emerald ones hovering above him. "Why did you have to do that?" he whispered accusingly, his own hands moving to run his fingers through Harry's thick, but surprisingly soft hair.

"I knew it," Harry said quietly. "You *are* sweet. You taste wonderful." His stomach rumbled.

Draco's eyes widened when he heard Harry's stomach, a smile rapidly growing into a grin, then snickers. "How- how romantic." To his own surprise, Draco giggled – then blushed violently that he'd done so.

Harry grinned, his face also red. "It's been awhile since breakfast, you prat."

"Then I suggest you complete your wardrobe, so we can lunch," Draco replied with a grin, trying valiantly to ignore what had just happened.

Ron took one look at them as they seated themselves at the Gryffindor table, groaned, and let his head fall, resulting in a loud 'thump' as it hit the table. He didn't even complain. After a moment he lifted it again, to the curious gaze of those around him. He didn't notice. His vision was solely concentrated on his best friend and 'the git'. "Harry, how could you?" he wailed.

Totally bewildered, Harry asked "How could I – what?"

"You let him kiss you!" Ron accused.

Immediately, the buzz of whispered conversations increased, as those within hearing passed along this 'information'.

Harry's confusion mounted, wondering how Ron could possibly know, and his cheeks blazed, but he didn't deny it. "Actually, I kissed him," he replied.

There was a short, shocked silence as Ron's accusation found solid ground, and then the whispered conversations started again, louder.

"How the hell could you know anyway, Weasley?" There was a bite of annoyance in Draco's question – not only from this evidence of the redhead's perspicacity, but with Harry's admission of the act.

Ron's shocked expression turned to petty aggravation as his gaze focused on the Slytherin – which reminded him. Ignoring the blond, he turned again to Harry. "You got re-Sorted, Harry. Why are you eating here?" he asked, rather loudly.

With this news, complete silence reigned in the circle of those who had heard. The Gryffindors weren't surprised, of course. Ron's moaning and groaning about how he'd pushed Harry down the stairs had included why. They hadn't been best pleased, but they'd mostly been beaten into submission, at least verbally, by Ron, Ginny, and Hermione, with moral support from Neville Longbottom and a couple of others. So Harry was now a Slytherin. So what? The only thing that had changed about him was his House! So while there were a couple of glowers at the reminder, that was all.

Harry looked around at the reaction to Ron's comment. "Didn't Dumbledore make the announcement?" he asked, somewhat confused about the fuss.

"What? Was he supposed to?" Ron asked.

"You were in the infirmary, Harry," Hermione said. "Helpless, right? Couldn't very well risk his 'Golden Boy', could he?" Yes, she'd stuck up for Harry despite the revelation of his sexuality and his change of House, but now he was getting romantically involved with that piece of slime?

The tense tone in her voice had several people looking at her curiously, a few with slight frowns; including Harry and Ron. She ignored them, continuing to eat her meal.

Ron shook off the mood, turning back to Harry. "So why are you sitting at the Gryffindor table, exactly?" he asked again.

Harry shrugged. "It's a crime to eat with your friends?" he asked nonchalantly.

Ron nodded. "Yeah, all right," he conceded, "but you're going to have to eat with your new House eventually, you know."

Harry looked at Ron more sharply. That sort of insight wasn't common to the redhead – if that's what it was. And that was twice, now. But instead of answering it, he reiterated Draco's question. "How *did* you know, Ron? That we'd kissed?"

"Your hair's mussed, your face is flushed, your lips are puffy.... Anyone with eyes could see you've been snogging, Harry; and I don't think blondie would stand by as witness while you got your jollies with some other bloke," he answered. "Besides which, *his* hair isn't usually mussed, *ever*!"



Draco, who had been wondering how Ron could possibly tell when Harry's hair was mussed, as it always looked that way to him, immediately felt of his own hair. It was true; he'd forgotten to brush it, after. "Not that it's any of your business, Weasel," he sneered, in reaction to his embarrassment. He finger-combed his hair, for now.

"Don't, Ron," Harry requested, with a note of warning in his voice, as he saw Ron puffing up.

Ron transferred his glower to Harry, then nodded. "This time," he said.

"Oh, please—" Draco began, superiorly.

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed, interrupting the blond. "Please – drop it?" he requested in a lower, more intimate tone when he had the blond's attention.

Draco met his gaze, gave a short, sharp nod, and turned his attention to his meal. It was, after all, a trivial matter.

"So how are *you* getting along, then?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged again. "All right."

"Found anyone to take my place on the team?"

Draco gave a small snort, in disbelief of such a thing being possible. Harry elbowed him, albeit not violently. Neither took much notice when Hermione got up and left.

"As a matter of fact," Ron replied, giving Draco the fish-eye, "we're having try-outs Saturday, half two. We have a couple of prospects, though of course we couldn't expect them to come up to your standard."

"No one else would risk their life like Harry," Draco muttered.

Harry heard. "There wasn't that much risk, Draco," he said, defending himself.

"Oh, please! Who else do you know who would stand on their broom to catch the snitch?" Draco retorted.

Harry's face went a bright red, and he very pointedly ignored Draco's very pertinent point, paying strict attention to his meal.

Ron snickered, then caught himself as he realized that he was tacitly supporting Draco with that laughter. "That *was* a fairly foolish stunt, Harry," he said, unable to keep himself from commenting.

"Well, that was then. This is now," Harry replied sheepishly, glancing at Draco, then cutting back to Ron.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Ron asked.

"It means," Harry said, looking at Draco more openly, "that then I didn't have as much to live for. I didn't care as much."

It was Draco's turn to pretend not to hear what had just been said, or its implications, but his slight blush gave him away. He was wondering just how Harry did it. How did he always manage to slip past his defences and get this reaction from him? But it had always been so, to a degree. Before, he had usually provoked hurt, jealousy, and angry embarrassment. However now....

Well, he mused to himself, Harry was spending a lot of time with a red face these days, too. At least he was able to affect 'the Golden Boy', as well.

Ron was looking just a bit green, and more than a bit put out. "Harry, if you're telling me you're starting to fancy that...." The tension in Ron's voice prevented him from finishing that sentence.

Harry looked him straight in the eyes. "And if I were?" he asked challengingly. Damn it, Ron *knew* about the soul bond! What did he *think* the results would be? Not that he had needed it to spur these feelings.

He didn't want to be on the outs with yet another friend, yet alone one that was so much like family – a brother to him, but he wasn't going to have his life dictated to him, either. Who he loved.... Loved? Did he actually love the snarky blond? On reflection, he considered that it was entirely possible. Well, then: who he loved, was his business. Ron would come around, in time – he hoped.

Ron carefully put down his fork and got up from the table. "If you'll all excuse me?" he said with overt politeness. "I find that I've lost my appetite." With that he walked away, not looking back.

Draco eyed Harry, curious about how he'd react to this development.

But Harry calmly returned to his meal, ignoring everything and everyone else. Yes, it hurt a bit, but Harry wasn't going to allow Ron to get any satisfaction from seeing that.

And if this all sounds as though Harry had forgotten about Lilorienne's tantalizing hints about his parentage, you'd be sadly mistaken. He merely hadn't had enough time yet to quietly converse with her and untangle the whole mess. But Lilorienne had been there for centuries. Harry was sure she'd be there in a few hours. All the same, he was 'straining at the bit', as racing people were wont to say.

But satisfying his curiosity was going to be delayed.

They were just making their way from luncheon when Draco recognised Hermione's voice coming from an empty classroom and brought Harry's attention to it.

". . .the blazes you're talking about, Ron! If Harry told you he and that uncouth Slytherin have a soul bond, he's just plain wrong!" Hermione was saying quite loudly. "I don't even know why Malfoy is still hanging around him. Even if I failed to take his place in the heart bond, I know for a fact that it didn't take, and the slave bond doesn't work any more, either."

"What heart bond, Hermione? And why the hell would you be wanting to be in a heart bond with *Harry*?" Ron asked, his voice dangerously tense.

There were a few moments of silence, then Hermione spoke up again. "I- I just didn't want that bastard bound to him anymore, Ron," she said, plaintively. "It's not as though I'm in love with him."

"But you would have been, with a heart bond, Herm," Ron replied, hurt evident in his voice. "I may not have my nose stuck into a book all the time, but I'm not stupid."

"I know," Hermione replied quietly. "I'm sorry, Ronnie."

A couple of seconds later, Ron opened the door completely. Seeing the objects of their conversation standing there, Ron coloured a bit, then just pushed past them and ran off.

Harry exchanged a look with Draco, then walked into the room, Draco right behind, to confront an equally red-faced Hermione.

"H-hello, Harry," she said, then her eyes darted to the floor, and fixated there.

"Hello, 'Mione," Harry replied, seating himself on a tabletop. Draco sat on the same table, a few feet away. "Have a fight with Ron?"

"No, thank you," she said in a weak attempt at humour, "I just had one."

"I know. About us," Harry said.

"There is no 'us'," Hermione interrupted.

"Nor could there be," Harry agreed, "but I was referring to Draco and myself."

Hermione's head came up. "It's wrong, Harry. Not only being bound to . . . him, but the whole homosexuality thing, too."

That brought Harry up short. He'd known she didn't like Draco, but.... "Weren't you the one who told Ron to back off, on the train?" Harry reminded her.

The girl's face flushed. "I.... That was then." All right, so she had panicked. Now she was stuck with it.

"So what's changed, Granger?" Draco asked, joining the conversation.

Her eyes cut to him, glaring. "God," she spit out. She'd heard enough of this crap to be able to fake it.

"Which one?" Harry asked.

She stared at him for a second. "So you're a heathen, too? There *is* only one God."

"So you joined that Muggle religion, then," Draco sneered.

"I never left it," Hermione lied, sneering back at him. "I just got distracted."

"Ron was really that good?" Harry inquired, verbally poking at her.

"Leave Ron out of this!" she ordered, blushing angrily.

"It seems to me *you* already have," Harry replied gently. Draco snickered, but cut it short, resorting to merely smirking when Harry looked sternly at him.

Now Hermione was looking a bit lost and confused.

"Did you ever love him?" Harry asked in the same tone.

"I.... Yes," she admitted.

"Then why would you throw that away?"

"To save your soul!" Hermione declared boldly. *'To get rid of that blond bastard!'* she viciously thought to herself.

Harry shook his head, sadly. "Your god was never mine, Hermione," he said softly, "and I could never be happy with a female. My experience with Cho Chang taught me that."

"You had a crush on her, Harry. You wanted her!" the bushy-haired girl declared.

"I wanted to want her," Harry corrected. "Ever heard of denial, 'Mione? The Dursleys taught me a lot of hateful things, including that homosexuality was wrong, sick, twisted, and so on. Do you know how torn I was? How much I hated myself at first when I found myself looking at boys instead of girls?"

"They were right!" Hermione declared. If she could create some doubt in him, maybe she could still get Harry to dump Malfoy.

Draco looked at her in disgust. "I thought Muggles were bad before, but if that's how they think...!"

"You've been very dear to me, Hermione," Harry said as he stood up, ignoring Draco's comment, and distracting the girl from whatever comment she'd been about to sling at the blond. "When you can accept me for who I am and who I love, I'll be around. I hope." He walked out the door, then noticed Draco hadn't immediately followed.

"I've read a little about your Muggle religion, Granger," Draco said to the girl as he got up off the table he and Harry had sat upon. "Isn't it supposed to be about love? Where does bigotry fit into that?"

Hermione glared at him. "Pot, kettle, black," she said, coldly. Who cared what *Malfoy* thought, anyway?

Draco shrugged and started walking towards the door to catch up to Harry. "It's not *my* religion, Granger – it's yours," he tossed over his shoulder.

When he found Harry waiting for him in the corridor, he impulsively gave the raven-haired boy a hug – then turned and walked on as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Didn't those Muggles try to teach you their religion, Harry?" Draco asked, some time later.

Harry shook his head. "They didn't even want to acknowledge I existed, let alone spend time teaching me anything. And taking me to public places? Only if they couldn't avoid it."

"Do you *have* a religion, then?"

"Not really," Harry replied, shaking his head, "although I rather like some of the concepts I've heard about the Old religions."

Draco nodded and dropped the subject.

"And you?" Harry wanted to know.

Draco shrugged. "I was taught a bit about the old gods, but I can't say I've ever pursued it."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. With what he'd learnt of Draco's childhood, he could see how the blond might be a little jaundiced on the subject. He'd have probably been more exposed to the darker aspects of the gods. "But Draco? Hermione's attitude isn't shared by all Muggles. Not even most of them, although the ones who do would have you think so."

Draco turned a doubtful eye on Harry, but didn't say anything. He thought Harry was probably giving them more credit than they deserved.

Professor Dumbledore announced Harry's being re-Sorted to the school near the end of supper that evening. By that time however, word of mouth had fairly well informed the whole of the school. The headmaster's announcement only made it official, and there wasn't nearly the fuss one would have expected. Everyone had, for the most part, already run through their initial emotional reactions earlier in the day.

Oh, there were the usual rumours of Harry's having 'turned Dark', or that Harry had only been put in that House in order to spy on potential Death Eaters, but very few believed that there wasn't more to it than a simple re-Sorting – especially in the face of the fact that re-Sorting just wasn't done.

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'Lilorienne?'

*'Good evening. Shouldn't you be sleeping?'*

*'With all these questions flying around in my head unanswered?'* Harry asked with mock astonishment.

The school laughed. *'Fae children were much the same,'* she replied. *'What would you know? Your parents?'* she guessed shrewdly.

*'Lily and James Potter,'* Harry stated, daring her to contradict him. She did.

*'That is who he gave you to,'* she remarked mildly. *'The old man – Dumbledore – found you in your stasis bubble spell, and took you.'*

His heart sinking, Harry started on his next question. *'You mentioned . . . Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin. They were two of the founders of the school. Slytherin fought with the other three—'*

*'And left,'* she said, interrupting. *'Yes. Quite true. Godric and he reconciled over twenty years later, and were blessed with a surprise. You.'*

Harry's mind was reeling with the implications, and his emotions were roiling. He was reluctant to believe any of this, but he couldn't think of any plausible reason why she might be lying to him. *'But.... My resemblance to James? My mother's eyes?'*

*'Your appearance is your own. James Potter was a distant cousin and did resemble you, as sometimes happens in families. But if by 'mother' you are referring to Lily.... Have you not learned spells to change your eye colour as yet? Lily's eyes were brown until she changed their colour in her second year. I must admit it was an improvement, but it was only coincidence. Hers were a lighter green.'*

Harry frowned. *'Do you know the details of all the pupils who have attended here?'*

*'I don't recall all of them, no. One mind, even in as large a body as I now have, cannot hold all that I have seen and experienced over the centuries, but I have them stored in the stones of this place. When you were given to the Potters, I rooted out those details.'*

*'How? How could you store memories in stone?'*

*'The crystals in the stone can be imprinted with energy, and memories are energy, as you know from your own experience with pensieves.'*

Yes, crystals held energy. Everyone knew that. Everything he was being told, as outrageous as it seemed.... He couldn't find a hole in the logic. He had thought he'd

found ways to disprove what he was being told, but . . . there were logical explanations! The only thing left to do was confront the headmaster with what he'd learned, to see if he could refute all of this. It would have to wait until tomorrow, though.

And maybe he should talk to someone else, first. But Hermione.... He sighed. He never would have taken the bushy-haired girl to be a religious fanatic. And Ron was still upset with him, as well as most of the rest of Gryffindor, if for different reasons. Neville? A good sort, but he'd never shown signs of wisdom or knowledge. Ginny? A possibility, but he felt funny going to someone younger for advice. Of course there was Draco....

Harry opened his eyes and turned over in the gigantic bed, looking over the intervening five or six feet at the blond. The room wouldn't allow another bed put in, so they'd agreed to share this one. It was large enough that most of the Weasley family could have slept in it comfortably. Yes, he decided. Since Remus still hadn't shown, he'd talk to Draco.

Harry shut his eyes and drifted off to sleep, the image of Draco's blond hair splayed out over his pillow still in his mind's eye.

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"Gods, Potter! Are you going to sleep all day?"

"Sod off, Draco; I'm sleeping," Harry complained.

"Well, state the obvious, why don't you?" Draco said cheerfully.

Harry pulled his pillow over his head in response, only to have it rudely ripped away.

"What did you do, Harry; have a long wank session after I went to sleep?" Draco suggested lewdly.

"Of course, Draco; you were just too beautiful to resist," Harry replied sleepily, his hand reaching out, searching for another pillow. When a sarcastic comeback was not forthcoming (and it took a few seconds for that lack to filter through to Harry's sleep-laden mind), Harry got curious enough to raise his head and search out the blond boy.

He found Draco with his back turned to him, meticulously dressing himself. But Harry still got a few good glimpses of Draco's slowly fading blush. '*Hm.... Interesting,*' he thought, oddly happy. "Actually, I had a rather interesting 'talk' with Lilorienne last night," he said as casually as he could.



Draco paused while buttoning his shirt. As it was Sunday and there were no classes, robes weren't required. "Oh?" he remarked rather awkwardly. "You – didn't, then?"

"You *are* beautiful, Draco, but no, I didn't." He couldn't stop himself. "I'm saving myself for you."

Even though he embarrassed himself with that comment and caused himself to blush, he was rewarded by seeing an answering blush on the blond's face.

"You are such a prat, Potter," Draco said as he sat and busied himself with his shoes.

Harry was up and out of the bed in a flash, then stood there in his pyjamas, not sure why he'd reacted like that. It wasn't anger. It was – almost – fear. "Ah, . . . Draco? *Is* there any chance . . . for us?" For all that his previous impulsive actions with the blond had made him look very self-assured, this was one arena in which Harry was still anything but.

To his credit, Draco didn't try to pretend he didn't know what Harry was talking about. But he was reluctant to answer. If he lied, he might ruin any chance of something happening between them, soul bond or no soul bond. On the other hand, to answer truthfully would be to make himself vulnerable. He looked up, trying to see if, by looking at Harry's face, he could detect a reaction in himself to base an answer upon. The black, tousled bed hair, rumpled pyjamas (cotton, but of a good quality, he noted) which didn't completely hide a nicely formed and toned body, and Harry's expression of doubtful hope, decided him. He wanted this.... Yes. This man. No longer a boy. But he wasn't going to hand himself over on a silver platter. "Maybe, Harry. But we've a lot of history to overcome."

Harry grinned and headed for the bath, discarding his pyjama top as he went, and unknowingly causing the blond behind him to hold, then catch his breath.

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"So what do you think?" Harry asked, having finally nerved himself to tell Draco what Lilorienne had told him.

"So now you're bloody Merlin?" Draco said incredulously.

"Huh?"

"Good comeback, Harry," the blond said dryly. "Don't tell me you don't know Merlin's history?"

"King Arthur?" Harry guessed lamely.

"Harga's garters! No!" Draco exclaimed. "Myrddin Emrys, Harry!" At Harry's blank look, he explained. "I don't know how we got caught up in the Muggle usage of 'Merlin', but 'Myrddin Emrys' was his real name. Muggles Anglicised it to 'Merlin'."

"But wasn't he King Arthur's tutor?" Harry asked, leaning forward off the couch they were lounging on to throw another billet on the fire, then brushed his hands off. He knew the 'Merlin/Myrddin' name thing of course, having the older version for his own middle name, but he didn't know what Draco was trying to point out.

"There *was* no 'King Arthur', Harry. There was a war leader who was called 'Artur', which means 'bear'. But as far as I know, the two never met. That whole story was made up by that Muggle writer.... What was his name? Ah . . . Malory, I believe. Something like that, anyway. A good read, but...."

"*You* read something written by a Muggle?"

"That's a surprise? Didn't you hear me tell Granger I'd read about her religion?"

"Oh. Yeah. That," Harry responded a bit morosely. "Doesn't mean what you read was written by Muggles, though."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I shouldn't have brought that up."

"T's okay. Wait a minute," the former Gryffindor said, his tone changing, and raising his head to stare in mock amazement at Draco. "Will wonders never cease? Now you *apologise*?" Of course it had happened before, but he loved to tease the blond about it.

Draco scowled. "Probably the last time, if you keep *that* up," he growled.

Harry gulped, causing the blond momentary satisfaction, until, "Ah, Draco? Don't do that. It goes right to my...." Harry couldn't finish the sentence; he just looked at his own lap.

Draco blushed, but he was also pleased. He now had a 'weapon' he could use, sometime in the future. He had to test it, though. "Right to your – what, Harry?" he growled, using a more 'sexy' intonation.

He barely had time to realise his mistake and squeak, before he was flat on his back, Harry's teeth gently, but firmly, gripping the side of his neck – and then moving, licking

and nipping their way towards his mouth. "H-harry?" he had time to say, before his lips were claimed for other purposes than speaking.

Eventually he remembered himself enough to make a fist, and start pounding Harry's biceps (but not *too* hard).

When Harry pulled back, Draco glared at the green-eyed young man. "What's next? Rape?" he accused half-heartedly, trying to catch his breath. He didn't notice that he was still mostly lying underneath the other, or that his other arm was still embracing him.

Harry blushed. "I told you not to do that," he said, defending himself as he pushed himself upright.

That's when Draco noticed that he was still holding onto the former Gryffindor, and hastily rectified the situation. Of course Harry had noticed that Draco had at least one arm around him, which eased his guilt quite a bit.

"Um, . . .anyway. About my parents?" Harry inquired.

"Which ones?" Draco asked, trying to compose himself.

"That's just it, isn't it?"

Draco looked at him, trying not to blush yet again. "Do you have anything that belonged to your parents? The Potters, I mean?"

"Like what?"

"Something you wouldn't mind being destroyed."

"No!" Harry responded, shocked.

"Not even to find out if they *were* your parents?"

Harry was torn. On the one hand, everything that belonged personally to his parents ('The Potters,' he reminded himself) and weren't just family possessions stored in a vault, was precious to him. There was little enough of it. On the other hand, if they *weren't* his parents...? "Would...." He had to stop and clear his throat. "Would a photo do?"

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\* half two = 2:30 (British time. Germans and the Dutch use the term to mean a half-hour *before* the hour rather than after, as the British do, but here we're using British convention.)

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## Chapter Ten

"What are you going to do with it, anyway?" Harry asked nervously. He still wasn't happy about the thought of a picture of his parents being destroyed (*'The Potters, the Potters, the Potters,'* he repeated to himself, trying to put a little emotional distance between him and them, just in case it turned out they *weren't* his parents), but he'd been able to talk Colin Creevy into making a copy of it for him, so it wouldn't be a total loss. It wasn't the original though, and that fact rankled, just a bit.

"Did you get your hair clipping as well?" Draco asked.

"Yes! Now what are you going to do with them?" Harry asked impatiently.

Draco took a deep breath. "This spell is used in cases where the paternity of a child is in question. I'm going to pour this potion," he said, showing Harry a small vial of silvery liquid, "over both the picture and the hair, then cast 'Famiglia Svelare' on them. They'll burn. If—"

"Does it have to?" Harry anxiously asked of the picture. "No. I'm sorry. You did say it would be destroyed. Go on."

Draco looked at Harry a bit impatiently. He understood, in an abstract kind of way, but it was still annoying. "The rising smoke will tell the tale," he said. "The smoke will be in the forms of the objects' owners. If they group together, they're family. If not...." He didn't need to finish the sentence and he knew it, so he let it trail off.

"But Lilorienne said my fa— Said James was a distant cousin, so he *is* family," Harry objected.

"A close group, touching, if they're immediate family. Further apart, the more distant the relationship," Draco explained with strained patience. "If they're not related at all, the smoke will dissipate almost immediately. Most of the aristocracy is related in one form or another, Harry. I thought you researched all this?"

Harry took a deep breath, composing himself, then shook his head, denying it. "Just what was directly related to myself," he admitted. Harry's eyes widened. "Draco, if I'm not related to James Potter, then I'm not of the aristocracy!"

Draco laughed. "Harry, if Salazar and Godric are your parents, you're royalty!"

Harry looked at the blond, gobsmacked.

"You didn't know?" Draco asked, amused.

Harry just shook his head.

"Salazar was a prince in line for the throne, although he never rose to it. Godric was a duke, and second cousin to Salazar."

"Incest?" Harry whispered.

Draco was tempted, for a moment, to let Harry believe that, but had a change of heart. "No, second cousins are quite all right to marry, if they wish."

"Do it," Harry said, then subconsciously held his breath as Draco proceeded, until lack of oxygen forced him to breathe again.

Harry crossed his fingers, hoping that his world wasn't about, once again, to be turned upside down. The smoke began to rise, and figures formed. He recognized the smoke form of himself, and then of the couple he'd seen in the Mirror of Erised. His form turned to the couple and gave a respectful bow, but drifted quite a ways away from them.

Draco's eyes went almost impossibly wide, and his mouth gaped open before he snapped it shut again. He hadn't actually believed any of Harry's wild tale.

Harry sat down hard as his legs gave 'way beneath him.

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"What was I supposed to tell you, Harry?" Dumbledore inquired mildly, after Harry had bearded the old man in his office. "That an abandoned baby was found in a stasis spell in a cave, and I gave him to a good couple?"

"It would have been a good start," Harry replied acidically. "It would have saved me a lot of heartache. Is that all there was to it?"

"I wanted you to have a family, Harry. And yes, that's almost all there was. The cave entrance had been well hidden, and was only discovered after an earthquake revealed it."

Harry was curious. "Who found me?" he demanded.

"Your godfather, Sirius Black," Albus revealed.

Harry had already run the gamut of emotions from shock to acceptance upon being confronted with the truth, although it had taken him two days to do so. He'd walked around in a daze during that time, almost like a zombie. Draco had been quite busy then, putting off those who cared enough to inquire, informing them that Harry had just had some shocking news, but that he'd be all right.

It suited Draco's sense of humour to ease their concerns on the one hand, while dangling another piece of curiosity-inducing information in front of them, and then refusing to answer the resulting questions.

But, . . . Sirius? Yes, Harry could very well see the man being curious enough and reckless enough to explore a newly revealed cave, especially as a young man. Still, it was a shock, and one he didn't need since he was still recovering from the shock of finding out that the Potters *hadn't* been his parents after all. But he refused to show weakness to the man in front of him. He bypassed that subject, and went on to another.

"How long did it take you to find out, Professor?" Harry asked, mildly accusing. "I think it very likely that you'd have performed spells to locate any family I might have still living. But there weren't any by that time, were there?"

"James was the closest relative of yours I could find," the headmaster admitted, ignoring Harry's first question.

"Was he? Or was he only the closest *acceptable* relative you could find?" It was a shot in the dark, played on a hunch, but it hit home as he saw the headmaster pale and flinch, if only in the slightest amount. If Harry hadn't known the old man so well by this time, he'd likely not have noticed.

"What do you know?" the old man asked.

"I didn't know anything until just now, Headmaster," Harry admitted. He leaned forward. "So, who is it?"

"I don't recall saying there *was* anyone else, Mister Potter. In fact, I distinctly remember saying that James Potter was—" He stopped himself upon seeing the look on the young man's face.

Harry sat back in his chair, not bothering to hide his disgust. "You're going to continue to lie to me?" he inquired.

It had been many years since anyone had dared to call the headmaster a liar to his face. "You will apologise, Mister Potter, and on the instant!" the headmaster snapped. Apprehension and pride warred within him for dominance. His wounded dignity won.

Instead of directly defying the old man, Harry said, "When I asked you if James was only the most acceptable relative you paled, Professor. You flinched, if only slightly." He waited.

The old man was too wily to lie again, or admit to anything. He stuck to his injured pride and dignity. "I will not tolerate—"

"You won't tolerate," Harry interrupted, trying not to let his frustration erupt into anger as he rose to his feet. "Very well, Professor. It would have been less time consuming to have you tell me, but those spells can be done again." He turned, then turned back. "Oh, and for the record?" Harry affected a bored, rote-recitation voice, and said, "I'm sorry I called you a liar, Professor," making it more than plain that he was not sorry, at all.

Dumbledore glared at the youth as he departed, then slumped in his chair and sighed. He'd just made a major error, and he knew it. The son of two of the school's founders, both of whom had been extremely powerful wizards, and from everything he had used in his efforts to be able to compare, even more powerful in his own right. More powerful than himself, certainly, although he went to pains to make sure the lad didn't realise it. On top of that, the youth was the heir to the wizarding world's throne. And now his own damned pride had just alienated him. It would only have been a matter of time, though. He had counted on the boy never finding out his true heritage. If Harry started thinking about the Dursleys in connection with this....

That Muggle family had been another large mistake. He'd assumed that they'd welcome a sister's child, and had complacently gone about his business for the next ten years. Then he'd compounded the error and lied when it turned out Harry had been abused and neglected while in their care. Then to back up his lie, he'd had to force the child to return to that same treatment for several weeks every summer.

Oh, the boy had been safe from Voldemort and his Death Eaters there, but only because of the wards he and some of the more powerful members of the Order of the Phoenix had erected. Blood protection? Yes; a small vial of James' blood, taken after his death, was buried under the foundation and gave a minimal amount of blood protection. But it had nothing to do with Lily or her Muggle sister. Harry had survived all those attacks on him by his own power but the first one, in which Voldemort had, to all appearances at the time, died. That one was a protection spell originally put upon



the babe by his parents. The Killing Curse had broken it, but only after it had reflected most of the power back to its source.

Dumbledore had researched for that spell after finding Harry almost completely unharmed save for a jagged wound on his forehead. He had cursed himself innumerable times for not originally having had the foresight to check to see if any other spells had been on the child, other than the stasis spell. If he had, he might have been able to study it. Unfortunately, the knowledge of that particular spell seemed to have been lost with the deaths of Slytherin and Gryffindor.

And that was also a mystery he wished he could solve. What had happened to Harry's parents that they hadn't been able to retrieve him? They'd died, obviously. He didn't think anything else would have kept them from their child. But how? He recalled what he had seen of Sirius' memories of finding the child.

Sirius had picked his way over the rubble of whatever had been blocking the entrance to the cave. He started exploring, but found very little more than fallen stone and dust until he came to a small side cave. There he saw an almost newborn baby, perhaps a few weeks old, surrounded by an orb of energy. A few detection spells told him there was nothing dangerous about the magic surrounding the babe, but the magic was also nothing he was experienced enough to handle. He had put a magical shell about the whole thing, being careful not to let the two shells touch, but it was still a reckless thing to do since he had no way of knowing if the magics would interact, or how, and had taken the baby to his old headmaster.

He, Albus Dumbledore, had then, of course, examined the stasis spell, done a few weeks worth of research, and then was safely able to dissolve the stasis spell. The baby had been alive: not a surprise in itself, until he had discovered how long the child had been stashed away in that cave. Almost a thousand years! He had found out all he could about the child through magical means: magic potential, relatives, and so on. Finding out who the baby's parents were – had been – was a major surprise in its own right; but he hadn't checked for any other spells on the child.

He readily admitted to himself that his choices after the Potters' deaths hadn't been the best for Harry's welfare, but he hadn't known that initially: and at first, at least, the lies had been well-intentioned, rather than to protect his own reputation. Passing Harry off as the Potters' own child protected the babe from public scrutiny and media sensationalism....

'*Oh, gods,*' he moaned to himself. That triple damned 'prophecy' he'd manufactured; it was what had caused Voldemort to go after the Potters. But he'd been so sure that they'd be safe! He cursed Black for getting cold feet about being the Potters' secret

keeper. And who knew that Pettigrew yearned for power so badly that he'd abandon everything for the chance of it?

Albus had counted on that trumped-up prophecy to act as a lever so he could guide the babe with so much potential power in the directions he needed him to go. Of course with the Potters' deaths he'd had to find someone else to raise the child until Harry was old enough to start learning what he needed to know.

Although he approved of the name the young couple, with his guidance, had given the child, he had never liked James' shortening 'Harald' like that; 'Harry' was such a common name. But he had to admit that it was a better one for Muggles to relate to. And then he just had to develop a conscience, and try to give the child a 'real' childhood....

He shook his head at himself and sighed as he contemplated the web of lies, omissions, contradictions, and manipulations he'd devised over the years. Such a tangle he'd woven. And now it seemed all his plans were about to come down about his ears. He was sure of it. He reached into a desk drawer for a headache potion. He had a feeling he was going to need Severus to brew him a constant supply.

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"Oh, bugger!"

Draco rolled over in bed and looked at the dark-haired head on the other side. "What is it now, Harry?" he said tiredly.

"What's my name, Draco?"

"Harald Myrddin...." Draco began in a bored voice, then stopped, eyes widening a bit in realisation. "Oh, I see." After a minute's thought, he said, "Well, it's rather a toss-up, isn't it? But I suppose the higher rank's surname would be the one used."

Harry couldn't see it, his back being turned to Draco, but he was positive the blond was smirking. "Stop smirking, Draco," he said, to test his theory.

"I'm not.... How did.... Are you using legilimency on me?" Draco accused.

Harry rolled over to face his bed-mate. "No," he admitted as he grinned at the blond. "I just knew you would be."

Draco glared at him.

"But I am *not* going to call myself by that name. It would be rather pretentious, don't you think?" Harry inquired.

Draco shrugged – only partially successfully, since he was laying on one shoulder. "If he's your...." Draco stopped, to think. "You know," he said, going off on a tangent, "you'd think that as long as wizards have been able to have children without witches, we'd have come up with a separate word for a male child bearer. Anyway, if Slytherin was your . . . mother, you have every right to it."

"He wasn't. Godric bore me," Harry corrected absently. "But I wonder if the Potters adopted me," he mused. "If they did, then Potter would still be my legal name, even if—"

*'They did not,'* Lilorienne interrupted, choosing to enter the conversation.

"Bugger," Harry opined.

"What now?" Draco wanted to know.

"Lilorienne says they didn't adopt me."

"Does she know what your surname was?"

*'I'm sorry, but no, I don't know,'* Lilorienne answered, not waiting for Harry to repeat the question. *'However, the father's name was usually used, if only one were. Otherwise, the names were hyphenated, or combined in some fashion.'*

"Combined?" Harry asked aloud, so Draco could hear at least one side of the conversation.

*'Your parents were a Slytherin and a Gryffindor, so possible combinations could be "Slyffindor", or "Grytherin",'* she replied.

Harry made a face. "Those are terrible!" he replied.

"Harry, if you don't tell me what this bloody great castle is saying *right now*," Draco broke in, "I'm going to hurt you. Badly."

Harry looked at him, not in the least worried due to what the slave bond had done to the blond's ability to hate him, and had a wicked idea. "Give us a kiss, and I will," he replied. He 'heard' the castle laugh at his blackmail.

Draco cast a doubtful, suspicious look at the green-eyed youth, scooted closer, leaned over, took hold of Harry's face, and give him a quick peck on the cheek before quickly returning to his own side of the bed. "Now tell me," he demanded.

"You call that a kiss?" Harry asked, amused in spite of his frustration.

"It's what you're going to get, Potty," Draco returned, smugly.

Harry nodded. Two could play this game. "All right," he replied, "She said that last names could be combined."

"Hyphenated?" Draco asked.

"That's one possibility," Harry admitted.

"What else?"

"That information will cost you another kiss. A proper one," Harry said, smirking.

"Oh, no. You got your kiss," Draco objected. He was afraid that if he gave in, it wouldn't end with just a kiss.

"Oh. Well, then...." Harry went quiet, pretending he was talking to Lilorienne. Lilorienne played along, and kept quiet.

Draco put up with it for an amazing ten seconds. "What did the bloody castle say, Harry?" he demanded.

"Hm?" Harry said, smirking to himself. "Oh! Have you reconsidered that kiss, then?"

Draco glared at him, then once again scooted over, repeating his actions of just a minute before. But when he leaned in, intent on giving as brutal a kiss as he could manage, Harry grabbed him and pulled the blond down on top of him, one arm around his back, the other holding the blond head to his own.

Draco struggled, but quickly lost his will to fight, as he'd feared he might. Soon both of Harry's hands were roaming Draco's body, exploring his neck, shoulders, and back, both over, and then under his pyjama top. Draco even allowed the former Gryffindor to grip and massage his buttocks through the silk of his pyjama bottoms. But when Harry's hand gripped Draco's erection, the blond pulled back. He didn't try to remove Harry's hand, but he gave the green-eyed youth a rather strange look.

"What?" Harry asked.

"What are you wanting?" With Harry's hand where it was that was a rather inane question, and he knew it as soon as he asked it, but.... "I won't be your boy-toy, Harry."

A confounded Harry removed his hand from Draco's cock and asked, "Just *what* are you going on about? We're soul-bonded. Married! Or so you said, anyway."

"What I said, Harry, was that it was looked upon as being married. If two people were to set up house and start throwing out get they'd be considered married as well. But in our circles, Your Highness, it just isn't done. And you need to produce heirs. Several of them." He deliberately used Harry's deserved title to drive home the young man's responsibilities to his position.

Harry stared at him for a few moments, then without a word he got out of bed and started getting dressed.

"What are you doing?"

Harry ignored him, slipping on a robe.

"Where are you going?"

Harry started putting on his socks.

"You're not going without me!" Draco averred, moving quickly. Since he was hurrying and Harry was going at a deliberate pace, he was only a few metres behind the dark-haired young man as he headed down the corridor towards the door.

Harry stopped by the snake statue guarding the room just long enough to kick it – viciously – making Draco wonder if Harry were all right after all. But he said not a word. He just hurried after, as his soul mate strode rapidly out to the corridor. He knew he was being a little – all right, quite a bit – pathetic, following Harry around like this, but he couldn't quite stop himself. "Harry! You didn't even give me time to brush my hair!" Draco scolded.

Somehow that struck Harry as being very funny. He started laughing quietly, and slowed down enough to let the blond catch him up.

"I'm *so* happy you find me amusing, Your Arseness," Draco drawled dryly.

"Sorry, Draco. I just have to check on something, and if I don't do it now, I may lose my nerve. I just hope he hasn't gone to bed, yet."

"Who?"

"Snape."

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"I'm sorry, Professor. Were you abed?" Harry asked.

"No, Potter, but I'm not in the habit of receiving pupils after nine. Good night," Snape said with scant courtesy.

"Is there such a thing as a male pregnancy potion?" Harry asked hastily as the heavy door was swinging shut.

Snape paused. It was an odd question. But he had a queasy feeling that he knew who would be using it. He swung the door open again, his eyes running from the nervous-looking ex-Gryffindor to the young Mister . . . to Draco, who was looking at his companion with rather a shocked expression on his face. "Mister Potter," the professor began threateningly, "if you're thinking of impregnating young Draco, here, I must warn you—"

"Could we discuss this out of the corridor, please?" Harry requested, interrupting.

"I don't believe there's anything to discuss, Potter," the potions master said coldly as he again made to close his door.

"That's no way to treat the future king, Professor," Draco said neutrally, causing the man to again halt his actions.

"I'm sorry? King? I thought it was Potter who broke his head on those stairs?"

"I thought you were Dumbledore's confidante," Harry said casually. "But perhaps not." He turned as if to leave, though he actually had no intention of doing so.

Snape stepped to the side of the doorway. "Get in here, Potter," he snarled. He knew he had been manipulated, but here was a puzzle that it could be in his best interests to unravel.

"Now: What's this nonsense about Potter being king?" Snape asked Draco irritably, once they'd been seated. "The last living member of the royal family was murdered by Grindlewald!"

"Although not dead, I wasn't exactly 'living' at the time, either," Harry said, cryptically.

"Explain yourself!" the potions master demanded.

"Your majesty," Draco prompted, with a mischievous look in his eye.

"Even if he were the seated king, he'd have no status here other than as a pupil," the man snarled, reprimanding Draco.

*'But I wager you'd be far more polite,'* Harry thought. He caught a feeling of rather dubious assent from the castle. "It all started when Ron pushed me down the stairs...." Harry began. He then went on to relate most of what he'd learned, at least insofar as it related to his rank.

Snape glowered at him. "What sort of gullible fool do you take me for, young man?"

Draco hastened to reassure him. "I didn't believe it either, sir, until I did the 'famiglia' test."

Of course Snape would have nothing less than that Draco relate exactly what he'd done, how he'd done it, and every detail of the results. He muttered something to the effect that he'd have preferred to have done the test himself, but Harry overheard.

"I will not have anything else destroyed, sir." Harry said, heading off any thoughts that might be leading in that direction. "I have too few reminders of my- Of the Potters, as is. They may not have been my parents, but they protected me to the best of their ability when the time came, and gave their lives for me."

"As a proper subject should," Draco said under his breath.

Harry glared at him, and the blond had the grace to look at least a little abashed.

"No matter. There are other methods," the man replied to Harry. "If I could get a snip of your hair, and a vial of blood?"

Draco caught at Harry's sleeve, garnering the dark-haired boy's attention before he could reply. Giving the potions master an apologetic look, he spoke to Harry. "May I have a word before you make a decision?"

Harry nodded, and they made their way to a distant corner of the room.

Draco leaned in close, and whispered "He's a Death Eater, Harry. You don't want to be giving him such personal, and powerful, spell ingredients. The Dark Lord would like nothing better!"

Harry laughed. "He may be a hateful git, Draco," he said easily, "but if with nothing else, I trust him with my life."

"Thank you, Mister Potter," came Professor Snape's dry tones, as Draco stared at Harry in disbelief. "What Mister Potter isn't telling you, . . . Draco, is that my loyalties may not be what they seem. And I only tell you this because these rooms are completely warded, and you are bound to bring no harm to young Mister Potter, here."

"I don't suppose you know of a way to determine my true surname, sir?" Harry asked, hopefully.

Snape gave him a sidelong look, eyebrow raised in question. "Let's see what the tests tell us first, shall we? If, that is, you have decided to entrust me with the materials I require?" he asked challengingly.

Harry laughed. "I no longer feel the need to prove myself, sir," he said, "at least not in that way, so you'll have to find some other way to goad me." His grinning countenance only elicited a sardonically raised eyebrow from the potions master. Harry's amusement at Snape's attempt to manipulate him by appealing to his former inability to resist a challenge soon faded, however, in the face of what was at stake.

About fifteen minutes later both young men were back out in the corridor with strict instructions to go straight to their rooms, on pain of detention – and with a note for Filch, or any teacher or prefect, should anyone come across them.

About halfway back, Harry stopped dead in his tracks and started swearing under his breath. His scowl would have caused any number of First Years, and a good few Second Years, to piddle their pants.

Draco sighed. "*Now* what's wrong?" he asked, in annoyance.

"The greasy git never answered my question!"

"You only now noticed that?"

"So why didn't you remind me?" Harry demanded.

Draco looked gave Harry a look that could only be called sedimentary. "I don't recall you asking *me* how I'd feel about being up the duff with your get, *Harry*," the blond said pointedly.

Harry blushed.



Once back in their rooms, after Draco accepted Harry's apology (he made him suffer for awhile, of course), they sat for hours and talked about it. Finally Draco allowed that if it were possible, he wouldn't mind giving Harry at least two heirs – but only after they were out of school, formally and legally wed, and their lives were relatively safe and settled. And with that admission, Draco also knew that he'd opened the door for further developments in their relationship. He wasn't proud of it, but he rather found Harry's take charge attitude in that department comforting (and a little exciting). Well, when it wasn't annoying, anyway.

It was the wee hours when they finally got to bed again. The next day was a coffee day, of necessity, and still they barely managed to stay awake through classes.

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In answer to some of the reviews I've been getting for chapter nine:

1. Why is it hard to believe that someone can fight for the rights of some groups, while being right behind oppressing others? It may not be logical, but it happens all the time. Whether Hermione will stay that way remains to be seen.
2. No particular religion has been mentioned, nor will be. Your assumptions are your own.
3. Harry has already specifically said, in ch. 9, that such closed-minded people were in the minority. (Not my personal belief, but the situation is getting better.)

Thank you, everyone, for your reviews. I do read them and enjoy them. And when I can, I reply privately, by e-mail.

Beta: Phoenix

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## Chapter Eleven

When Harry woke the next morning, he knew immediately that something was different. He felt both awkward and more comfortable, and just a little too warm. It was when he tossed the covers back and opened his eyes that he discovered why everything felt different. He was rather intimately entangled with Draco. A brief look at his surroundings left him relieved to find that he was still on his own side of the bed. He couldn't be blamed for this – although he probably would be, he ruefully admitted to himself.

As the chill morning air hit them, Draco tensed against it, and then attempted to move closer to the only source of heat – Harry.

"Um, . . . Draco? Wake up," Harry said softly. The only response he got was a bit of a grumble from the blond. Harry lay there for a few moments, watching Draco sleep. Draco was a very beautiful young man, his graceful features lending him an almost effeminate appearance, yet he was still quite definitely male. Harry felt a wave of tenderness wash over him, and before he knew what he was doing, he had leant over and placed an equally tender kiss on the sleeping lips. When he raised back up he saw Draco, still mostly asleep, stick his tongue out to lick the lips he'd just kissed. Harry grinned, then began to chuckle lightly and quietly, but audibly.

Draco sleepily opened his eyes. It took him a couple of seconds to process the situation, but then his eyes widened in surprise and alarm, and he pushed Harry away – hard.

Harry yelped as he was propelled over onto the edge of the bed, where he teetered for a split second, grabbing for something – anything – to keep himself from falling, before he lost the fight with gravity and fell to the floor. He rolled over onto his back, having landed mostly on his buttocks anyway, propped himself up on his elbows, and waited, seething just a bit. He didn't have to wait long.

A blond head appeared over the side of the bed and peered down at him. "Harry?"

"Yes, Draco?" Harry said in an exaggeratedly patient voice.

"You *weren't* on my side of the bed."

"Just figured that out, did you?" Harry said in the same tones.

"Well, how was I to know? You probably dragged me over to you," Draco said, an odd note in his voice.

Harry looked up at him. "You'd best not be laughing at me," he said warningly.

Draco shook his head wildly, eyes wide, lips pressed tightly together, then lost the fight and fell back onto the bed, bursting out into wild laughter.

Harry had never heard the blond laugh so unrestrainedly, but the teen male code of honour would not allow him to let Draco get away with pushing him out of bed, then laughing at him about it. He scrambled to his feet, then leant over the laughing young man, one hand surreptitiously getting a firm hold on his pillow. "So you thought that was funny, did you?" Harry asked threateningly, with a huge grin.

Draco looked up at him and nodded several times as he continued to laugh – until Harry suddenly yanked his pillow off the bed and brought it crashing down on him.

Draco stopped laughing, his face having a comical look of shock upon it, his mouth dropped open. "You *didn't* just hit me with a pillow, Potter," he said, dire consequences threatened in his tone.

"Didn't I?" Harry replied, still grinning. "I could have sworn that was I, who did that."

Suddenly, Draco was moving, grabbing his own pillow and swinging it at Harry. Soon the room was ringing with laughter, playful threats, and rapidly moving bodies as they swung their pillows and dodged blows. About ten minutes later Draco grabbed the pillow Harry was swinging at him, but instead of retaliating, he clutched both pillows to him and fell backwards onto the bed, throwing the pillows behind him and away from Harry as he did so.

Harry threw himself face down onto the bed next to Draco. After a long moment he propped himself up on his elbows and looked down into the blond's face. And suddenly he felt very awkward and shy. He'd tasted those lips before: twice in a heady moment of power and once while the blond was asleep. But now....

Harry slowly lowered his head toward Draco's.

Draco must have sensed Harry's movement, because he suddenly opened his eyes, raising up at the same time.

Disaster. Lips and noses crashed together. Instant pain. Draco fell back, and Harry pulled back, both lifting hands to injured areas.

"Merlin's beard, Potter!" Draco moaned. "What were you doing?"

Harry blushed crimson. "Um, . . .trying to kiss you?"

"Remind me never to let you do that again," the blond replied, licking his bruised lips in a manner oddly reminiscent of earlier.

"You seemed to like it this morning," Harry said a bit sullenly.

Draco lifted shocked eyes to Harry's. "What? What are you on about?"

Harry sat up and turned away from his soulmate, too embarrassed to face him any longer. "Nothing."

Dim memory slowly filtered back to Draco as he struggled to remember what Harry could be talking about. And blushed at what he'd ascribed to a dream. "Oh."

Harry sat straight up as shocked fear hit him. "You remember?" he whispered.

"It.... It was nice," Draco admitted.

Harry relaxed a little now that he knew Draco wasn't upset about it, but he was afraid to say anything.

"If you promise not to ram into me again...." Draco began to say before a sudden attack of shyness made him break it off.

"What?" Harry prompted, a lump in his throat.

Draco swallowed the lump in his throat and asked, "Would you like to try it again?"

Harry ignored the fact that it had been Draco who had rammed into *him*, and slowly leant forward, watching Draco carefully as he did so, hoping this wasn't a tease. Their lips met. The kiss was still awkward, at least at first as they were both nervous, but it improved with practise.

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As the days wore on, it could be seen that Hermione and Ron both were miserable. Harry and Draco had some of the same classes with the Gryffindors, so saw them there as well as at meals, and it was inevitable that they'd run into one or the other of them in the corridors or on the grounds once in a while. Harry avoided looking at them whenever possible, but Draco noticed that 'the Weasel' had started shooting thoughtful looks at

them, as though he might be reconsidering his position vis-a-vis Draco and Harry having feelings for each other. Hermione, on the other hand, looked both sad and angry, but also stubborn.

Harry had found that having Lilorienne as a friend had many bonuses as she showed him, and consequently Draco, shortcuts from one part of the castle to another, drastically cutting walking distances. He had also found out the hard way what it meant to have her angry with you when he'd inadvertently offended her due to his lack of knowledge of Fae culture. He had asked her if she had any children. Evidently fae children were so precious they were kept secret until their majority, which was not judged by some arbitrary number of years, but by their ability to care for and protect themselves, and by finishing their training. Asking about children was forbidden.

Harry had been stuck on a staircase for four hours as she moved first one end and then the other, whenever he tried to get off. She'd been in a pretty good humour afterward, having 'played' with him long enough to become amused by his various attempts to escape, and his swearing. She hadn't had much of a chance to hear Muggle swear words before, and she thought it was hilarious that they'd use sexual references to mean something bad.

Although he wouldn't admit it until much later, Harry rather thought she had a point. From everything he'd heard, everyone loved to have sex (he hoped he'd be able to find out about more than masturbation, soon – and then blushed as he realised he would probably be exploring the intricacies of the subject with Draco. He hoped he wouldn't make *too* much of a berk of himself), so why were sexual references used as swear words? Well, some of them, obviously, were references to taboos such as incest, but what of others? They really didn't make much sense as swear words. He resolved to use his words more carefully, in future.

So by the end of that four hour session on the stairs, Harry was not only completely frustrated and angry, but humiliated as well. He just thanked the stars that nobody else had been witness to his humiliation. And that in itself was strange, when he came to think of it later. There was almost always someone coming or going. But none for four hours? He wound up assuming Lilorienne had done something, but that was a mystery that he never did solve.

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"Damn it, Ron, it's just not right! That arse, Malfoy, is going to wind up *hurting* Harry." Hermione exclaimed.

"They're soul bonded, Herm; Malfoy would be more likely to cut his own throat than hurt Harry. And I can't believe I'm *defending* that git!" Ron exclaimed, his face screwed up in a moue of distaste.

"But it's *Malfoy*! Five years of insults, put-downs and malevolence, and I'm supposed to be happy that Harry's stuck with him for the rest of his life? Oh, sure, I didn't like the idea of Harry enslaving him, but I wanted to get him free of that arse! And now!"

"Now.... What? Your religious beliefs?"

"What are you on about?" Hermione inquired with angry puzzlement.

"I snuck back and listened, when Harry found us talking the last time," Ron explained.

"Oh, that," Hermione said dismissively. "I couldn't very well tell him the truth, could I? It sounded so . . . petty! But Harry deserves so much better!"

"Actually, it sounds like me; and I don't much like hearing it, now I'm on the listening end. And yeah, I think Harry could've done better if he would have had a choice, but he didn't, other than letting Malfoy be mistreated, tortured, and probably killed. And he wouldn't be Harry if he could do that, would he? He's still my friend, Herm," Ron said softly, willing his former girlfriend to see reason.

"I thought we were on the same side, Ron?" Hermione exclaimed softly, with the hurt of perceived betrayal in her voice.

"You know me, Herm; I don't change my mind easily. But...." Ron sighed. "I miss Harry. Don't you?"

The girl mumbled something.

"What?"

Hermione straightened up, looked Ron square in the eye, and defiantly repeated, "I said, 'Not enough to put up with Malfoy'." She then expounded on the subject. "I love him, Ron; probably as much as you do. And if Malfoy were out of the picture, I'd be there in a flash. But you don't know how it feels, Ron. When Malfoy looked at me, it felt as though he thought he was looking at the filthiest and most common – *insect* – on the planet! Just being around him now, seeing him, makes me feel the need for a hot shower and a vigorous scrub!"

Ron looked at her compassionately. For the sake of their friendship and the brief romantic relationship they had shared, he wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. But she was supposed to be the smart one: the logical one. How had she allowed Malfoy to affect her so? While he could feel for her, he still couldn't forget that she had betrayed him – thrown away their nascent relationship – and had tried to betray Harry. True, she had thought it to be in Harry's best interests, but that was no excuse. And as long as she continued to think her actions were justified, there could be no forgiveness.

Ron shook his head sadly. "You betrayed us, Herm," he said gently. "You betrayed our relationship, and you tried to betray Harry. You *did* betray his trust, and mine. You're supposed to be the smart one; even if you had succeeded, what do you suppose the result would have been?"

Hermione's only response was to defiantly raise her chin a fraction further.

Ron's shoulders sagged, and then he turned and walked away.

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Over the next few weeks, Draco and Harry became more comfortable with each other, although they didn't try to take their physical relationship any further than some light kissing and petting. Harry didn't push it because he didn't want Draco to feel pressured. Draco didn't push it because he didn't want to scare Harry off. At least that's what he kept telling himself. Truthfully he was, himself, scared. He was scared of being vulnerable, and scared that he might prove to be less than competent. He was also aware that he *shouldn't* be scared. The fact that he was told him how much he truly cared – and that in itself scared him.

Draco kept tutoring Harry in the ways of the wizarding world's elite, finances, and politics. Harry surprised the blond with how well he was both learning and retaining the information. Also, under Draco's guidance, Harry was slowly expanding his wardrobe of formal wizarding wear, most of which was **not** robes, although formal robes were desirable for certain obligatory functions.

Harry was also building Draco's wardrobe. As his consort, Draco had to look the part.

He had also invested in other holdings and businesses, again with Draco's advice, expanding both his wealth and his influence. Among these acquisitions, through proxies, he bought controlling interest in some of the more troublesome media, including 'The Daily Prophet', with an eye towards nudging them towards more truthful reporting. He didn't have Rita Skeeter fired, however. That would have set her loose to

create havoc elsewhere. Instead, he had her 'promoted' to editor of advertising, where she could have no personal input.

Ron started going out of his way to be civil, and even friendly. However, since the redhead had yet to actually address the issues, Harry was only civil in return: a reaction which had Ron perplexed. Harry's frustration with Ron's obliviousness was slowly growing. Eventually he'd let the redhead know what was what. He only hoped he'd not hex the Gryffindor in the process.

Insofar as Hermione was concerned . . . well, they might as well have dropped off the edge of the world, for all the attention she paid either of her former cohorts, and did her best to pretend that Draco didn't exist. However the situation with Harry, Draco, and their bond was now beyond anyone's ability to affect. It was now up to them. And no matter how they handled it, no matter what might go wrong, they would always be soul mates. What Hermione nor the boys knew, was that a Fae soul bond was just a bit different than a human soul bond.

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## Chapter Twelve

As a child Harry had, of necessity, become philosophical. After arriving at Hogwarts he had started becoming spiritual. With the hard fact of ghosts staring him in the face, it was almost inescapable. There *was* an existence after death, at least for some. So on his own, he'd started reading about wizarding beliefs and religions. What he'd found was a bit startling. Contrary to his experience in the Muggle world, the greater part of the wizarding world was pagan. Not that they'd have accepted that term, however. The word 'pagan' was from the Latin 'paganus' (country dweller) – the language of the Romans; and they'd had quite enough of Romans, thank you.

Wizards had no one word to describe their religious practise. It simply was. And each wizard or witch would have several gods. There were the gods of the geographic area, the gods of the clan and/or family, and then their own personal god or goddess, which usually related to their livelihood. They each honoured those gods as they'd learned how.

Not that Harry was religious. He hadn't grown up in it, so he had no grounding in wizarding beliefs and practises. He rather wondered, though, what gods his parents had believed in (either set, since he simply couldn't shake the feeling of relationship to the Potters), and how they had honoured those gods. But he had no way of finding out. Still, he could relate to some of the philosophies and beliefs he'd uncovered in his researches.

And why was he thinking of this now? It was only one week to the Halloween Ball. He was wondering if it should be called the Samhain Ball. But then, the holiday had many names, and it was likely that someone would be insulted no matter what it was called. So 'Halloween' would do. It insulted everyone equally. Or Harry rather thought it should, though nobody really seemed to mind; or if they did, they kept it to themselves. Religious beliefs were highly personal, and nobody really talked about them. With so many gods and ways to honour them, it was easier to avoid disputes that way.

That wasn't the only thing that the upcoming event had Harry thinking about, however. He had rather been taking it for granted that Draco would be his date to the ball, but he hadn't asked. And over the past few days, Draco's temper had been getting a bit edgy. After that first time Draco had woken up tangled with Harry, then a few more times despite the blond's best intentions, Draco had given in to what seemed the inevitable and had taken to cuddling with the former Gryffindor every night. Harry had grown used to it, and liked it; but last night Draco had actually gone back over to his

own side of the bed. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that it was due to the upcoming ball, with nothing having been said to him about it, and with not knowing if Harry was going to, or wanted to take him to it.

"Draco, have you given any thought to the ball?" Harry asked in an offhand manner, that evening.

"What ball?" Draco asked casually.

Harry almost laughed at the blond's attempt to dissemble. "The one over which you've been seething at me, the last few days," he replied, trying to match Draco's tone. It wasn't easy, with humour bubbling in his chest.

Draco blushed, although his expression didn't otherwise change. He'd been caught, but he wasn't going to admit it. "What are you talking about? 'Seething' at you? Why would I do that?"

Harry decided to cut to the chase. "Draco, would you do me the honour of allowing me to escort you to the Halloween Ball?" he inquired, using the formal manners the blond had been teaching him.

"To do that properly, Harry, you should use a formal mode of address," Draco replied, slipping into tutor mode.

"Draco: the question?"

"Oh!" Draco's blush was back. "Um, . . .I'd be honoured to accompany you, Mister Potter."

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "Um?" he inquired teasingly, and then grinned.

Draco aimed a swipe at him, but missed as Harry dodged, laughing.

"So I'm assuming you've given *some* thought to the ball, right? What sort of costume did you have in mind; magical, historical, or...?" Harry asked.

Draco, uncharacteristically, scrunched his face up and stuck his tongue out at Harry – then smirked. "Of *course* I've thought about it, you awful prat," he said, lightly. Then he sobered. "Normally I'd go for something mysterious, dangerous, or alluring; all three, if I could manage it without repeating myself. But I thought we might start taking advantage of such occasions as this to advance your claim to the throne: in this case, to make an impression on them; insinuate the idea into their minds."

Harry cocked his head and regarded his soul mate. He was a bit reluctant to advance a bid on the throne, but he had to admit that there were many things about the way the world of magic users was run that needed seeing to. And the Ministry of Magic, as it was run now, was an ill-fitting plug in the leaking dam of order. So.... "How?"

Draco grinned. Harry wasn't going to like this, at all.

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Harry didn't. But Draco had managed to wheedle him into agreeing to it without seeming to do anything of the sort. That night, in an effort to make it up to him, Draco wore only pyjama shorts to bed.

Harry noticed, of course. As unobtrusively as possible, he removed his top before climbing into bed.

Draco pretended not to notice the action, although it further destabilised his already precarious case of nerves. But he cuddled up to his soul mate as he had been every night recently, although he wouldn't have used such a fluffy, Hufflepuff sort of term as 'cuddling' to describe it. No, he was just enjoying the closeness. The skin-on-skin contact took his breath away. After all the other nights of being close, he hadn't expected this reaction. Of course on those other nights there were two layers of cloth between them. That hadn't stopped certain parts of him from reacting, but he'd been able to ignore it. But now . . . now his manhood was so hard, it was aching. He groaned.

Harry was only a bit more in control. He'd been hard before the skin contact however, in anticipation. He gently wrapped his arms around his bedmate. "Are you all right?" he asked softly, gently.

"Oh, gods, Harry," Draco whispered helplessly.

With exceeding tenderness, Harry kissed Draco's forehead. When the blond looked up at him, Harry couldn't resist the flushed lips, and bent to kiss them.

Draco met him halfway.

They kissed, then slowly their hands began to caress each other; and after a time, to explore where they hadn't dared before. Hesitantly, and somewhat clumsily, Harry's hand found Draco's erection. Draco emulated him, and was almost as unpractised. Each was very familiar with his own prick and how to pleasure himself, but – this was someone else. They each explored the shape and velvety hardness of the other through

the cloth. Harry took in a sharp breath as Draco gripped him just a bit too tightly in response to his cockhead being stroked.

"Sorry," Draco apologised.

Harry kissed him in response. "It's okay. Did I hurt you?" Harry asked, wondering why it had happened.

"No," Draco admitted quietly. "It just felt so good."

That made Harry smile. But as much as he was enjoying this, there was something missing; more skin contact. "Could we...?" he started to ask, then stopped, afraid he might be about to ask for too much.

"What?"

Harry gathered his courage. "Could we . . . take our bottoms off, too?"

Draco frowned slightly, then relented. He had every confidence he could stop the other boy, if Harry tried to go too far. "Okay," he said, suiting action to words. It surprised him that he missed Harry's hands on him while he removed his last garment.

But it was only seconds, and then they were in contact again; full contact this time, cocks pressed tightly together, rubbing slightly against each other as they embraced. And then hands were again moving. Draco loved the feel of Harry's strong, muscular back. And then he involuntarily jumped forward as Harry's hands first caressed his buttocks, then gripped them firmly. Eyes widened in mild surprise, he reared his head back to look at Harry in question.

Harry blushed a bit, one hand still unapologetically on one of the blond's small, muscular, perfectly round butt mounds, the other now playing with Draco's blond hair, but he didn't say anything; he just closed the distance, and kissed him.

Draco decided he rather liked the feel of Harry's hands on his buttocks, and kissed him back.

Harry pressed closer, forcing Draco off-balance, until he had to lie back on the bed. Harry moved over him. Draco instinctively spread his legs so Harry could lay himself between them, then wrapped one of his legs around one of Harry's as they ground their cocks together.

Their kisses and movements became ever more needy, until the lack of oxygen overcame their need for the feel of each other's lips. They moved against each other, holding each other tightly, sweat from their efforts covering them and adding a lubricating factor between their skins, enhancing sensation. Harry was the first to lose control, his seed spurting between them, followed only seconds later by Draco as he felt his partner's pulsing cock and the warm, spurting liquid.

As they relaxed against each other Harry turned his head and kissed Draco's neck. He didn't have the energy for more than that. Draco firmed his grip on Harry slightly in response before again relaxing. Message sent, received, and replied to: 'thank you', 'I liked it, too.'

Harry had been wondering about his feelings for the blond. This encounter cemented his opinion; he was now sure. "Draco?" he said, sleepily, still on top of his lover.

"Hm?"

Harry raised his head, to look Draco in the eyes. "I know you didn't come into this relationship entirely willingly, but I hope by now your feelings have changed. I know mine have. I think I love you." Actually, he knew for certain that he was in love with his former arch-rival, but he didn't want to make such a bold statement if Draco wasn't ready to hear it.

Draco stilled. "Are you sure that isn't the sex speaking, Potter?"

Harry winced. Draco only used his last name now when he was angry, or feeling vulnerable or defensive. "I'm sure it's not just the sex," he said positively, then leaned down and kissed his soul mate. Draco's response was brief, and lukewarm at best. "It hasn't been very long," Harry said softly, and as persuasively as he could, "but we *are* soul mated, and I can't imagine anyone else in my life," he continued. "So will you marry me?"

"Get off me," Draco requested, avoiding the question.

Harry did so slowly, wondering if he'd just ruined everything with his declaration and proposal.

Draco reached for his wand and cleaned them both with a spell before refreshing the sheets with another. He had used that time to try to order his thoughts and emotions. He was scared half to death, but mostly because he wanted so badly what Harry had offered, and he was afraid that it *was* afterglow speaking. If he accepted and Harry then regretted it.... Finally he met Harry's eyes. "Ask me again in the morning. Maybe." He saw the

hurt and confusion in his soul mate's eyes, and felt it through their bond. But as much as it cost him, he held firm. He leant forward and kissed the dark-haired young man. "I haven't said 'no', Harry," he reminded him.

As they settled down to sleep, Lilorienne spoke to Harry. *'He is cautious. That is a good trait. Don't forget to ask again, if you truly want this,'* she said.

*'Hello, Lilorienne,'* Harry *'said'* tiredly. *'I'll do that.'* Then he changed the subject. *'I thought you were going to tell me some things?'*

*'You're too tired right now, but we'll talk,'* she promised.

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The next morning, Harry knew what Lilorienne had looked like. She had been tall for the time, at five foot eight inches tall, with long black hair that reached the small of her back. She'd had pale skin, fine features, and light grey eyes. They had spent most of the night, in his dreams, talking and having her show him things. And Harry was almost sure they weren't imaginative dreams. *'Lilorienne?'*

*'Yes?'*

*'Did you talk with me while I was asleep? In my dreams?'* he asked.

*'Yes, I did.'*

Harry nodded, not aware that gray eyes were watching him. *'Thank you.'*

"Lilorienne?" Draco asked.

Harry started, then turned and faced his bedmate, and smiled. "Yes. How are you feeling this morning?" he asked. He was feeling a bit shy about last night, but Slytherin or no, he still had Gryffindor courage.

Draco tinted slightly. "Good," he replied.

Harry leant down, his hand sliding down Draco's side to rest on one pale hip, and gently kissed the blond. "My question, and my offer, still stand," he said softly.

Draco's blush was full blown now, and he couldn't meet Harry's eyes. "In that case . . . yes," he whispered.

Harry's grin was so wide he thought it might split his face, but he didn't care. He leapt half on top of Draco, holding him tightly, then pulled up, looked at him, grinning, and then dove in for an almost bruising kiss.

Draco's mind took a vacation. He couldn't figure out what to do with his hands. They wandered aimlessly in the air, then gripped his own hair, before settling on Harry's shoulders and trying to pull him closer.

When Harry pulled up, Draco tried to drag him back down, but desisted when he saw Harry's embarrassed expression. "What's wrong?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing's *wrong*," he answered, "but . . . Lilorienne and I had a long talk in my dreams last night and, um . . . you'll be able to talk to her, later."

Draco's brow creased in confusion. "Why later? Why not now?"

Harry's blush deepened. "Well, we, um . . . haven't consummated our bond," he said, in a rush.

"What?"

"We . . . We haven't . . . consummated our bond," Harry whispered, not meeting Draco's eyes.

There was a long pause as Draco processed this information. "Oh," was his considered opinion. His own face was blazing, now.

"There's more," Harry offered.

Draco groaned. "What?" He was still reeling from the information that he'd have to lose his virginity. Well, he'd known he would lose it eventually, somewhere in the back of his mind, but the fact had just been shoved in his face.

"We'll be able to talk mind to mind."

Draco's eyes bulged. "What?" he exclaimed, rising up.

Harry nodded. He knew he didn't have to repeat himself. Draco's exclamation said that he more than understood.

Draco threw himself back into his pillow, staring at his soul mate. "Anything else?" he said weakly, more for something to say than actually believing there could be more. His eyes bugged again when Harry nodded.

"I'll be able to teleport," Harry said.

"Teleport'?" Draco asked. The term was unfamiliar to him. But the confusion gave him a respite from the shock.

"It's . . . a little like apparating, but relies on psychic power, rather than magic," Harry explained.

"And me?" Draco asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, but I'll be able to take you with me, and find you wherever you are. And—"

"There's *more*?" Draco asked, in disbelief.

Harry nodded. "We won't need our wands," he revealed. Actually, Harry had been able to do some wandless magic anyway. A wand was used to focus the magic, since few could focus the power without an outside focal point, but it also presented something of a bottleneck for the flow of power. Doing away with such a small conduit as a wand would allow them to use all the power at their disposal.

Draco closed his eyes. "Harry?" he said wearily.

"Yes?"

"Kill me. I can't handle this." Actually it was a dream come true, but on top of everything else, it was too much right now.

Harry was torn between concern and laughter. Laughter won.

Draco opened his eyes, cocking an eyebrow at him. "You think it's funny?" he asked, danger in his tone. Now this – *this* – he could deal with.

Harry ignored it, and nodded. "You – power – can't handle it?" he managed to get out, before he collapsed back onto the bed.

Draco's expression didn't change, but he had to admit that Harry had a point. Still.... "Aaaah!" he yelled, as he leapt at the laughing young man, and started tickling him. It didn't stop Harry's laughter, of course – just added to it – but Draco felt better that he was torturing the laughter out of his new fiancée, rather than being laughed at.

When they'd finally calmed down and recovered, Harry suggested a bath, to which Draco hesitantly agreed. It was another intimacy to share a bath – something they'd not



done before. When they entered the bathroom, the large tub was already full of hot water, scented with lavender and sandalwood.

"Thank you, Lilorienne," Harry said aloud.

*'You're welcome.'*

They slipped into the hot water. Harry moved up behind Draco, and cuddled him.

"I feel rather odd, knowing that someone can see us, no matter what we do," Draco remarked.

"Lilorienne?"

"Mm-hm," Draco confirmed.

"She can hardly help it; and I'm sure she's seen it all, in all these years," Harry said, calmly.

"Oh, I know," Draco said, turning around in Harry's arms to kiss him lightly, " but you know what I mean."

"Mm-hm," Harry replied. He did. And there was no denying that *he* felt a little self-conscious, too. He just hoped that Lilorienne exercised some decorum and 'looked away' during such intimate moments. He was going to go on the assumption that they had privacy when they wanted it. He wasn't about to ask though, in case the answer was otherwise.

Their hands were moving over each other gently as they washed each other. There was no hurry, and though both were erect, there was no urgency. It was enough that they touch and explore each other. It was exhilarating in a way, because there were no barriers to where they touched. They had given each other that right. They felt a bit exhibitionistic though, knowing Lilorienne might be watching, but that just made them feel a little naughty. And with the whole school to watch over.... After all, her attention couldn't be everywhere at once, could it? Could it?

As a matter of fact, it could, but it wasn't an effort Lilorienne made often. It was much easier to just pay attention to a few individual spots within herself, wherever there was the most going on, and keep a watch out for anything unusual. Although Harry didn't know it, Lilorienne had made him, and now Draco, a priority, so she was always paying attention to them now, whenever they were within her area of influence. However, she was very discreet. At the moment, she was feeling very motherly as she watched 'her

child' (emotionally, anyway) with his mate. Eventually, she knew, she was going to have to talk to him about his parents, and tell him how they died: at least, as much as she knew. And then there was that other thing about how the bond would affect his mate.

"Mm...", Draco hummed, as he parted from the latest kiss. "We're going to need to eat soon, or we'll never be able to keep this up," he said. Draco was feeling very happy and at peace with himself; something he didn't think he had felt since he was very little. He had known that when he finally let go of his resistance to this that he'd be giving up some independence, but he hadn't realised that he'd get so much more back from it. It was intoxicating.

They climbed out, but before Draco could reach for a towel, he found himself once again in Harry's embrace.

"Mm.... You're delicious," Harry growled into the blond's ear, as he revelled in the feel of Draco's wet skin against his own.

"Harry," Draco whinged playfully, "get off me. I'm hungry!" It was so new and strange to feel another person's nude body pressed against his, but rather nice, as well.

Harry laughed low and let Draco loose, giving him a light smack on the arse as he did so. "You think more of your stomach than you do of me," he teased.

Draco raised an eyebrow mischievously at him, even as he dealt with the emotions engendered by that smack. On the one hand, he had been taught to react badly to such familiarities. On the other, it was Harry – his fiancée. His mind eased as he created that distinction. "My stomach yells louder than you do," he teased.

Harry grinned at him as he was toweling off, and watching his new fiancée. "We'll need to go shopping soon," he said, changing the subject.

"More clothes?" Draco asked, his interest piqued.

Harry laughed. "No, rings!" he said.

Draco frowned slightly, and turned away.

"Draco? What's wrong?"

"We don't do rings, Harry," Draco said. "That's a Muggle custom."

"Oh. Sorry." The silence stretched out. "So . . . what's the wizarding way?"

Draco told him. It turned out a trip to a jeweller's was still in order, but one with specialised metal working skills would be needed.

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Harry had finally given in about a week after having been re-Sorted, and started eating at the table of his new House. As one might suppose, he hadn't been welcomed with open arms. Harry hadn't expected to be. Nor was Draco welcomed back with great warmth. However, a few well-placed rumours regarding the pair's new quarters and what it might mean had at least kept the chill to a minimum, and no violence or threats had been offered after the first few days. And between them, those had been handled fairly easily.

But at least one person was sneaky enough to follow them and then find the narrow corridor. That person had also discovered the purpose of the doors flanking the snake fountain. They were traps.

One would expect someone like Salazar Slytherin to protect his quarters, and the man had. One would also expect one of the doors to be the wrong door. One might even expect the trapping door to change at odd times. It was possible, with the right magic. One wouldn't really expect both doors to be traps, though. One of the doors led to a small room that shunted the intruder into the middle of the lake. The other shunted the intruder deep into the Forbidden Forest. Which did what, *did* change on an irregular basis. Both had the potential to be deadly if the person couldn't swim, on the one hand, or if a predator happened to find the person in the forest before they could find their way out, on the other, but at least the unlucky trespasser had a better than average chance of surviving.

Pansy knew how to swim, fortunately, and wasn't stupid enough to try again. For all she knew, a repeat offender could be killed outright.

Harry and Draco had sniggered at her the next day, the guardian snake having reported the incident to Harry, and he having related the story to Draco. Since she had waited until they were gone, she was perplexed that they could know, but she was sure they did. Of course a few people had seen her storm back into the castle dripping wet afterward, so maybe....

Professor Snape approached the Slytherin table as Harry and Draco were eating their midday repast. "Mister Potter, I would like to see you in my office after lunch."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied politely. In the past couple of weeks, the potions master had come to grips with the fact that Harry-sodding-Potter was now one of his Slytherins.

That, plus other factors, had caused him to revise his opinions of the young man, and although he hadn't taken Harry to his bosom, he had become more civil. As a result, Harry had returned the favour, much to Snape's surprise.

Harry exchanged looks with Draco. "What d'you think?" Harry asked. He knew Draco would understand to what he was referring.

Draco gave a slight shrug. "Only one way to find out, isn't there?"

As desperately as Harry wanted answers, he knew better than to break routine. Doing so would arouse too much curiosity. And since the man who had the answers was eating his own midday meal, it didn't make much sense to go charging down to the dungeons, anyway.

Ten minutes later, Harry was heading for the doors out of the Great Hall. Draco rolled his eyes, finished the last couple of bites of his own lunch, then followed at a leisurely pace. He knew Professor Snape would be at least another five minutes, although the potions master had his own, faster ways of reaching the dungeons. He and Harry had explored them Sunday last. They couldn't use them now of course, because they'd likely be seen, with so many people about.

When Draco finally caught up with Harry, he saw what he thought he would: Harry was pacing the corridor in front of the potion master's office. "And I'll wager you ran down here too, didn't you?" he said, twitting his fiancée.

"Where is he, Draco?" Harry asked a bit anxiously, ignoring the blond's jibe.

"Likely just now on his way, so why don't you sit down and relax? Getting yourself into a state isn't going to change anything."

Harry stopped and looked at the blond. "You're right," he sighed, then walked over to join him. Reaching Draco, Harry put his arms around him and leant their foreheads together. "I'm glad you're here," he said. "You didn't have to come, you know."

"Of course I did. If we're going to—"

"Oh, gods! Potter. Draco. In. Now." Snape was standing in his office door, a look of disgust on his face.

"He's speaking in one word sentences. Do you suppose he drank one of his own potions?" Harry whispered in a sudden and totally inappropriate mood of irreverence.

Draco stood away from his boyfriend. "Have you lost your mind?" he inquired, in turn.

"Probably!" Harry replied, grinning as he turned to face his Head of House.

"Good afternoon, Professor!" Harry exclaimed.

"Potter," the man growled, "public shows of affection are forbidden, as you well know. So whatever possessed you to—"

"Even if you're engaged?" Harry chirped with a smirk.

After a long moment, Snape let out his breath, and then closed his eyes as though in pained prayer. A moment later he opened them again. "Please. Tell me I did not hear what I think I just heard," the professor requested, sounding very tired. He then stepped back, out of the doorway. "I believe we both have news to relate," he said with a glare.

Draco couldn't quite hide a little smirk as he stepped past his Head of House. He was followed closely by Harry.

Snape seated himself in an almost throne-like chair which was situated on a slightly raised platform. It was only an inch, but the added height gave a slight psychological advantage. It didn't seem to be helping this time, though. Despite all his arguments against their engagement, both boys were adamant.

"I've taken all those things into account, Professor," Draco said, sounding bored. "Why do you think it's taken me this long to commit to a relationship with Harry?"

At this, Harry gave the blond a slightly surprised look, before again turning his attention back to the professor.

The man sighed, looking between the two young men. They were only sixteen years old. How, under all the skies, could they have any idea what they were getting into? But it did seem that magic had a mind of its own at times. Maybe the gods, the fates, or whoever, knew what they were doing. "I do hope you don't wind up regretting this decision, Draco," he said.

Snape pulled himself together. "And now on to other matters: I have performed quite a few tests and spells, and...."

Harry was glad they were finally getting to the information he had sought, but he did rather resent that the greasy-haired professor only seemed to be concerned about

Draco's welfare. Since Draco had been under Snape's care longer, he could understand why that might be, but it didn't stop him from feeling slighted.

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A/N: Since I've had a Brit or two become offended, I remind the reader that Wizarding Britain's social structure is roughly, although eclectically, in the Victorian Age, and not modern Muggle Britain. At least some of the characters' speech is going to reflect that to some degree. And Harry is trying to be taken more seriously, so his speech is more mature – when he remembers.

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## Chapter Thirteen

*Snape pulled himself together. "And now on to other matters: I have performed quite a few tests and spells, and..."*

"...it seems that you were not misinformed, after all. Insofar as I can determine, and as much as it pains me to say so, you are indeed the son of Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor."

Harry sighed. He had held out a last, miniscule hope that it might not be so. That hope was now extinguished.

"And relatives in this time?" Harry asked, bracing himself.

"James Potter, as you were already aware . . . and the Malfoys."

Harry stared at the man in horror, his body rigid.

"Harry, you're hurting my hand," Draco quietly complained. When Harry didn't respond right away, he said it louder. "Harry – my hand!" Draco would have removed his hand from Harry's grip forcefully, but he knew Harry needed the contact right now.

Harry turned to his fiancé. "Draco . . . we're related!" he said, with fear in his eyes.

"I heard. But there are over a thousand years between us, so it can't be close," Draco replied in an exasperated tone. "Now will you *please* stop crushing my hand?" he exclaimed irritably.

Harry turned back to the potions master without replying, but he did loosen his grip. "How close?" he asked.

Professor Snape sneered at him. "Mister Potter, if you would kindly use the matter that supposedly resides within your skull?"

Harry finally realised that he had been panicking and fought it back, then considered the question as logically as he could. A thousand years, twenty years to a generation . . . fifty generations? His cheeks burned as he realised that the Malfoys were probably as distant relatives to him as the Potters had been – little enough to almost dismiss it altogether. "Almost nonexistent, I would think," he admitted sheepishly.

"Actually, second cousins, several times removed," the potions master corrected. "The relationship is closer than yours was to James Potter due to more intermarriage between the Malfoys and the other aristocracy than the Potters participated in, but it is still quite distant."

"So I should actually have been raised with you, by your mother and father," Harry said to the blond.

Draco shuddered. "Knowing how that turned out, I wouldn't wish it on – on Weasley!"

"Hey!" Harry exclaimed, "Ron's not *that* bad."

Draco smirked. "Isn't that what I just said?" he asked, glad of the chance for a diversion. Actually, with Harry being raised with him, having a companion, his childhood might have been a lot happier. But then Voldemort would never have been weakened, his father's character might have deteriorated far sooner than it had, and.... So many things might have been different – and worse. It didn't bear thinking about. As bad as things now were in the wizarding world, at least now there was hope.

"If you're quite through wasting my time?" the professor drawled, before Harry could retort.

Harry glowered briefly at the man before remembering that, despite his attitude, the professor had done him a service. True, it had been for his own edification as well, but.... "Thank you for the information, Professor," he said. "I'll likely need to be able to produce documentation of the results of your tests." To have spoken the question of whether such documentation had been made would have been an affront to the potions master, but it was implicit in the statement.

Snape rose to his feet, then gracefully gave a slight, stiff bow. "It will be available when you have need of it, Your Majesty," he said. The time was coming, he knew, when he'd kneel to this young man and pledge his allegiance, but that time was not yet now.

The mode of address startled Harry, but he quickly regained his aplomb. "Thank you, Professor," he said again.

Snape inclined his head in recognition of the gratitude offered, then dropped the loyal subject rôle, and once again donned the persona of the gritty potions professor. "And now," he growled, "I have papers to mark."

Harry and Draco heard the dismissal, again professed their gratitude, and departed.



As they were walking to their next class, although it was a bit early for it yet, Harry was pondering a question engendered by Snape's referring to him by his as-yet-unacknowledged title. "Draco...."

"Yes?"

"If I *do* wind up on the throne, what would your title be? I don't think I could keep a straight face if I had to listen to people calling you 'Queen Draco'." He had said that last with a sense of pure mischief.

Draco came to a dead stop, face blazing. "Potter?"

"Yes, Draco?" Harry asked, as innocently as he could.

"Run," Draco advised.

It was a good thing that Harry had the reflexes of a Seeker, or Draco might have caught him flat footed. As it was, the blond was only feet behind him all the way to Transfigurations. By the time they got there, both young men were out of breath; Harry more so, because he'd been laughing the whole way, as well. But Draco was laughing too by the time they stopped outside the classroom.

Draco grabbed his dark-haired soul mate, and pretended to maul him. Harry squealed with laughter as he allowed his love free reign, only pretending to try to defend himself.

"*Ahem!*"

Both young men froze, and turned to face the source of that voice. They knew they were probably in trouble, but laughter and mischief still sat just below the surface. Still, they straightened themselves up and presented a proper Slytherin face. "Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall," Draco said, greeting the Transfigurations professor.

"I'm sorry; did we disturb a class?" Harry asked 'innocently'.

"As a matter of fact, Mister Potter, you did; for which five points shall be deducted for each of you from Slytherin. Now, I suggest you find another venue for your raucous activities." With that she turned, re-entered the classroom, and closed the door firmly in their faces.

Harry looked at Draco, then grinned. "You know, we *do* need to go back to our rooms before class; we forgot our books and supplies!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Only you, Harry, would go to class without everything needed," he drawled teasingly.

"Here, now! I don't see anything in your hands, either!" Harry remonstrated with a grin.

"And whose fault might that be?" Draco inquired aloofly.

Now it was Harry's turn to roll *his* eyes. He started off in the direction of their rooms. "Well, come on then, Queenie," he said, "let's retrieve our wayward books."

Draco gave Harry an open palm to the back of his head, though not *too* roughly. "'Queenie'? Amusing, Potter. Actually, I think it would be 'Prince', or maybe 'Prince-Consort'."

Harry grinned at having again successfully teased his companion, while he briefly rubbed the spot that had been hit – just to let Draco know that he appreciated the blond's effort. "That makes sense," he admitted.

Since Monday next was the ball, Professor Dumbledore had decreed that fifth, sixth, and seventh years would be free on both Saturday and Sunday to go to Hogsmeade to prepare for it. Fourth years would have to make do with the Saturday only, and would leave the ball at ten. The ball would end at midnight. First, second, and third years would have parties in their common rooms. Harry rather thought he'd be able to get permission for both he and Draco to go every evening during the week as well, if he asked for the privilege, but decided not to test it. They already had many people envious of them for having a private suite of rooms. They were reacting only to rumour, but people had a bad habit of taking rumour as fact. In this case it *was* true that they had a private suite, but very few knew that as a fact. Still, it wouldn't do to incite further ill feeling by pushing for special privileges.

Wednesday, Draco presented a design to Harry. He'd looked up the crests of the House Slytherin and the House Gryffindor (which were different from the Hogwarts House crests of the same name), and had created a combined crest to represent Harry's parentage. With some discussion and a couple of minor revisions, they came to an agreement. This would be the design they'd take to the jewellers.

Finally, it was Saturday. Since it was going to take time to make, their first stop was the jewellers. The owner was quite startled to see what the design consisted of, and demanded proof before he would lay his reputation on the line by incorporating them into anything. After a short talk by Floo with Professor Snape, in which the proof was presented (although not until the man had agreed to, and been subjected to a minor

binding so he couldn't reveal the information), the jeweller finally consented. An old man himself, he had been taught the designs as an apprentice by his grandfather, but only as an exercise. He had never thought to be commissioned to use them himself, especially after Grindelwald had murdered the royal family. After some discussion, a price was agreed upon. And a hefty price it was, too: one thousand, eight hundred, thirty-seven galleons. But the magic that would be used to make the items, as well as that to be incorporated into them was intricate, and the results would be worth it.

The last stop would be the clothiers, Gladrags, where they'd pick up the costumes they'd ordered by owl early in the week. (Draco also meant to order outerwear for the both of them with the new logo embroidered on the breast. After obtaining them, their present clothing would be sent out to be be embroidered.) Other than that, there was no pressing business to attend to, so Harry and Draco wandered around town, stopping in at the magical item repair shop, Dervish and Banges, where they kept a few models of the newer broom designs on hand as well as broom maintenance supplies. They admired the sleek designs and picked up a maintenance kit to share between them. It would do, since they weren't doing much flying right now.

A pet and familiar's store caught Harry's eye, where he bought a bag of deluxe owl treats. He'd been neglecting Hedwig terribly, and he wanted to try to make it up to her. Next was Honeyduke's, where Harry indulged his penchant for sweets, and finally impressed it upon Draco that he, too, was allowed to indulge. It was a good thing they both knew the shrinking spell.

Although sweets were tasty, they were nothing with which to fill an empty stomach, and since it was getting on towards noon, they headed for The Three Broomsticks for luncheon.

**"Oy! Harry!"** they were greeted, as they entered.

Looking about, Harry spotted the shouter. A wide grin threatened to split his face. "Seamus!" he yelled back, waving.

Draco held him back when he would have rushed over to the table at which the Irishman was sitting. "Etiquette, Harry!" he remonstrated. "You do not yell and make a spectacle of yourself in public places!"

Harry grimaced, but nodded, and composed himself. Then he took Draco's hand and dragged him over to Seamus' table. "I am not going to put my nose in the air to my friends," he informed the blond quietly.

"I didn't ask you to," Draco replied, gritting his teeth, "but you needn't act like a street merchant, either!"

"Noted," Harry said absently. If they hadn't been in public, he would have given Draco a quick hug and kiss in apology. And then they were at the Irishman's table.

"Have room for two more, Seamus?" Harry asked. Since only Dean Thomas was sitting with the curly-haired young Irishman, there was plenty of room.

"There, and I'm not s'sure, me friend," Seamus replied teasingly, "that it would do me reputation good to be seen in public acting friendly wi' Slytherins!" He then gave a somewhat doubtfully amused Harry a broad wink, proving that he'd been drinking far more than was good for him. His strong accent was another giveaway, since it was much more mild when he was sober. "But there, I'm bein' rude, and I've no reputation to speak of, anyway! Sit!"

"Oh, you have a reputation, Seamus," Dean reassured him. "All bad."

Seamus shot his friend a hurt look.

Seamus leant towards Harry, but he was looking rather more at Dean. "That's me mate that said that," he said sadly, but more loudly than necessary. "Some friend." He sat back rather more heavily than he'd intended, and thumped the back of his head on the high wooden seat back. He then sat there, rubbing the spot with a rueful expression on his face. Harry and Dean laughed at the Irishman's antics, and Draco unbent enough to smirk amusedly.

"We'll just order our lunch and be right back," Harry told them. "Save the seats for us?"

Seamus looked at him, offended. "What kind o' friend d'ye take me for, Harry? O' course the seats're saved fer yeh – you," he said, indicating that Draco was included.

Harry laughed at his friend, shaking his head in bemusement. Draco walked away towards the bar, leaving Harry to follow behind. After they had ordered their meals, with only a small glass of red wine to drink (to aid with digestion), they returned to the booth. Harry ushered Draco onto the bench seat, then sat beside him. Draco, looking at Seamus, was rather torn between amusement with Seamus' clowning, and disgust that someone would get drunk so early in the day.

"Well, we know what *you've* been doing all morning," Harry remarked to the Irishman.

Then Harry turned to Dean. "Why'd you let him get so drunk so early in the day, Dean? You're going to have to *pour* him into bed tonight!" he said, with a wide grin.

"He was mostly in this condition when I got here," Dean explained. "We had a fight last night, and the ruddy twit thought I was breaking up with him!"

Harry's eyebrows rose. "I knew you two were close, but...?"

"That's right," Dean replied apologetically, "you got re-Sorted just before we got together."

That question answered, Harry went on to the next. "So you fought?"

"An Irishman's biggest curse," Seamus put in, answering the unasked question, "a wanderin' eye."

Seamus turned quickly to the young man beside him. "But not wanderin' feet, me love!" the sandy-haired young man told Dean anxiously, putting an arm around Dean's neck.

Dean didn't reply to his boyfriend. Instead, he addressed the young men across from him and Seamus. "Let this be a lesson to you; never go to bed angry with each other," he said wryly, "even if it takes all ruddy night."

"Well, he'll last longer, now," Harry remarked, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

A very confused Seamus and questioning Dean stared at him.

"Well, he's pickled, isn't he," Harry stated.

Just as the others were recoving from their bout of groaning at the bad joke, Seamus also shooting Harry a hurt look, Harry and Draco's lunch arrived. Harry had ordered fish and chips, with lemon instead of malt vinegar. Draco received a 'shrimp basket' (batter fried shrimp, and chips), also with lemon wedges. Seamus and Dean had already eaten and were just waiting for the Irishman to sober up enough that he could leave without embarrassing himself, so they contented themselves with iced pumpkin juice. While Harry and Draco ate, the other two regaled Harry with tales of what had been going on with his former House-mates, as well as school gossip. They weren't quite rude enough to leave Draco out entirely, but it was close. Well, it was easy enough to do, since Draco wasn't putting much (as in 'any') effort into interacting with them.

"Ron's wanting to make friends again," Dean offered tentatively.

Reflexively, Draco growled – just a bit, and only just loud enough that Harry heard him, but it brought a small smirk to his lips, and made responding easier. Harry looked up from his meal. "I know," he said quietly, "but it's his move." He wanted to ask about Hermione, but since neither Dean nor Seamus mentioned her, he decided it was best to leave the subject lie.

After their meal, Harry and Draco relaxed and chit-chatted about nothing much at all with the other couple, while sipping on the limeades they'd ordered after eating, Draco's having a splash of grenadine added. An idea had been nibbling at the edges of Harry's mind, and finally he decided to act on it.

"Dean, could I have a word in private, please?" he asked, and then apologised to Seamus and Draco for the rudeness.

"I'll just be a minute, love," he whispered in Draco's ear. The blond looked at him questioningly, but only nodded. Harry knew he'd be interrogated, later.

Harry knew his face was as red as a beet as he faced the other boy in the alley behind the tavern. He almost decided to call it a bad job and give it up before he'd even begun, but for Draco's sake, he persevered. "You and Seamus," he began, "you, um.... You . . . do things, right?"

Dean wasn't a cruel person, and he knew from Harry's embarrassment what he must be getting at, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity. "Sure, Harry. All the time," he replied.

"Could you, um, tell me how?" Harry asked.

Dean cocked his head at Harry, as though confused. "How what?"

Harry frowned, a bit. "How you . . . do it," he said.

"Harry, we do all sorts of things! If Seamus hadn't got drunk, we'd be shopping; and surely you know how to do that?" Dean couldn't continue: he burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, Harry. You just looked so uncomfortable!" Under the threat of Harry's embarrassed glare, he quickly got himself under control, although he couldn't stop grinning.

"There's too much to talk about in the time we have. Why don't you stop in at Rotereit's Tome Emporium, and pick up a book on it?"

Well, Harry *did* have a very isolated childhood, so, "They write books about stuff like that? For people like us?"

There must have been something in Harry's tone, because Dean frowned a bit. "We're gay, Harry, not flawed."

If it had been physiologically possible, the former Gryffindor would have blushed even worse. "Sorry. The Muggle notions I grew up with still surface at times."

Mollified, Dean nodded. "Let's go back to our boyfriends," he suggested. He was a Muggleborn himself, so he understood what Harry was talking about.

Harry almost corrected him; almost told him Draco was his fiancé. But that was a bit of news they didn't plan to tell anyone for awhile.

When they left the Three Broomsticks, Harry suggested they look for books on etiquette and such, so he'd have an idea of what Draco was talking about when he was being tutored. Draco was all for the idea, since it would result in less work for him. Harry didn't mention the other books he'd be looking for.

Afterward Harry and Draco made their way to Gladrags. Harry noted Scrivenshaft's just beyond it. "D'you need quills, parchment, or anything while we're here?" Harry asked.

"Don't slur your words, Harry," Draco corrected automatically, before his cheeks tinted slightly. "Um, no, thank you. I have what I need at the moment," he said a little sheepishly.

Harry gave him a grin. "Do you, now?" he said insinuatingly.

Draco's blush deepened, but he ignored Harry's 'childish antics' and, head high, entered the clothiers.

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When Harry woke up Sunday morning he was frowning, and furious. He turned to the sleeping blond beside him. Even as angry as he was, he was gentle when he shook Draco. "Draco. Wake up."

Draco could be a deep sleeper, something that had only started happening recently due to his finally feeling safe, but the urgency in Harry's voice must have registered even with his sleeping mind. "Harry? What's wrong?" he asked muzzily.

"I just had another night of conversation with Lilorienne," Harry revealed.

"That's nice," Draco replied. He then turned over and prepared to go back to sleep.

"Dumbledore lied to me!" Harry exclaimed.

Sighing, Draco rolled back over onto his back. "And why does this surprise you?" he asked with an air of long-suffering patience.

Harry stared at his fiancè, exasperated that the blond wasn't immediately as angry as he was over this. "It's not just that he lied, it's what he lied *about*!"

Draco raised one eyebrow at Harry, and waited for an explanation.

"He made up that damned prophecy!" Harry revealed.

Well, that *did* get Draco's attention. Harry's whole life had been defined by that bit of vague, mystical drivel. He felt himself starting to get angry on Harry's behalf, and forced control. "Are you sure?" he asked, his tone strained.

Now that Draco was responding appropriately, Harry found himself, all logic to the contrary, becoming more in control of his emotions. "Lilorienne is," he said flatly. "It seems our good headmaster talks in his sleep when something is bothering him. He knows it and takes precautions, but that doesn't help against the building your room is a part of, does it?" Harry asked rhetorically, a somewhat malicious look on his face.

Draco frowned. "How did the subject come up?"

"I was telling her about my life, and the prophecy. And then *she* told *me* about the 'prophecy'," Harry growled.

Draco nodded thoughtfully. "So what do you want to do about it?" he asked. Now that he was thinking about it, the prophecy Harry had told him about *couldn't* have been true – unless it applied to Longbottom, and not Harry. But that didn't seem likely.

Harry opened his mouth, then paused to think. "Nothing, right now. As much as I'd like to shove it in his face, he's had time – years – to plan for the contingency of me finding out. We need to think – to plan. But I'll continue to act the 'Golden Boy', and train until I have a plan in place."

Draco's eyebrows rose. "Well, maybe you *are* Slytherin after all," he remarked with a smirk.



Harry raised an eyebrow of his own. "Yes, the ex-Gryffindor *can* be trained," he remarked dryly.

Draco actually *giggled*, then belatedly tried to pretend he'd done nothing of the sort by turning it into a snicker.

Harry donned a smirk. "Too late, love. Who knew you had such a cute giggle?"

"Malfoys do *not* giggle, Potter," Draco said haughtily. His furiously blushing face said he knew otherwise, and that he knew he'd been caught out, as well.

Harry just grinned at him, then leant in and kissed the pale neck. He gave it a small lick before pulling back.

Draco caught his breath. "Harry," he said slowly, "don't you dare start something you don't intend to finish."

Harry looked at him for a count of two – then jumped out of bed. "As you wish!" he said cheerfully, and sauntered into the toilet, leaving a quite scandalised Draco in his wake. "Harald Myrddin . . . whatever your name is – get your arse back here!" he shouted.

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"What's *his* problem?" Crabbe asked Harry, indicating a glowering, sulking Draco.

"None of your bleeding business, Vincent!" Draco snapped.

"He's just a bit frustrated," Harry replied to the question with an easy grin.

Over the weeks Harry had become friendly with a few of the Slytherins; Vincent, Gregory, Blaise, Pansy, a couple of seventh-years, and a few fourth and fifth years. He didn't go so far as to trust them, but he considered them friendly acquaintances, anyway. Of them all, he was more inclined to trust Draco's 'bully boys' than any of the others, but even with them he remained alert. He knew their fathers were Death Eaters, and their loyalties would likely lie more with their families than with him. But there were indications that they weren't happy with their families' state of affairs.

"Oh? Over what?" Vince asked.

Draco kicked Harry's shin, causing him to wince. "Ah, . . . I don't think I should say," Harry replied, rubbing the sore spot and glaring at his boyfriend.

"Oh. Couldn't get it up," the large Slytherin remarked calmly.

"Exactly, Vince," Draco said triumphantly, with a malicious smirk.

"Too bad he disappointed you, Potter," Greg said matter-of-factly.

Draco's jaw dropped, and Harry started snickering.

Draco started taking long, slow, deep breaths. From watching this performance with others, and before this year from personal experience, Harry knew Draco wasn't trying to calm himself – he was just expanding his lungs so he could yell louder and longer. And some of that yelling was likely to be hexes.

"Vince, Greg – you know the signs. I suggest you run," Harry said quietly.

The large Slytherins looked at Draco. "But we're not finished eating yet," Vince protested. But he was already preparing to do just that, as was Greg. The other Slytherins within earshot had been listening with great amusement, but wisely had not participated in the conversation, preferring to make whispered comments between themselves. At Greg's pronouncement of sympathy, however, several of them had burst out laughing, most others at least smirking or grinning.

Only Pansy, of those within earshot, looked the least offended on Draco's behalf. But when she put her head on the blond's shoulder and said, "He doesn't deserve you, Draco," the first hex was hers. Her hair became a huge, rigid ball of split ends.

"Never touch me again, Parkinson," he hissed, before turning his attention back to Vince and Greg. But by that time they were halfway to the doors of the Great Hall, and rapidly closing the distance.

"That wasn't nice, dear," Harry said, but Draco could see that Harry was barely suppressing his laughter.

"It's *your* fault, Harry," Draco accused.

Harry smirked.

Draco was getting irritated by that smirk. It didn't belong on Harry's face. But damn, it was sexy!

"I'll make it up to you tonight, all right?" Harry promised, then he leant over, and gave Draco a chaste peck on the lips.

Draco wasn't having it. He grabbed Harry's head and gave him a very forceful, steamy kiss before letting him go. "You had best, Harry," he growled. It troubled him a little that Harry looked as though he'd won the prize at the country fair.

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**A/N:** We all act one way with the general public, another way with our parents, yet another way with our friends, and still yet another way with the one we love. We act differently, depending on who we're with. So if you're all those people, which one is your true character, and which ones are out of character?

And a big thank-you to my betas, Keikokin, and Phoenix.

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## Chapter Fourteen

"Draco, Potter, might I have a word?" Blaise Zabini quietly asked after they had eaten lunch.

The two in question looked at each other, shrugged at the same time, and then laughed at the coincidence. "Sure, Blaise," Draco replied.

Once they were ensconced in an empty room in the dungeons near the stairs, Blaise threw up silencing and locking charms. As he did, Harry and Draco both had their hands on their wands – just in case. Blaise noticed, but didn't comment. Indeed, if what he'd heard was correct, he felt their actions only prudent. He would have been disappointed in them if they hadn't been cautious and prepared to defend themselves.

"We've been hearing some rumours," the dark young man began, "about the rooms you're occupying. If they're true, we have some questions, and maybe an offer."

"Who's 'we'?" Draco asked just before Harry could.

"Slytherin House. Well, most of us, anyway," Blaise replied, looking him in the eye to ensure that his sincerity was seen.

Harry wondered what this could be about, but he didn't want to seem overly suspicious. "What's the offer?" Harry inquired.

"A possible alliance; provided we like the answers to the questions."

"And what do you want out of it?" Draco asked. This was his *métier*, and the first chance he'd had to practise it since just before becoming Harry's bond slave. It felt invigorating.

"Freedom," Blaise replied bluntly, and with an intensity that surprised both Harry and Draco. "Freedom from servitude to a madman, and to be able to live our lives without the fear of death or torture hanging over us."

It was a good answer, and Harry approved of Blaise' fervour. "All right, then;" Harry said with apparent aplomb, settling back against an old desk, "what questions do you have?" Harry looked calm and self-assured – the very epitome of a budding leader. Only

Draco, through his soul bond with the green-eyed young man, could tell he wasn't quite as confident as he looked.

Draco had mixed feelings about Harry taking over the lead in these proceedings. On the one hand, *he* had been Hogwarts' Prince of Slytherin; not Harry. These were his people. On the other hand, it would likely be Harry's bloodline and heritage that would sway the decision, and his fiancé was the one who might one day sit the throne. Therefore Harry needed to be able to handle situations like this, and this would be good practise. Yet again, this was an important first step, and if Harry made a mistake....

But Harry was the head of House Slytherin, House Gryffindor and House Black, and the unrecognised king. Draco wasn't sure, but Harry might also be the head of House Potter, as well. At least he didn't know of any other living relatives, save the Blacks, of whom Harry was now the Head through Sirius Black's will, and his own family. And although he'd have to check the Book of Lines to be sure, he thought Harry had a stronger claim. He reluctantly decided to let Harry handle it, but be ready to step in if needed.

"Firstly, that Draco is now in a soul bond with you, rather than your bond slave, despite the marks being there. Several have heard the rumours from your old House, Potter," Blaise began.

Harry nodded calmly. "It's true. If I knew how to get rid of the slave marks, they'd have been a long time gone."

Draco had mixed feelings about those marks, now. They proclaimed that he had been a slave, and that was a fact he despised; but on the other hand, he rather liked the idea of having something that proclaimed him Harry's – and that rather confused him, that he'd come so far that he didn't mind that others thought Harry 'owned' him. There would be something else soon, but until then....

Blaise nodded. There was no hint about whether he was pleased with the answer, or not. "There are rumours that you occupy one of the protected suites in Hogwarts," Blaise stated.

Harry recognized the question that wasn't asked. "Salazar Slytherin's," he revealed.

Blaise' eyes widened, to Harry's amusement, but that was the only sign he gave of his shock. He had put money on it being Godric Gryffindor's suite. Five galleons he'd not see again, in a hurry. "You're not serious," he said.

"He is," Draco assured him.

"But . . . how?"

Harry looked to Draco for a hint of what he should do. Draco nodded. Harry turned back to Blaise.

"You'll want to verify it with Professor Snape, but I'm not a Potter. I was found in a stasis bubble, and given to them to raise," Harry began.

Blaise was now looking at Harry with a very dubious expression on his face. "And?" he asked cautiously, obviously thinking Harry was unbalanced.

"He's Salazar's son, out of Godric Gryffindor," Draco inserted when he saw – and felt – how reluctant Harry was to say the words.

Now Blaise looked angry. "I didn't come here to be made a fool!" he exclaimed.

Harry had been leaning against an old, dusty desk. But at this show of temper he was immediately on his feet, ready for anything, while at the same time attempting to look unthreatening.

"Sit down, Zabini," Draco ordered. "This is going to take a while." He exchanged looks with Harry, who gave him a slight smile and a quick wink of reassurance. Oddly enough, to Draco's way of thinking, it helped.

He sat, as did Draco at another desk close by. Harry resumed his leaning stance. But even after having had everything explained to him, Blaise didn't believe the claim.

"That's why I told you that you'd want to verify it with Professor Snape," Harry finally said in exasperation.

"Right," Blaise scoffed; "I'm going to go up to our Head of House and make myself look the fool by asking an unlikely question like that? Not likely."

Harry sighed and rose to his feet. "Come along, then," he said, heading towards the door and removing the spells Blaise had set.

"Where?" Blaise asked suspiciously. He was still of more than half a mind that Potter was off his trolley, and that Draco had joined him for the ride.

Draco smirked as Harry shrugged and replied, "You require proof; Professor Snape has it," as he opened the door.

"After you," Draco said to the doubter.

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "No, after you. Age before beauty, you know," he said a bit snidely. Have a nutter at *his* back? Hah!

"Indubitably," Draco replied, his expression hardening, "which is why I insist."

Zabini didn't push it. Ex-slave or no, mad or not, Draco's wand work and Dark Arts training was second to none in Slytherin House – except perhaps now, for Potter. He exited to the waiting ex-Gryffindor, Draco close behind.

"Your vanity is going to get you in trouble one day, love," Harry whispered in Draco's ear, when he reclaimed the blond in the corridor.

"I'm not vain," Draco replied, his voice tight with the effort to contain his temper. The *nerve* of Zabini! He didn't need Harry's insults on top of it.

"All right, your pride, then." With the mood Draco was in, he didn't feel like pointing out the blond's vanities, but it amused him nonetheless that Draco could deny his pride in his appearance.

"You've no room to talk, with *your* temper," Draco shot back. To his surprise, Harry chuckled.

"Well that makes a pair of us then, doesn't it?" Harry replied, with a soft kiss to the blond's cheek.

Blaise, who had been enjoying the byplay between the two, now grinned as he saw Draco unconsciously lean into it. He wondered if Draco realised just how whipped he was.

"Oh, just . . . shut up, Harry," a slightly flustered blond replied.

A minute later they were at their Head's office door. Harry knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened.

Snape looked at the small group, then settled on Harry. "Potter," he said, as though it pained him, "what do you need now?"

"Professor," Harry said patiently, "you know very well that isn't my name."

The professor ushered the three young men into his office. He didn't know what the ruler-apparent was up to, but he didn't think it would be good to have this conversation in the corridor. He did not offer them seats. "And what *is* your name, then?" the man said snidely.

Harry shrugged. He'd decided on a name, but telling the potions master what it was at this point would have upset his hastily made plan. "Why don't you call me by my title?" he suggested, with just a hint of stress on the last word.

Snape's glance at Blaise Zabini was subtle. So was Harry's nod.

"You know school policy does not recognise titles while you are in school," the potions master replied with very little change in tone. "I'm not going to go about calling you 'Your Majesty' just to feed your ego, young man."

At that point Blaise' legs evidently decided to be somewhere else than under him. Draco stepped to one side in the event Blaise *did* fall, but the young man caught and steadied himself against a nearby wall.

Harry smirked a bit, and nodded his thanks. "It might become a bit tiresome to yell 'Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor', sir," he said, finally revealing the name he'd chosen, "and maybe just a bit confusing as well, given the House names."

Professor Snape rolled the name around in his mind. He was afraid Harry might be correct, but if that was the name he had chosen – and he *was* entitled to it – then so be it. "You will allow me, as well as the rest of the staff, to decide that, Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor."

Harry shrugged. "As you wish, sir."

"And your reason for disturbing me?" the potions professor inquired. Yes, he knew that the mission had been completed, but Mister Zabini wasn't aware he knew that, and he had to keep up appearances.

Harry floundered for a moment, since the question had already been answered, then, "Blaise overheard Draco and I discussing what my probable surname actually was, and questioned my parentage. I suggested we come to you, sir, since you had ascertained that for me. I believe that has been accomplished."

He turned to a somewhat paler Blaise Zabini. "Blaise?" he inquired, seeking confirmation of his assumption.

Blaise nodded somewhat dazedly.

"Thank you for your time, Professor," Harry said politely. He felt the urge to smirk, but suppressed it. Blaise might be a little slower to question his word, next time.



"Pot- Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor: Wait a moment." Professor Snape went into another room and came back a few seconds later with a small, folded sheaf of parchment in his hand. Handing it to Harry, he said, "Do not waste my time with this again."

Looking at the first page of parchment, Harry saw that it was the results of the spells and tests the professor had made for him. "I'd prefer you keep this, Professor, for safety's sake," Harry said, holding the sheaf out to the man.

The potions master made no attempt to reach for the documents. "It's a copy," he said flatly.

Harry tinted, slightly. Of course Professor Snape would keep the originals in his own records. But speaking of keeping records.... "Professor, have you submitted a copy of these to the Ministry?"

"Do you wish me to?" the man inquired. For a change, the man's face was not registering a negative emotion. It was quite blank.

It would be good to have this in official records, but would having them there cause problems for him? Harry said as much to his Head of House. "After all, sir, the more copies there are in separate places, the less likely they can all be lost or destroyed."

"I believe this is a matter that will require more thought and planning; something I do not, at present, have time for," the greasy-haired man replied.

"Perhaps Tuesday evening?" Harry suggested, tucking the document into an inside pocket in his robes, and sealing it.

"That will do," Snape replied stiffly.

"Are we *done* here, now?" Draco inquired, sotto voce.

Harry grinned, and moved to where he could give Draco's hand a quick squeeze. He knew the grumpy professor wouldn't stand for anything more than that in front of him. "I believe so," he said quietly.

"Again, thank you for your time, sir," Harry said.

The professor gave a sharp nod, but said nothing. Those Gryffindors had practically ruined a perfectly good Slytherin, but there was still material there to work with. Draco had been a good influence on him.

Blaise had recovered by this time, and though he still looked a bit shaken, he opened the door, and all three young men trooped out.

Once out in the corridor, Harry turned to Zabini. "Now what?" he asked.

"I'll have to discuss this with the others, then we can set up a meeting. Maybe later tonight?"

Harry shook his head. "Tonight won't do, and tomorrow is the ball. Tuesday evening is Professor Snape, and training. Wednesday.... No, that's too far away. Gather your people and bring them to the Room of Requirement."

"What? Now? But—"

"We don't have time now, Harry," Draco said, interrupting. "We need to do our lessons, and I'd like us to try on our costumes before supper, in case they need adjusting."

Harry raised an eyebrow at his fiancé before turning back to the other boy. "Will directly after supper do?" he asked Blaise.

Blaise studied their faces, then nodded. "It will do. I have inches to write, as well. Sevenish all right?"

"It's a date," Harry replied.

"You're taken, Harry," Draco growled playfully.

Blaise looked at him in surprise. This wasn't how the Draco he knew acted.

But on second thought, he really didn't want to know.

"Hm. Poor choice of words," Harry agreed with a grin.

"Where?" Blaise asked.

Harry thought about it for a few. "Do you remember where the DA met, on the seventh floor?" Upon Blaise' nod, he said, "Best not to go in one group; it would draw far too much attention. Small groups, staggered, and using different routes would be best."

Blaise agreed, then left for the Slytherin dorms.

As soon as Blaise was out of sight, Harry crushed Draco to him, claiming his lips. When he let up, he softly said, "You know better than to growl at me, my dragon. Now look what you made me do, and in a public place! What kind of example is that for me to set?" The lights in his eyes were dancing quite devilishly.

Wide-eyed, Draco stared into Harry's startling green eyes. "I . . . forgot?" he said weakly, leaning against Harry for support.

Harry chuckled. He seriously doubted Draco had forgotten any such thing, but the blond had obviously underestimated Harry's reaction, and overestimated his own ability to hold up under the onslaught. "Our lessons are done, Draco. So what's on your mind? And why did you hold back, back there? I rather thought you'd take over the negotiations with Zabini," he said, softly.

Draco shook his head, then grabbed Harry's hand, and started towards the stairs out of the dungeon. "You did well enough," he said, ignoring Harry's question. "And with you being the family head of so many houses, plus your rank.... You definitely need the practise, Harry," he said with a hint of hauteur, trying to regain his dignity.

A small frown crossed Harry's brow. "What do you mean, 'so many houses'?" he asked.

"You haven't thought of that? There's House Slytherin and House Gryffindor, of which you're the only survivor, House Black—"

"I know I inherited his estates and monies, but there are other Blacks," Harry protested.

Draco shook his head. "Sirius was the last male. My aunts.... Bellatrix is a fugitive, and can't inherit. Andromeda married a Muggle, and was disowned. My mother...." Draco's voice had become a bit strained and hoarse. He hadn't once heard from his mother since his ordeal had started. Although not a demonstrative person, she also had never been totally uncaring. It hurt that he hadn't heard from her. Was it because he had become a slave? Or who he had been bonded to, or.... Being around Death Eaters and Voldemort, there were so many things that could have happened to her. He tried to put her out of his mind for now, and pulled himself together. He genteelly cleared his throat. "I wouldn't want my father in control, there. Not that it matters. You *did* read the complete will, didn't you?" Draco had made sure to familiarize himself with Harry's copy of that document as soon as Harry had given him permission to do so.

Harry shook his head. "Too soon," he said, meaning that he hadn't recovered enough from Sirius' death to read such a personal document closely.

Draco nodded, understanding. "He specifically named you his heir in all things, Harry. That included his position as Head of House Black."

Harry was feeling a little overwhelmed. "All that, and a crown too," he said, trying to make light of it.

"I've told you before, Harry—"

"That there is no crown," Harry said, interrupting. "Yes, I remember. I was trying to make a joke, all right?" Harry was feeling just a bit exasperated. "You're taking this tutoring a bit too seriously, Draco," he continued. "I appreciate that you're helping, but...." He trailed off, unsure how to finish that sentence, and a bit frustrated as well.

"Do you want me to stop?" Draco asked quietly.

"No!" Harry exclaimed. Harry swung around in front of the blond and stopped, which forced Draco to stop as well. He took Draco's face in his hands, and looking intently into those amazing grey eyes, he spoke earnestly. "You're not just my tutor, Draco. You're also my boyfriend, and.... And you mean much more to me than that," he substituted in place of 'fiancé', since anyone might be listening in these corridors. The acoustics were strange, sometimes. "Can't you enjoy being with me without always looking for faults?"

Draco was stung. "I am *not* looking for faults!" he retorted, 'although they're there in plenty,' he added petulantly, to himself.

Harry searched the eyes in front of him, and found nothing but angry honesty there. "All right," he conceded, "'teaching opportunities', then."

Draco tried to lower his head, but with gentle firmness, Harry prevented this escape. Draco's hands came up to grip Harry's wrists, but he didn't do anything else. Harry drew him closer, kissed him, then drew him into a brief embrace. He had felt Draco's capitulation.

Draco drew back. "Let's go try our costumes on," he said with a twinkle in his eye. He knew Harry wasn't happy with them, and was only doing it for his sake, and to start people thinking of him in a regal rôle. Draco was going to enjoy this little revenge.

Harry had felt that, as well, but decided that Draco deserved it. And it was harmless enough.

The snake guardian opened the door upon their approach.

But first....

As soon as they were in private, Harry attacked Draco's neck. Soon they were writhing against each other in front of the fireplace, and soon after had to bathe, before Draco got his 'revenge'.

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"A wig?" Harry exclaimed.

"It's part of the costume," Draco remarked offhandedly. He sniggered when he looked over and saw Harry trying to fit the wig over his own thick, unruly hair. Eventually he'd offer to help, but for now he was having too much fun. He couldn't wait to see Harry try to put on the costume itself. All those pieces could get confusing.

"Merlin's craggy arse!" burst from Harry's lips.

"Harry, please!" Draco complained with mock horror. "My virginal ears!" He sniggered as his boyfriend discovered the braies.

"You can't be serious, Draco! These things are hardly there!" The braies were about the same size and construction as Muggle bikini briefs, except for having a pouch in front and a drawstring instead of an elastic.

"You exaggerate, Harry," Draco said, snickering. "Besides which, I think you'll look dead sexy in them. Don't you want to look sexy for me?"

Harry was torn. He knew he was being manipulated, and that rather set him against the idea: he hated being manipulated. But if it would titillate Draco.... Finally he sighed, dropped his pants, and stepped into the braies. After adjusting himself and tying the drawstring, he looked at Draco to twit him about the undergarment again, and stopped. Draco's eyes were just a bit glazed, his jaw hung loose, although his mouth was still closed – thank the gods, since he didn't know what he'd do with a drooling Draco (although he had a few ideas) – and his own braies were stretched out of shape by Draco's admiration of Harry's form. Seeing Draco's form in the braies rather brought Harry's . . . ah . . . 'interest' up as well. And they'd only just enjoyed each other not that long ago!

With a wrench, Harry turned his attention elsewhere. If Draco were amenable, he intended to consummate the bond tonight, and sixteen or no, he didn't want to risk wearing himself *or* Draco out beforehand. But when Draco walked over to him as though under Imperio, his resolve was sorely tested. He couldn't keep himself from

responding to the kisses, returning the caresses, and stroking Draco's proud length. But finally he exerted his famous willpower, and pushed his lover away. "Later, love," he panted, looking into Draco's disappointed grey eyes. "I promise I'll make it up to you. I don't want it to be rushed, and we don't have time for anything else." He crushed Draco to him one more time with a fierce, bruising kiss, and turned away again.

"You had *best*," Draco said fiercely. "I'm so hard, I hurt!"

Looking at his fiancé, Harry had a change of heart. "Don't move," he said. Dropping to his knees in front of the blond, he untied Draco's braies, carefully extracted the smooth, pale column of flesh, kissed the purplish head, licked it, then slowly engulfed it, savouring the texture and flavour of every inch. This was something they'd only recently added to their activities, and Harry was being very careful not to scrape Draco's hardness with his teeth.

"Oh, gods, Harry." Draco's moaned words included praise, need, and a demand for more. Harry obliged him, applying suction then easing off, playing with Draco's foreskin with his tongue and teeth, though not enough to hurt, before again letting his lover's length plunge into his mouth.

Even with Draco's state of arousal, his previous release prevented him from quick relief. Even so, it was sooner than Harry expected when Draco showed signs of his impending climax. And then it was there, Draco crying out wordlessly as he came, then collapsing into Harry's lap as his knees gave 'way.

Harry held himself in tight control, then gently eased Draco off his lap, got to his feet, went into the bathroom, and submersed himself into an ice-cold bath. *Gah! I wish we had a shower!* Harry thought, as the cold water closed over him.

*'If you had asked, I would have provided one,'* Lilorienne replied.

Harry was surprised. *You could do that?*

*'Given time, yes,'* she replied.

*That would be lovely, if you would.*

*'Consider it done.'*

*Thank you,* Harry thought at her in real gratitude. He shivered, but the cold water was doing its job; he was no longer ready to rape Draco.

(Over the next few hours, Lilorienne would transform parts of the room into an elaborate shower with two showerheads, with a wide bench and sauna, enclosed in glass bricks. She would have to move other parts of the bath around to accomplish it, but there was plenty of room to do so. Harry and Draco would be elsewhere by that time, of course, and wouldn't see it until the next day.<sup>1)</sup>)

Harry got out of the bath, performed a drying spell on both him and the braies he'd been in too much of a hurry to remove, then went to try on the rest of the costume. When he appeared out of the bath, Draco smirked at him. Harry did the only mature thing he could: he stuck his tongue out at him.

Draco laughed at the uncharacteristic behaviour, almost losing his balance as he stepped into the knee trousers of his costume. Harry smirked, satisfied with his small revenge, and started sorting out his costume.

Finally, with Draco's help, Harry was fully attired in the period costume. He conjured up a wide, full-length mirror, and they stood side by side in front of it. The picture was quite striking.

Both were in the costume of the royal court of France of the eighteenth century, and sported powdered wigs. Harry's costume was of brocaded black silk with gold, forest green, and burgundy embroidered designs, and Draco's of brocaded grey silk with silver, robin's-egg blue, and pink embroidered designs. Very plain – indeed, quite funereal – by the standards of that time, but quite striking by wizarding standards. White linen shirts with ruffled fronts and cuffs, white stockings, and appropriately coloured slippers finished the ensemble.

But Draco wasn't finished yet. He brought out two three-quarter circle, black felt hooded cloaks. Harry's was lined with a deep burgundy red, Draco's with forest green; both linings being of velvet. On the breast of both was the crest they'd worked out, with a slight difference between them. The crest was a Dragon Sanguine Crowned, Maintaining a Serpent Azure Erect, and a Griffon Or Respectant<sup>2</sup>; Harry's atop a royal crown, Draco's atop a prince's coronet, even though he wasn't quite entitled to it yet.

The costumes and wigs had been specially made (Draco would *not* wear clothing that had been worn by others), but would be sent back after being thoroughly cleansed, and any hair or other body residue removed (to protect against such being used in a spell against them). The store would be able to sell them at a large profit due to the notoriety/fame of the wearers. The cloaks were a purchase. Many spells had been incorporated into the cloaks, including waterproofing, fireproofing, the strongest anti-hex charms money could buy, and a weight reduction charm. The cloaks would have been quite heavy, otherwise.

"I thought you said the wizarding world doesn't use crowns," Harry remarked.

"Only in family crests," Draco answered absently as he adjusted the folds of his cloak.

Harry shrugged. "Okay, so are you satisfied, then?"

Draco turned Harry around and fussed over his fiancé's costume then stepped back, scrutinized his appearance one more time, then nodded sharply, satisfied.

"Good!" Harry announced, snatching the wig off. With it on, his own hair had to be tucked under, and the wig left his forehead totally bare, exposing his scar in a way he'd never allowed it to be in the past. Needless to say, he wasn't happy with that.

Draco winced at the treatment of the piece. "Harry, careful of that!"

Harry glanced sidewise at Draco, but only continued stripping out of the outfit, then started changing into regular clothes. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked Draco, who was still fussing with his own costume.

Draco sighed exasperatedly. "We're only going to be able to wear these one night, Harry. I wish to enjoy it!" he said, but reluctantly started changing out of his costume, too.

Seeing Draco divesting himself of the costume, Harry refrained from reminding him that the night was the next one, not this. Instead, he finished dressing then sat down to wait until Draco was also ready to go to supper. "I just can't get over how beautiful you are," he remarked to the blond, just as he divested himself of the braies.

It was a calculated remark and got exactly the reaction he'd hoped for. Draco blushed. Then he got the reaction he'd expected. Draco threw something at him – the braies – and accused him: "Pervert!"

Harry laughed. "Where you're concerned, love? Always!"

Supper was a rather mundane affair, being chops, bubble and squeak, and bread rolls. It helped that the bread rolls were freshly baked.

"Still on?" Blaise asked cryptically.

Harry nodded, then got up. Draco looked up at him curiously, since they hadn't yet eaten desert. "Just a short trip to the loo," Harry explained.



When he got back he found that their dessert was that ultimate indignity, vanilla tapioca pudding. I mean; how mundane can you get? He sprinkled it with powdered cinnamon and put a dollop of brandied cherry preserves on it when the house elves delivered them upon his request. The shaker and preserves were well received by many at the table, though few others used both.

"I think Dumbledore's trying to bore us to death," Harry remarked about the meal, and pudding.

"You think?" Blaise replied, smiling.

Harry wasn't sure if Blaise was agreeing with his comment or taking a dig at him, but he just nodded – a response that was appropriate either way.

Since he had told Blaise to stagger the groups coming in, Harry made sure that he and Draco were at the Room of Requirement early. Six-thirty found him pacing in front of the wall that held the door, thinking of the meeting with an unknown number of Slytherins, some of which might be untrustworthy, and needing a space that would make them all comfortable, both physically and psychologically.

*'Really, Harry,' Lilorienne spoke in Harry's mind, 'all you had to do was ask, you know.'*

Harry grinned abashedly. "Sorry, Lilorienne," he said out loud, for Draco's benefit.

Draco grinned. "She twit you for not asking for help?" he guessed.

Harry nodded, face red, but still smiling. "I'm just used to doing for myself," he explained.

"Is that why you haven't asked her to interfere with Dumbledore's spying?" the blond asked.

Harry stilled, stunned. "I never even thought of it!" he confessed. Of course Lilorienne had long since protected Harry and Draco from Dumbledore's attention on her own initiative, but they didn't know that.

*Lilorienne, can you stop Dumbledore from getting any information from the school?* Harry asked.

*'From the portraits, ghosts, and other magical artifacts, yes,' she replied, 'but not from spells he sets or from other people.'*

*Can you warn us if there are any such spells on or around us?*

*'Since I'd see him cast them, yes,' she replied.*

*Then, if you would, could you please stop what information reporting to Dumbledore that you are able to affect, and warn us of anything you can?* Harry requested.

*'Of course.'*

*Thank you.*

"Well?" Draco asked, when he saw Harry relax.

"It's done," Harry said, with a smirk.

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1. The Room of Requirement was spelled into being by the Founders for its specific purpose. For Lilorienne herself to change anything takes time.

2. A crowned purple and/or red dragon and a gold griffon reared up on their hind feet, wings swept out behind them, and peacefully facing each other. The dragon holds a blue snake ready to strike in one forefoot. In heraldry everything, including the colours, has a [meaning](#).

A/N: For those wondering about the royal rooms: They can only be entered by the seated ruler and his/her family. Harry hasn't been officially seated, yet.

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## Chapter Fifteen

In groups of two to five they came, until there were over twenty Slytherins from the top three years there, not counting Harry and Draco. When Blaise, who had come somewhere in the middle of this migration indicated that everyone he expected was there, Harry closed the door and asked Lilorienne to hide it, so they wouldn't be interrupted.

"Most of Slytherin indeed," Harry murmured to Blaise in an aside.

He walked back up to the 'front' of the room, and addressed his Housemates as a group for the first time.

"Blaise tells me that you're considering an alliance with the Light side."

"Then Zabini mis-spoke," Milicent Bulstrode said, interrupting Harry before he could say anything else. "We're considering an alliance with you, Potter – nobody else."

"I said nothing of the Light side, Potter," Blaise reminded him, "just an alliance."

"They would have approached Dumbledore if they just wanted to join the Light, Harry," Draco put in.

Harry was astounded, and found himself at a loss for words – but not for long. "I wouldn't want to be accused of pride, but I'm actually very happy about that," he finally stated. "For my own reasons, I no longer wish to work directly with Dumbledore."

"Harry, you're going to have to tell them the whole story anyway, so why waste your breath by talking around the subject?" Draco said, interrupting him.

"Yeah, Potter; what's this codswallop Blaise is telling us about your parents?" called a voice from near the back; a seventh-year, Harry thought.

Harry had no idea how they had connected the story of his parents with Dumbledore.... But maybe he wasn't giving them enough credit. Given that the Potters *weren't* his parents, it wasn't that much of a leap of logic to think that Dumbledore had his hand in the pot, dirtying the waters.

Harry winced at having mixed his metaphors, even if just in his own thoughts. Wait a minute.... "Draco . . . have you been campaigning behind my back?"

"Campaigning for what, Harry?" Draco looked as innocent as an angel – which meant he was anything but.

"Oh, you are *so* going to get it tonight, Draco," Harry threatened.

Draco licked his lips, looking interested. "Get what?"

Harry's cheeks flushed, but he wasn't going to let Draco manipulate his way out of *this* one. He just gave the blond a meaningful look, letting Draco make of it what he would, and turned back to find a very interested group of teenagers eyeing him and Draco curiously. Harry's face grew brighter, but he ignored it and tried to carry on. "What do you need to know, to agree to an alliance with me?" he asked.

"Who are you?" a voice asked from the back. It was Daphne Greengrass. "You've been Harry Potter for five years...."

"Rather longer, or I'm bound to a child!" Harry heard Draco snark quietly. Harry had to fight to keep the smirk from his face.

". . .and now you're saying you're someone else. So who are you?" Daphne had finished, not hearing Draco's comment.

"I don't know what my real name is," Harry replied, still trying to suppress a grin, "but I've honoured the Potters, who did die in an attempt to keep me safe, by keeping at least a little of the name they gave me. However I've adopted the hyphenated names of both my father and sire. My name is Harald Myrddin Slytherin-Gryffindor."

There was silence, except for one disgusted-sounding "Pht!" It was impossible to tell where it came from.

"I think you had better tell them the whole story, Harry," Draco said, while glaring at their audience and trying to identify the scoffer.

Harry sighed, and began. "It turns out that Sirius Black found me in a stasis spell in a cave that was revealed after an earthquake collapsed the debris hiding the opening...."

It had been a long meeting, and even after answering all the questions he could, Harry still had to show them the test results Professor Snape had produced. A few diehards insisted on hearing from Professor Snape himself, but Harry told them that they would have to do so on their own, and at their own risk. Professor Snape had already stated that he didn't want to be bothered about this again. That deterred all but two. Harry shrugged. He'd warned them.

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Draco massaged Harry's shoulders, working the knots out that had developed during the meeting with the other Slytherins. He rather hated public speaking, and this had not been an open-minded group.

Blaise had told them that they would discuss what they had learned, and try to give them a decision the following day.

"Oh, that feels so good, Draco," Harry said, even as Draco's Quidditch-strengthened hands dug into his shoulders. It hurt, but the resulting relaxation of the muscles abated the continuous ache he would have had. His frustration level was still rather high, however. "Gods, I wish they'd just **open up!**" he said of his Housemates, although to be truthful they had come quite a way if they were willing to discuss options.

*"What was that, master?"* one of the snake guardians of the fireplace asked.

Under the influence of the pain and relief Harry was experiencing under Draco's hands, he didn't notice the change in language, and replied in the same tongue *"I said I want them to open up!"*

Of a sudden, there came grinding and scraping sounds from several areas in the room. Draco momentarily froze, and Harry jumped up from where he'd been sitting, drawing his wand as he did so. Draco was only half a second behind him.

But as they looked around, there were no attackers to be seen. What could be seen was that a bookcase had moved, revealing a room behind it. The wood storage cupboard had slid aside, showing a small, dark passage, and one of the sets of steps leading into the sunken room had also slid aside, revealing yet another set of steps, leading down.

"I think you just proved your theory about hidden things here, Harry," Draco joked with a hint of awe in his voice. "Just what the hell did you say, anyway?"

"Didn't you ask me to repeat...?" Harry stopped as realisation hit him. "No, you wouldn't have called me 'master'."

"Duecéd right, I wouldn't, but what are you.... Something asked you, in Parseltongue, to repeat what you said?"

"Quite likely, I'd say," Harry nodded, already peering into the passage that had opened up behind the wood bin. "I wasn't really paying attention."

Harry turned around and strode towards the entrance, stopping about five feet away from the wall. "Melchior!" he called.

The fountain, replicated on this side of the wall, but without the snake, rotated until the snake guardian statue was facing him. *"Yes, Master?"*

"What was all that about?"

The guardian did not try to feign ignorance. *"She tells us you may soon have need of every secret of the castle, but we could not reveal these without your order."*

"Harry?" Draco said, asking for an explanation.

Harry gave a wry grin. "They tricked me into ordering them to reveal the secrets, here," he revealed.

"Well, you weren't doing anything to find them on your own, were you?" Draco stated slyly.

Harry raised a brow at his fiancé. "Just whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Yours, but you *can* manage to put things off," Draco said with a grin.

Now it was Harry's turn to grin. "Like teaching you Parseltongue?" he asked, slowly advancing on Draco.

Draco now wore a puzzled frown. "But I thought you said...." His eyes widened. "Harry...." he said apprehensively.

"Yes, love?" Harry asked as he took Draco in his arms, and nuzzled his neck.

"You want to complete the bond?" Draco asked nervously.

Harry nodded, his expression more serious now as he looked into Draco's eyes. "Yes, love," he said.

Draco looked back into Harry's eyes for some time, weighing and sorting his emotions. He decided he loved Harry, but he wasn't ready for this. After a further few moments, he realised that he was scared. It was a big step. If he waited until he was comfortable with the idea, they might never complete the bond. The big question was, did he love Harry enough to forge ahead despite his fear? Slowly he nodded, and was rewarded when a look of joy suffused Harry's face, and Harry's lips claimed his.

Harry was all for heading for the bedroom right away, but Draco nixed that idea. "Shower first, Harry," he insisted. Not only did Harry smell of sweat after facing down a roomful of Slytherins, but Draco didn't want to take any chance of his own hygiene, after a long day, offending Harry. He wanted to be sure he was clean all over. And a hot shower might help him relax.

"You're right," Harry replied, becoming conscious of himself. He looked around at the open passages. "Those can wait until tomorrow," he said, indicating the openings to the blond.

*"Close the passages," he told Melchior. "I'll deal with them tomorrow."*

"Aren't you curious?" Draco asked him, even as the openings disappeared behind their camouflage.

"Weren't you the one who told me to put things in order of importance?" he asked in return. Upon receiving a nod from the blond, he said, "You're more important."

They had shared baths, and since Lilorienne had created it, a couple of showers, but it wasn't something they did all the time. Each of them had days where they just needed a bit more alone time than they usually had. That was not the case today. Draco had not been in the shower but a couple of minutes when he heard the door open and he felt Harry come up behind him.

Harry put his arms around Draco, moving up close to nuzzle the pale neck, his erection brushing Draco's arse. He felt Draco tense slightly, both physically and through their bond, but he also felt Draco fighting to relax, so he continued to nuzzle and kiss on his neck until he did.

"Nervous?" he asked softly.

"I don't do 'nervous'," Draco replied, leaning back into him, but he flinched a little as Harry's erection pressed into one butt cheek, before deliberately relaxing into it. He wasn't willing to admit his case of nerves, lest Harry decide to put off the moment. He had known from the start, of course, that Harry would top him. Their bond almost demanded it. But his training demanded that he should never yield to another. That conflict, plus the natural nervousness attached to first time intercourse had been at the base of his reticence. Now he was forcibly repressing his training. He wanted Harry, and this was needed in order to have him.

Harry let it go. This was not the time to bring the truth home. Instead he began to gently wash the blond, using no wash cloth or sponge, but only his hands. Slowly, Draco became truly relaxed under his touch, and started washing Harry.

Soon the physical sensations and sexual tension became too much, and Harry pressed Draco up against a wall. They kissed and rubbed against each other. Because they'd been resisting acting on their urges until they couldn't stand it any longer, it wasn't long before Draco came. Shortly thereafter, so did Harry.

Afterward, Harry was unhappy with himself. He knew he'd be able to become erect again fairly soon: that wasn't what he was concerned about. He'd lost control; let his lust control his actions. But he tried to hide his upset, and determined not to do so again.

He'd hidden his face against Draco's neck during this introspection so he'd give nothing away, distracting the blond by gently nuzzling, licking, and kissing his neck. Now he lifted his head and leaned his forehead against Draco's. "Love you," he murmured.

Draco didn't respond vocally, but tilted his head until their lips met, kissing his fiancé tenderly. "We've made ourselves a mess again, you know," he teased, his voice low. Draco had caught Harry's feelings through their bond and could guess at the cause, but Harry had resolved whatever it was quickly, so he let it go. Besides which, he was feeling far too good right now, to spoil it.

*'Maybe losing control wasn't so bad after all,'* Harry thought, seeing how relaxed Draco was (and observing his own more relaxed state).

After a thorough rinse they dried off, and went to bed. At first they just lay next to each other, shyly touching each other as though it were the first time, and occasionally sharing tender, closed mouth kisses. Their erections revived within minutes.

Eventually Draco pulled Harry closer, so their erections were pressed together. Harry continued the movement, rolling over on top of the blond. But still neither was willing to show the urgency that was building up within them.

Finally, Harry knew it was time to begin. He leaned up away from his fiancé to look him the eyes, repeatedly running one hand gently through Draco's hair. When he was sure he had his attention, he said, "I know you've read at least one of the books I brought home. Right?"

Draco nodded. "How did you know?" He thought he'd been very sly, and hadn't got caught.



Harry's cheeks tinted as he said, "I felt you had some alarm and embarrassment through our link, so I came looking to see if you were all right. I saw you reading it. I thought for sure you'd tease me about having them." The unasked question hung there.

Draco ignored it. He wasn't about to admit that he'd needed the education as well, although he was fairly sure Harry already knew that.

When it became evident that no explanation would be forthcoming, Harry forged ahead. "You know this first time isn't likely to be very comfortable?" This may not have been the best time to discuss the subject, but it was one that needed to be talked about.

Draco nodded. "I've been stretching myself," he offered shyly, his own cheeks ablaze, now.

Harry was relieved to hear that. He'd still need to make sure Draco was loose enough, but it wouldn't be a totally new experience for the blond. "Did you read about the positions?" he asked. Upon Draco's nod, he said, "It says the first time might be better if I take you from behind."

For some reason, Draco's mischievous side spoke up. "You'll be taking my behind, anyway."

Harry knew it was humour, but it seemed a strange time for it. He gave an appreciative little smirk anyway, then leaned down and gave Draco a short, fierce kiss before getting off Draco entirely. "Roll over, you blond git," he said affectionately.

Draco did so and waved his arse teasingly at Harry. It was either play, or panic. And he was too close to the latter. He grabbed his pillow, wrapping it up into a bundle against his chest.

"Up on your knees a bit, love," Harry directed.

Draco was doing his best not to think of what he was doing, or the picture he must present. He focused on feeling the sheets, and Harry's hands on him as he adjusted his position.

Harry, for his part, loved the picture that was being presented to him, and what it meant. It meant that Draco truly wanted to bond with him. It would have been the same, without any magic involved. He caressed Draco's body, carefully pressing the length of his erection along Draco's arse crack as he leaned forward to touch, caress, and hold as much of the blond as he could. He reached under his lover's body to rub Draco's nipples, caress the tight muscles of his stomach, and gently coddle the egg-shaped bollocks

hanging loosely in their sac. Finding Draco's nerves had caused his erection to flag, he gently encouraged it back to fullness.

Feeling Harry's hardness pressed into his arse, against his opening, if not yet demanding entrance from it, had brought home to Draco just how close he was to losing his virginity. He was scared, excited, and determined all at the same time. He hadn't noticed his wilting erection until he felt Harry's hand on it. It embarrassed him that it had happened, at the same time that Harry's ministrations excited him, making his thoughts and the case of nerves that had accompanied them recede into the background. "Do it, Harry," he urged throatily. Waiting for it to happen was torture. He wanted it over with. Not the experience – the waiting. Well, maybe the experience, too. He wasn't sure.

Draco felt Harry move away from him, but he was back in seconds.

Harry repositioned himself and opened the small bottle of oil he'd retrieved. Pouring a few drops on his fingers, he applied it to Draco's opening, which clenched spasmodically when he touched it. "Easy, love," he soothed, continuing his ministrations. It took long enough for Draco to relax that Harry's need fell to a more bearable level. He added a few more drops of oil, and slowly started applying more pressure, until suddenly one of his fingers slipped in. Draco gasped. Harry didn't remove the finger, but he stopped moving it.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked softly. He didn't think he could have hurt his bond mate, but he needed to be sure.

Draco nodded and then, afraid that Harry mightn't have seen him, quietly said, "Yes. It just surprised me."

"Let me know if it hurts, or you want me to stop, all right?"

Draco nodded again, although he privately determined that he wasn't going to go through this nerve-wracking experience again: he was going through with it *this* time. He thought of how gentle and caring Harry was being, and his attitude softened. He relaxed, putting more trust in Harry doing his best not to hurt him.

Feeling Draco relax, Harry tried slipping in another finger. It was tight, so he slowly worked his two fingers in and out until they were completely in, then started working them around, twisting then in different directions. Suddenly, Draco gasped.

"Draco?" Harry inquired.

"Mm. You touched something. It felt good."

Harry had forgotten about the prostate, being more concentrated on getting his lover's muscles relaxed. He mentioned it to Draco, who agreed.

"Do it again?" Draco requested.

Lilorienne relaxed, in a metaphysical sense. Despite everything, she had worried that the young blond man would refuse to mate with the king. That eventuality now seemed far less likely.

The relaxation process took no time at all after Harry found the small gland and started massaging it. Draco was making little noises, and didn't seem to notice when Harry added a third finger. He did notice, however, when Harry removed those fingers – and then he felt the head of Harry's well oiled erection at his opening.

"Remember what the book said, love," Harry told him. "Pushing out as I push in will help you relax those muscles." He didn't wait for a reply, but slowly started pushing at Draco's opening, relaxing back, then pushing again. He'd only done that three times before the head slipped in. He immediately stopped pushing, waiting for a signal from the young man under him.

Draco was panting as he restrained himself from crying out. Even with Harry's careful preparation of him, this invasion was stretching skin and muscles. It wasn't too bad though, and soon that 'stretchy' pain went away. "Okay," he said, giving Harry permission to continue. He was silently berating himself for only having tried stretching himself twice. It had seemed such a perverse exercise, and he'd felt so silly doing it, though. It didn't seem so silly or perverse any longer.

Every inch or two, Harry had to stop to allow Draco to relax and adjust, but eventually he was fully seated. "Okay?" he inquired.

Draco felt overly full. If he hadn't emptied his bowels before the shower, he would have thought he needed to use the loo. Harry felt so *big*! But he wasn't in pain, so, "I'm all right. Just...." It felt so awkward saying this – it was so clichè. But he needed the reassurance. "Just be gentle?"

In answer, Harry bent forward and softly kissed Draco's shoulder. Then he straightened back up, grasped Draco's hips, and slowly pulled part-way out before sliding home again; two, three, four times. He was feeling the pressure. He had taken so long to ensure Draco's comfort, and all the while his nerve endings had been being stimulated. He paused, letting the urgency die down.

Draco opened his eyes, curious. He had just started to feel comfortable with Harry in him.

"I didn't want it over so soon," Harry explained.

Draco's cheeks tinted, although he couldn't have told anyone why.

Harry looked down at his lover. "Are you okay?" he asked, tenderly.

Draco nodded shyly, but he was getting impatient. He gave a slight thrust up at the green-eyed young man above him.

Harry took the hint and again began thrusting into his mate, exerting all his willpower to restrain himself, and trying to pleasure his lover at the same time.

It was working. When Draco felt Harry's manhood again moving into and out of him, he also felt Harry's hardness massaging his prostate, which had the effect of stimulating him again to hardness. The initial discomfort of his penetration had made him wilt, although he had eventually found other pleasures in the stimulation he was getting. But now, with the revivification of his erection, he wanted to add that pleasure, as well. He reached back and started fondling himself, although his main attention was on the stimulation he was getting from Harry. He moaned. "Faster, Harry," he directed breathlessly, as he felt his need building.

Harry was only too happy to comply. He needed release.

Both young men were now sweaty, and their breaths were coming faster, and deeper.

Harry's thrusts were longer, deeper, and faster as his climax drew inevitably nearer.

Draco now had one hand in front of him as he rose up a bit and braced himself, pushing back into Harry's thrusts, stroking himself harder, and faster. And then he was there, and over the edge. His arms collapsed under him. The only reason he didn't fall flat was that he had no room to do so. He was vaguely aware of Harry uttering a low yell, and a pulsing in his rectum. Shortly after, he felt Harry's weight fall on him, and his knees finally slid out from under him as the world gently slipped away from him.

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## Chapter Sixteen

Harry wasn't in him when Draco woke up, but Harry *was* tangled up with him, and half on top of him. It was warm, but as a blanket Harry was rather heavy. "Get off me!" he moaned. When there was no immediate response, Draco pushed up with one hand, levering Harry off him. He felt a strong wave of disappointment that was not his. Without thinking, he responded to it. "Well, you were heavy!"

*'And as a bed, you're rather lumpy,'* Harry thought muzzily to himself.

*'I'm not lumpy. And you seemed comfortable enough,'* Draco replied mildly in his own mind. He hadn't realised that Harry hadn't spoken aloud, but he didn't want to ruin the comfortable mood he was in by allowing that remark to insult him, so he didn't say anything that might provoke his lover.

Harry didn't want to fight – not right after last night, anyway. "You were warm," he said. Then Draco's words percolated through his sleep laden mind. "Wait a mo'...." he said, raising his head to look at Draco, "I didn't say you were lumpy."

"I heard you," Draco mumbled into his pillow, too sleepy to catch that Harry had replied to something he hadn't said.

Lilorienne *had* said they'd be able to hear each other.... Harry laid back down again, and decided to test it. *'Can you hear me now?'* he thought.

"I'm not deaf, you know," Draco replied, mildly annoyed with Harry's games.

"I didn't say that out loud: I only thought it," Harry said quietly with a smile, anticipating Draco's reaction. He wasn't disappointed.

Draco's eyes flew open, and he lay silent for a few seconds, absorbing the impact of that statement; then the blond became a whirlwind of motion as he levered himself around and into a sitting position to face his fiancé. "What?" he exclaimed.

Harry just nodded at him and thought *'It's true'* at him.

Draco was staring at Harry's lips, which hadn't moved. "I heard that," he said in awed disbelief. He threw himself back down onto the bed, then caught Harry's eyes again.

Harry just grinned at him, although he was going through some rapid mental adjustments, himself.

They lay there staring at each other. As the silence stretched on, the tension became a bit uncomfortable. "Well, let's go get some breakfast," Harry said briskly, bouncing out of bed, and breaking the strained tableau.

"Oomph!" Draco grunted, feeling a twinge in his arse as he moved to get out of bed. He wasn't obeying Harry, he told himself, he was just trying to distract himself. "My bum's sore," he complained.

*'Still?'* Lilorienne inquired.

Harry felt a wave of affection for his lover, remembering last night, but cocked his head, perplexed by Lilorienne's question. *'What do you mean, "still"?' he asked.* Draco was listening with intense interest for the answer to that question as well, even as he absorbed the fact that he was actually hearing the voice that Harry had been talking to for so long.

Lilorienne's 'voice' was a bit hesitant as she answered, but they would find out quite soon anyway. *'It's been a week.'*

"We've missed the Ball?" Draco exclaimed out loud.

*'I'm afraid so,'* was the reply.

"Damn it, Harry!" Draco yelled, rounding on his fiancé. "That was going to be our introduction of you to the student body!"

Harry dragged himself out of his shock at the time lapse. "They know me already," he said, replying with a grin, and deliberately misunderstanding. He wasn't quite fast enough to avoid the backhanded blow that Draco aimed at him, but it didn't wipe the grin off his face, either. Still, an unexplained week of sleep worried him.

Draco glared at him. Then a look of consternation crossed his face. "What caused us to sleep for a week?" he asked, unintentionally asking the question Harry was pondering.

*'Your bonding was much stronger than I anticipated it would be,'* Lilorienne replied. *'Our kind slept no more than an hour after consummating their bonds.'*

*'And?'* Harry prompted, sensing more.

*'I did not reveal to you all that the bond would accomplish,' Lilorienne revealed, her 'voice' tentative. 'You, Draco, will be able to bear children. The process has begun. In a few months you will have grown all the necessary structures to bear a child. However,—"*

"What?" Draco screeched.

*'I said, that you will-'*

"I bloody well heard you!" Draco yelled. "What 'structures'?" he went on, his voice still dangerous, but now in a more normal range.

*'A womb, eggs, and so on,'* she informed him.

*'A vagina?'* Draco asked, a hint of fear creeping into his tone.

*'No.'*

*'Then how....'* As curious as he now was, Draco was too embarrassed to finish that question.

Harry had a lot of questions himself, but Draco was asking most of them for him, so he was content to just sit on the bed and listen.

*'You will be able to be impregnated in the same way you bonded,'* Lilorienne explained.

Harry and Draco blushed at the mention of their bonding, but they didn't interrupt.

*'When you have become pregnant, your body will modify itself as needed to safely carry and give birth to the child. A temporary birth canal will develop in the last month of pregnancy. When it is time to give birth, your perineum will split open to give egress to the child. Bloody, but not dangerous.'*

Draco felt a bit ill, but buried his reaction in anger. He turned furiously to Harry. "Did you know about this?"

"No," Harry replied, his dumbfounded expression lending credence to his words. He loved children and had wanted one or more of his own, but due to his sexual orientation had never thought it would happen. This news gave him mixed feelings, however. He was happy at the prospect of being able to have his own children, but it sounded as though it would be a great strain on Draco.

*'I'm sorry. I meant to tell you,' Lilorienne said, 'but the time never seem to be right, and then you decided to consummate the bond. I was afraid that if I told you at that time, that he would refuse to bond.'*

"Bloody right, I would have," Draco snarled.

"Would you really?" Harry asked, his hurt evident in his voice.

Draco turned to him, still angry, but also feeling a little guilty. "I don't know, Harry," Draco said earnestly, and feeling a bit angry with himself as he felt tears brimming in his eyes, "but damn it, I wasn't given a choice in the matter!"

Harry knew exactly how frustrating that could be. After all, that was why he had broken away from Dumbledore: he was tired of being manipulated to the point of having no choices. He was about to share that with Draco when he was interrupted.

*'There is more,' Lilorienne said, breaking in.*

*'What else?'* Harry asked, with trepidation.

*'It seems the magic of the elven bond, along with your own magics, have combined, and you may start showing the physical traits of the Elfin kind.'*

Harry and Draco frowned.

*'In what ways?'* Draco finally inquired, resignedly.

*'Your ears may get more pointed, your features more refined, you may become stronger, your reflexes faster, and your senses might become sharper. You may get one, or more, or none of these.'*

"Oh, gods," Draco groaned, his hands going to his ears. "My beautiful looks!"

"May not change at all, or could become even more beautiful," Harry soothed.

Draco shot him a look, but was grateful for the words. But now he needed a distraction. Fortunately, his bladder gave him one. "I need to piss," he said flatly, moving to get off the bed. Again his backside twinged, reminding him, among other things, of the beginning of this conversation. This time, however, he ignored it and made his way to the toilet. He was aware of Harry following not too far behind.

By mutual unspoken agreement, they ignored what they had learned for now, and went about their morning business; showering, cleaning their teeth, and dressing for the



day. A thorough inspection in the wide, full length mirror showed that there were no changes, yet. But although it might have been Harry's imagination, he thought that perhaps their features may have altered, slightly.

"*Tempus*," Harry incanted. Upon learning the time, a quarter of ten, they decided to avail themselves of the services of a house elf and get some breakfast. After all, it had been a week since they had eaten.

"Dobby," Harry called.

Upon the house elf's appearance, and after hearing their request, they were informed that the headmaster was most anxious to speak with them. In fact, they were informed that the headmaster was furious. They decided they weren't going to face the man on an empty stomach.

"Dobby is being very sorry to bring bad news," the elf informed them, looking woebegone.

They were halfway through a simple breakfast of coddled eggs, toast, orange juice and coffee, and Draco had just adjusted his seat for the tenth time trying to find a comfortable position, when he snarled, "If it's been a bloody week, why in blazes is my arse still sore!"

Harry blushed. "You are?" he asked.

Draco blushed, as well. "Um.... Well.... Never mind." He wished, now, that he hadn't spoken up.

"I could heal it for you, if you like," Harry offered.

Draco pictured himself presenting his arse to Harry to be healed, and the colour of his cheeks deepened. "Thank you, but I'll manage," he muttered.

"You're sure?"

Draco nodded. Besides which, he had other motivations.

*'I can only surmise that your physical and magical energies were too busy following the dictates of the bond to completely heal such a small amount of friction damage,'* Lilorienne offered.

"Please let me heal it, Draco," Harry requested, feeling guilty for causing his lover discomfort.

Draco, thoroughly embarrassed, looked down at his plate. "No," he denied, shyly.

"But...."

The blond interrupted. "Harry...." Draco couldn't believe he was going to say what he was about to say. "Harry," he began again, "I might complain, and I might be sore, but it reminds me of . . . our bonding." Draco's cheeks were blazing, and he found he couldn't raise his eyes to meet Harry's. He hoped that Harry wouldn't catch the implication – that he'd enjoyed it. Well, after the initial discomfort had passed, anyway.

After a few moments, he realised that this was not his normal mode of interaction. Normally he would have told Harry to sod off and mind his own business. But it only seemed natural now to be honest with his mate and husband to be. He was a bit chagrined with this change, but after a bit of thought, found he didn't mind it so much after all.

Harry was both very pleased and very embarrassed by Draco's confession, and its implications. Not knowing what he could say, he said nothing. He leaned over and softly kissed Draco's cheek before going back to eating his meal, feeling oddly shy with his lover and fiancé.

Harry's reaction pleased the blond, and put him more at ease. They finished their breakfast in silence.

*"The man you named 'headmaster' is at the entrance, master, accompanied by the greasy one,"* Melchior announced.

*"Thank you, Melchior,"* Harry replied.

"It seems the headmaster and Professor Snape have decided to pay us a visit, since we decided to eat first," Harry informed Draco.

"Impatient, are they?" Draco inquired insouciantly, with a smirk.

Raising an eyebrow at his fiancé, Harry grinned. "Well, we *have* been absent for a week," Harry commented cheekily. "You don't suppose Dumbledore's worried, do you?" He'd never believe that Snape cared all that much.

Draco laughed at Harry's attitude.

Harry wasn't as concern-free as he pretended to be, but he didn't really care about Dumbledore's opinion – he just didn't want any trouble right now. Rising from the table, he made his way to the entrance. "Open," he ordered.

Upon opening the 'door', for lack of a better word, he saw both men, who immediately rushed the opening, but came to an abrupt halt when the guardian hissed and leaned threateningly at them.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but your demeanour must appear threatening to the guardian," Harry said, repressing a grin.

Indeed, the expression on Snape's face, at least, was nothing less than murderous. Dumbledore's stern expression softened to amusement, and although there was a twinkle in his eye, Harry wasn't fooled. That twinkle was more of a glint. Still, he knew he couldn't avoid meeting with them, so he stepped back and to the side, saying "Won't you come in?" He ushered them to the sunken living room, thankful that he had made sure the openings to the hidden rooms and passages were closed the night before. Actually it was the week before, he reminded himself.

When they were seated and Draco had joined him on the sofa he had deposited himself upon, Harry said, "I assume this visit is in honour of our week-long absence?"

"And where in the frozen hells of Niffleheim *have* you been?" Snape demanded.

"That is no way to speak to our pupils, Severus, although the question is a good one," Dumbledore said, his gaze upon the young men steely and cold, despite his affable expression.

"Asleep," Draco replied offhandedly.

Harry tried to hide his smirk behind a hand, but was a split second too late.

"It figures you would find this funny, Potter," Snape snapped.

"Slytherin-Gryffindor," Draco reminded him quietly.

"I wouldn't care if his surname was Ambrosius," Snape snarled at the blond. "I want to—" He was interrupted.

"Slytherin-Gryffindor?" Dumbledore inquired.

"Since I am unaware of my true surname, that is as close as I could get," Harry told the old man.

"Your surname is in the books as Potter, and until that is changed, you will be addressed as 'Mister Potter'," Dumbledore stated.

The headmaster's commanding tones regarding something so personal made Harry furious, and he developed a sudden, intense urge to speak to the Sorting Hat. The next thing he knew he was tumbling from the sitting position he'd had on the couch, to the floor of the headmaster's office. Recovering quickly from his surprise, Harry clambered to his feet and went to the Sorting Hat's cupboard. Opening the door, he spoke to the headwear. "What is my name?"

"Ah, Mister Potter," the Hat said, in greeting.

"Wrong!" Harry exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The Potters were never my parents. My name is Harald Myrddin Slytherin-Gryffindor."

"Ah, Professor Dumbledore did mention something of that sort many years ago," the Sorting Hat remarked. "More along the lines of you needing a name, more than anything else," it said. "So you've decided upon a name for yourself, have you?"

"I took the surname of both of my blood parents, keeping the given names the Potters placed on me," Harry explained.

The Hat was silent, and somehow it was giving Harry the impression that it was staring at him skeptically.

"I wasn't even adopted by the Potters," Harry said, "just given into their care."

"And the headmaster is aware of this?" the hat inquired.

"Very much so," Harry replied truthfully of his last statement. It was hardly his fault if the Sorting Hat was asking about anything else.

"Very well then, Slytherin-Gryffindor it shall be," the Sorting Hat cheerily declared.

Harry grinned triumphantly. With the Sorting Hat's decision, he knew the books would now reflect it. Now he wondered if he could return to his own sitting room the same way he'd come. Unfortunately, he didn't know how he'd done it in the first place. He decided to just try willing himself there. Nothing happened. He pictured the room

carefully, and tried again. In the next moment he was standing in the middle of the sitting room in front of a very startled Draco. But the two older men were absent.

"Where are Snape and Dumbledore?" Harry asked.

"Where were you?" Draco demanded, sitting forward with a look of angry determination on his face.

Harry grinned. "Speaking with the Sorting Hat," he replied. "I think the headmaster will find that my name is now recorded correctly."

"You scared me half to death! You know that, don't you?"

Harry's face fell. "It's not like I was planning on it, you know," he said, defending himself. "I just wanted so badly to speak to the Sorting Hat, and then I was there."

Draco frowned. "You have to have better control than that. It could become a problem if you just pop off every time you want to talk to someone."

*'Lilorienne, can you help with that?'* Harry asked.

*'I can help train you, yes,'* Lilorienne replied, *'although it would probably be better if you were trained by one of my kind whom you could actually see.'*

"They still exist?" Draco asked, startled. The only elves he knew of were House Elves: but Lilorienne had been of the High Elves, who looked almost human – the same way that a thoroughbred racing horse looked almost like a draft animal.

*'I certainly hope so,'* Lilorienne said worriedly, *'although I admit to neither having seen nor heard from them for over two hundred years.'*

*'We'll have to do some research, Lilorienne,'* Harry said, *'but we'll definitely look into it.'*

Turning to his lover, Harry said *'I think that when we're speaking with Lilorienne, we should do so mentally. Otherwise we might slip and speak aloud in front of other people, and have them think we've gone barmy,'* Harry 'said'.

*'Right,'* Draco acknowledged.

"You never did say where Snape and Dumbledore went off to," Harry reminded the blond.

Draco shot Harry a look of disgust. "Looking for you, of course."

Harry gave a wry grin, but had to acknowledge that his fiancé had a point. He should have known that disappearing like that would have panicked the two men. But then, he hadn't meant to go anywhere, at all. However, the fact that the two men *had* panicked, gave him pause. "So why didn't you panic as well?" he asked.

Harry received a somewhat shame faced look from his lover. "I did, for a minute," Draco replied. "I was going to go haring off after you as well, but they ordered me to stay here. I'd just remembered that you were supposed to have got the ability to pop off like a house elf after our bonding, before you popped in again."

Harry grinned, and started chuckling.

"It's not bloody funny, you git!" Draco complained, aiming a blow at Harry's arm.

This time, however, Harry was able to dodge it. He then ducked in, tackled Draco to the floor and attacked the blond's neck, mouthing and chewing gently on it, growling and miming being vicious all the while. Draco was laughing and trying to fight him off of course, even while trying to maintain his pique with his bond mate, but it did him little good. He was laughing too hard to be effective.

When Harry pushed up from his pastime, he was holding Draco's hands above his now pouting lover's head. He grinned down into Draco's gray eyes and then glanced at the usually pale, but now reddened neck to admire his handiwork. He lost his grin, and his eyes went wide. "Draco," he said slowly, and then stopped. Instead, he took hold of his lover's arm and looked at where the slave mark should have been, Draco looking at him curiously as he did so. "Draco," he said again, "your slave marks are gone."

"What? Are you sure?" Draco asked, sitting up suddenly and almost hitting Harry in the face with his head. After looking at his arm, he grinned at his fiancé. "Let me up," he demanded.

Harry did, and Draco went straight for the nearest mirror, checking his neck. Upon finding it, also, free of any mark save that caused by their recent play, he turned and jumped into Harry's arms, kissing him wildly. "Oh, Harry, I love you!" he exclaimed giddily. He froze, then let loose and stepped back, his eyes darting to the floor in sudden self-conscious embarrassment. Draco had been trained his whole life to not show emotion. Now he had not only shown it, but enthusiastically declared it. They had both said it before, but that was before . . . well, *that*. Before he'd let Harry . . . fuck him. That word rather made what they'd done sound dirty though, and although he wouldn't

have called it beautiful, what they'd done had felt right – natural – between them; not dirty at all.

Harry reached down and took Draco's hands in his own. Looking at the top of Draco's head, the blond hair obscuring his lover's face, he said, "I love you, too." Seeing that Draco still did not know how to react, he drew his mate into his arms and was pleased to feel Draco's arms embrace him, as well.

It was at that point that Dobby again popped into the room. "I is being sorry, Masters, but Dumbly is giving Dobby orders that you is to come to his office."

Harry laughed into Draco's neck at the timing, then murmured, "Bloody old git; still interfering at the most inconvenient times." He raised his head, smiling at Draco and said, "Well, let's go get this over with, then."

Draco was still embarrassed, but he was relieved as well that Harry hadn't taken his confession badly. Of course he was just a bit ticked off with Dumbledore, but the interruption had broken up what may have become an awkward scene. He had no idea how he would have gracefully been able to leave Harry's arms.

Harry solved that problem by taking Draco's hand as they parted, and pulling him for a few steps until the blond caught up to his speed.

"Do I make the same noise as the house elves when I pop in and out?" Harry asked as they walked.

"Perfectly silent," Draco informed him.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Not house elf magic, then."

*'House elves are a different species. We were of the Thilorien,'* Lilorienne revealed.

Harry wished mightily that Hermione were still a friend. She would have loved researching what they had learned that day, and she was so good at it. He and Draco would have to do the work instead.

They arrived at Dumbledore's office only to find that, once again, the old man had neglected to give them the password.

"Well, I guess I could pop up and tell him to open up, or I could try to take us both like Lilorienne said I could, but I think it's time to teach Dumbledore a lesson." So

saying, Harry took Draco's hand and started wandering in the direction of the Great Hall.

"He's going to be angry, you know," Draco said with a smirk. But he was happy that Harry was not allowing the headmaster to treat him with less than respect.

"I know, but if he wants to talk to me in his office, then he will provide the password so that I can get in," Harry replied. "As I've said before, I refuse to play his guessing games any longer."

It was over an hour later before Snape found them sitting under a tree, looking out over the lake.

"Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor," Snape began with an ominous tone in his voice, "do you now feel yourself so superior to the headmaster that you can ignore his summons?"

"Not at all, Professor Snape," Harry replied pleasantly. "We went as soon as we received his summons. However when we got there, there was no one to meet us, and we hadn't been given the password."

"It didn't occur to you to merely wait?"

"Did he really want to talk to me, or is he playing head games?" Harry asked in his turn. "One would think that if we were expected, there would have been someone waiting for us, or a password provided."

Snape found himself agreeing with the boy – no, young man – despite himself. "Nevertheless, he *is* the headmaster, and respect must be shown him," the potion master replied. "In this case, Your Majesty, that includes not wandering away on your own."

The use of his title, not to mention from whom it issued, rather startled Harry, but hiding his reaction as best he could, he nodded and leisurely got to his feet, then helped Draco to his – a courtesy, rather a needed action. "I take it that he still wants to talk to us?"

"He's going to try to get you out of the Slytherin suite," the potions master told him.

That Snape offered that piece of unsolicited information was a surprise, too. The information itself was yet another. "What do you suggest?" Harry inquired. If the man was going to be helpful in offering information, then perhaps he would be willing to offer advice, as well.



The potions master glanced at Harry's calm profile, then made his decision. "Although Albus is the headmaster and holds many positions of power in the wizarding world, he does not own Hogwarts. He does necessarily have power over most of the interior and grounds, but certain rooms in the castle are deemed independent; those rooms including the royal suite and the Founder's suites. Of the five suites, you are entitled to enter three of them."

"Three?" Harry inquired.

"Think, Harry," Draco said, entering the conversation, "Slytherin, Gryffindor, and the royal suite?"

"Exactly," Snape said approvingly. "I have also done some research. Insofar as I have been able to ascertain, other than you yourself, there are no direct descendants still alive that can enter any of the three you have access to."

"Except Voldemort," Harry corrected. "He's the heir of Slytherin, remember." *And since I'm not official, I don't yet have access to the royal suite, either,* Harry thought to himself, but he didn't think his Head of House would appreciate him pointing that out.

"A distant relative, I'm sure," Snape replied, "but it's a point. I trust you have taken precautions?"

"I have," Harry replied. He had informed Melchior that none save he and Draco were to be allowed entrance unless they were specifically and personally invited within the guardian's hearing. That did not apply to the Hogwarts house elves who had work to do there, however. But now that Snape had mentioned it, Harry thought he should probably have the guardians attack immediately, should Voldemort ever appear at or in the Slytherin suite. They would probably be destroyed, but they would be anyway, for blocking the so-called 'Dark Lord'. Better that they should inflict any damage they could.

The professor remained silent, hoping that Harry would expand on his answer. However, such was not forthcoming.

"Honey bears," Snape said to the gargoyle when they arrived at the headmaster's office. The gargoyle leapt aside and a revolving staircase arose from the floor. A short trip up the staircase, and the professor knocked on the headmaster's door.

"Come in, gentlemen," the headmaster invited in a serious tone. "Have a seat. May I offer you tea; a lemon sherbet?"

Everyone having refused his offer, the old man settled back in his chair, folded his hands over his sternum, and peered at Harry over the rims of his glasses. "I believe we have a problem," Dumbledore said. "For an entire week you have been unreachable. For all we knew, you could have been dead, dying, or in dire need of medical aid. That snake guardian of yours ignored our presence altogether. Nor could we affect an entrance with any opening spells. That is an intolerable situation."

Harry looked back at the old man coolly. "If there had been need of aid, than the proper person would have been notified," Harry replied. "The house elves have access when needed, as you well know, since you sent Dobby in to inform us of your wishes. In fact you had to have known that we were all right, or you would have had someone camped outside the entrance to our rooms."

An idea popped into his brain. "Did you try to have the house elves remove us?" Looking at the old man, he was surprised to see a hint of colour in Dumbledore's cheeks. "You did!" Harry grinned. "And they must have refused. Did they give a reason?"

Professor Dumbledore ignored Harry's question as he leaned forward, putting his forearms on his desk, with his hands linked. "I'm afraid that having house elves report your welfare is not enough. Your well-being is too important to entrust to an elf. I believe it would be best if you were to move into a more accessible set of rooms."

*'Lilorienne, do you have any control over the house elves?'* Harry inquired.

*'I'm afraid not,'* Lilorienne replied.

Harry would have to talk to the house elves himself.

Harry smiled slightly as he thought that there was at least one elf with whom he felt entirely safe leaving his welfare. And it wasn't Dobby. Although Dobby was entirely faithful, the elf's methods left a lot to be desired.

He leaned back in his chair, letting his hands hang over the end of its arms. "I happen to disagree, Headmaster," Harry replied.

"The subject is not open to discussion, Mister Potter," the old man replied. "You will move tonight."

Harry's stomach was clenching and his hands were damp, but he was the picture of calm equanimity. "I'm afraid you haven't the power to do that, Professor Dumbledore. You see, for all intents and purposes, I own this school. And I remind you again that my surname is not Potter."

The headmaster shot a sharp glance at his potions master, whose face was a blank mask, and then looked back to Harry. "And how do you come to that conclusion, young man?"

Harry cocked his head at the old man, smiled mockingly, and said, "Which? My name, or that I own the school?"

"Don't mock me, young man," the headmaster replied severely.

"I am the descendant, actually the son, of two of the founders of this school, and the only member of the royal family left alive," Harry replied, now as serious as the man seated in front of him. "That means that I inherit both the school and crown – unless you can show me where the school was signed over to anyone else." Seeing defeat in Dumbledore's face, Harry continued. "I have no plans for the school at this time, and I have no interest in administrating it, but I will not be moved out of my rooms. However, to ease your mind I will set up a way to inform you, in a way that is not dependent upon Draco's or my ability to do so, if we are in need of succour or medical aid."

"And that would be?"

"House elves, of course." Lilorienne could also have the portraits alert someone, or use any one of half a dozen other methods, but Harry wanted to keep Lilorienne secret until she said otherwise.

The headmaster sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "You may go, Mister Potter," he said.

"I think if you check your books, Headmaster, you will find that my name has been changed in them to Slytherin-Gryffindor," Harry said as he rose. He smirked as he saw the pained expression on the old man's face. Professor Snape and Draco followed him out.

"Well done," Snape said, "although, perhaps, you could have gone a bit easier on him."

"And why, may I ask, did I have to be there?" Draco complained. "You didn't need my input, at all."

"Moral support," Harry replied, leaning tiredly on the man he loved. The strain of that meeting had really sapped his energy.

Draco, belatedly feeling his mate's state through their link, remained silent.

"By the way," their Head of House said, "a package arrived for you yesterday, Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor, from Hogsmeade. A bit on the heavy side."

Harry and Draco looked at each other, a rising excitement in their eyes. "From the jewellers?" Draco asked.

"I didn't look at it that closely, gentlemen," Professor Snape replied with a slight sneer.

"When would be a good time for us to pick it up?" Harry inquired.

"I'm on my way there now," Snape replied.

On their way to the dungeons, Blaise Zabini, accompanied by a few other Slytherins, ran into them. "We need to talk, Pot- Harry," he said, correcting himself, his attitude negligent.

"We're a bit busy at the moment, Blaise," Draco said, impatiently.

"We can set up a meeting at supper, if you like," Harry offered.

"That will do," Blaise agreed, now trying to hide his curiosity. A couple of his companions showed theirs nakedly.

A few minutes later, in Professor Snape's office, they were looking at the package. It was the right size, the right weight, and it *was* from the jewellers. Harry turned to their head of house. "Professor, would you do us the honour of witnessing as we exchange the symbols of our troth?"

"I beg your pardon?" the clearly startled professor inquired.

Instead of replying, Harry opened the package, lifted the lid of an ornate wooden box, and lifted out one of the objects from the box' felt lined interior, handed it to Draco, and then took up the other. A look of understanding came over the professor's face.

"For a ceremony such as this, even as simple as it is, the more people observing it, the better," Snape advised him, interrupting their happy scrutiny of the objects.

Looking at Draco for confirmation, Harry saw the blond nod. He sighed. He really would have preferred it to be a private thing but understood that, in his position, such important ceremonies required that he give up his privacy. He nodded.

"At supper, then?" he asked Draco.

"Unless we wanted to take out an announcement in the Daily Prophet and do it in the middle of Diagon Alley," Draco replied with a smirk.

Harry shuddered. "No, the Great Hall will do, thank you," he replied.

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A/N: As always, although not often enough, I thank my betas, Phoenix and Keikokin. I would also like to thank everyone who leaves thoughtful comments about my stories. I don't reply to them in the chapters, but if you leave me a way to email you, I do usually reply to them. Same goes for questions.

## Chapter Seventeen

"You know, Draco," Harry said musingly, later that day, "I've been thinking. It's rather strange that the Ministry always knew when I did magic. They can't be able to trace every wand, or they'd be able to track down Death Eaters whenever they commit a crime. So how did they always know when a spell was cast at the Dursley's? It had to have been built into Dumbledore's wards, don't you think? But it wasn't just at the Dursley's, either. It seems to be connected to my magic. So maybe it's not the wards: maybe it's my wand? Or both? Do you know how to check for monitoring spells?" Harry asked, abruptly turning to Draco.

A bit startled by Harry's sudden action, Draco looked at him, then slowly shook his head. "But it makes sense," he said. "We could find a revealing spell in the library, if you like," Draco suggested.

"I think we should; it might become imperative," Harry replied. "But not today," he declared decidedly.

"So those times that I got into trouble with the Ministry can probably also be laid at Dumbledore's feet," Harry mused. "Nobody else has had enough access to my wand, and he created the wards at the Dursleys." He was getting increasingly angry. "And then he waltzes in and 'rescues' me from the big, bad Ministry. I can't believe the *gall* of the man!"

Draco leaned in and put his hand on Harry's shoulder. He didn't say anything at first, but he was quite pleased. Harry was finally seeing what the Slytherins had always known; that Dumbledore was a manipulative old coot. It didn't matter if Harry's speculations were true or not. Harry had become suspicious enough of the old man to believe him capable of it. "That doesn't make the danger he put you in from the Ministry any the less," Draco replied, feeding Harry's suspicions and rubbing a little salt in the wounds.

"That's true," Harry replied irritably. "Fudge would gladly have broken my wand, or put me in Azkaban."

"But Dumbledore made sure you were very grateful, didn't he?" Draco replied, with a secretive little smirk.

"Oh, yes," Harry replied sarcastically. But Draco had gone a little too far. Harry recognized what the blond was doing, and it had broken his angry mood, amusing him

instead. "And you're not too bad at the manipulation game either," he remarked, with a grin.

Draco blushed, chagrined that he'd been caught at his game. He hid his face in Harry's neck. "Let's not think of all that right now," he said, trying to change the subject. "Think about standing up in front of the student body this evening."

Harry gave Draco a light whack upside the head. "You prat," he said, "that's why I was thinking of other things; I was trying to forget about that!"

"Hey! Watch the hair!" Draco remarked, but then invalidated his supposed snit by moving his head onto Harry's shoulder and starting to snigger. "Getting nervous, Harry?" he asked slyly, ignoring his own case of butterflies in the stomach in favour of twitting his lover.

"Aren't you?"

Draco sobered, and nodded. "At least it's a short ceremony," he said with relief.

"We just put them on each other?"

Again Draco nodded. "But we can't just leave afterward," he said regretfully, "We have to stand there and accept their accolades. At least that's what is supposed to happen. That we're bonded is one thing; I have no idea how they'll react to our engagement. Most of Slytherin will likely be all right, especially in light of the fact that they're wanting to ally themselves with you. The fact that you're no longer a Gryffindor will help."

"With Slytherin, perhaps, but it's definitely a minus with Gryffindor," Harry replied, with a sigh. He really did miss his friends sometimes. They were a bit much to have to live with all the time, but they could be fun once in a while. Hermione's behaviour seemed so out of character for her; and while he missed the easy camaraderie he'd had with Ron, the redhead had turned on him one too many times. Even if they could become friends again, he'd never be able to trust Ron as he once had. Fun-loving Seamus, shy Neville, fiery Ginny . . . all had carved out a small niche in his heart, but he knew they had seen his re-Sorting as a betrayal of their House.

They settled into a brooding silence. Finally, Harry shook himself. "What the hell are we doing sitting around like a couple of Gloomy Gerties? Public or no public, it's a happy day!" he exclaimed, trying to shake off the mood they'd fallen into, and bouncing to his feet. "I know!" he announced excitedly. "Why don't we explore our secret passages?"

Going quickly to the bookcase, Harry said, "*Open up.*" Draco was there before the hidden door had fully opened. Behind it was a well-appointed, if ancient, potions lab. Draco was delighted. Fortunately the needs of potions brewing hadn't changed much over the centuries, although the techniques and potions themselves had changed dramatically, becoming very much more sophisticated.

What made Harry happy about the room were a couple of porthole-type hinged windows, most likely installed to vent out potions fumes. Now Hedwig would be able to visit him when she wanted to, rather than he having to try to make time to make the long trek up to the owlery.

Exploring the room, Draco found some ancient potions books, most of which were hopelessly outdated, but a couple of which were quite rare and valuable. The supplies closet would need to be restocked, of course. Most of the ingredients in it had turned to dust or had long lost their magical properties. But again, not everything was useless. Unicorn horn, ground manticore tail, basilisk eggshell, and other such rare, 'hard' ingredients would be closely hoarded and used only as necessary. It was going to be a lot of work to get this lab back into working order, but Draco was almost chortling with glee.

Seeing this, Harry slipped up behind him and put his arms around the blond's waist. "I'm sorry, love. You've really missed all this, haven't you?"

Draco sobered a bit, although he was still smiling. "You have no idea, Harry. But then, you always were next to useless at potions."

There was no malice in the words, so Harry merely replied "It would have helped to have a lecturer that didn't hate me."

There was little Draco could say to that, so he only nodded.

"Or Slytherins that didn't sabotage even my poor efforts," Harry added, slyly.

Draco stiffened slightly. "I didn't—" He was interrupted by his fiancé's low chuckle. "Prat," he said sulkily, realising he'd been successfully teased.

"D'you think we have time to check out another before we get ready for supper?" Harry asked. "Or would you rather look this place over more closely?"

Draco would have really preferred to stay and look over those rare books and ingredients more closely, but he was curious about the other two secret passages as well, and he knew Harry would probably be bored to tears, here. On any other day he might



have followed his own dictates, but this evening they'd be doing an ancient engagement ritual only ever practised by the high aristocracy, and he didn't want Harry to be fretting over it, as he'd do if he weren't distracted. "It'll be here later," he said. "It's been here for over a thousand years, after all, and I'm curious to see where the other two lead, as well."

Carefully replacing the ancient tome he'd been perusing in the bookcase, they exited the lab, and Harry closed it again.

"It's going to become a right pain having to have you open and close that for me all the time," Draco observed.

"I'm sure we can figure something out," Harry said. "Likely all I have to do is order everything to work for you, and only you, without the use of Parseltongue."

Draco perked up. "Would you?" he asked, trying not to seem too eager.

Harry didn't reply directly: instead, he addressed the guardian. "*Melchior, I'd like for everything in these rooms, including the secret passages, to work for Draco with or without the use of Parseltongue - provided he is not controlled or otherwise coerced,*" Harry added as an afterthought. He loved and trusted Draco, but even the most trustworthy of people could be forced to do things against their will, with the right methods.

"*As you say, Master,*" Melchior replied.

"I swear you're going to become a proper Slytherin yet, Harry," Draco said, grinning.

"You understood that?" Harry asked, startled.

"Not a bit of it!" Draco admitted cheerfully. "I 'heard' you say it. Evidently even when you're speaking Parseltongue, you're thinking in English."

"Did you 'hear' Melchior's response as well?" Harry asked, curious.

The blond's features turned rueful. "No," he admitted. "That was just a short hiss."

"So you can 'hear' it when I think it, but you can't 'hear' my understanding of it," Harry mused. Not able to find a useful side for that, since they could talk mind to mind anyway, Harry shrugged it aside. "Do you want the honours?" he asked, gesturing at the sitting room steps.

Grinning, Draco said, "Open," making a grandiloquent gesture as he commanded the passage under the steps to be revealed. When the steps slid aside, he smirked at Harry,

then started forward. He drew his wand and was about to cast 'Lumos', when a soft glow appeared in the tunnel. It wasn't very bright, only enough to be able to clearly see where you were putting your feet, but it was quite startling all the same: a permanent glow charm that had actually lasted as long as this one must have? Unless, of course, something or someone was renewing it at intervals.

*'Liloriennne?'*

*'Yes, Draco?'*

*'About the glow charm....'*

*'I renew it as needed,'* she said, anticipating his question.

Draco just nodded.

*'Thank you, Liloriennne,'* Harry said, filling in Draco's omission.

*'You're welcome, Harry,'* Liloriennne replied.

"Hmph!" was Draco's miffed response.

"Well, if you had said it...." Harry teased.

Draco ignored him, and started walking down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door. Draco tried to open it, but it didn't budge. He tried a couple of opening spells, but they didn't work either.

After watching all this, Harry reached forward and put his hand on the door handle. To the surprise of them both, the door opened immediately without Harry exerting any pressure on the door at all. With a quick glance at his very annoyed fiancé, Harry took the lead. The small alcove on the other side of the door had two passages leading off of it; one leading off to the left, the other to the right.

"I'm sure it's just because of my Slytherin blood, Draco," Harry said soothingly.

"But you told that snake thing—"

"Melchior," Harry filled in.

"That snake thing," Draco insisted with a glare, "that I was to have access to everything!"

"Yes, I.... Oh. 'Everything in the rooms', is what I said. This isn't properly in the rooms."

"Well, fix it, Harry!" Draco demanded. The effect was spoiled a bit by the fact that the blond seemed to be pouting, slightly.

"As soon as we get back upstairs, love," Harry promised, giving Draco's waist a small squeeze with one arm. He thought Draco's pout was adorable, but he liked living too much to say so. "But don't you want to see where these lead?" he asked, gesturing to the doors.

"We don't have time to explore both of them," Draco whinged.

"You pick one, then," Harry said, trying to console his fiancé.

"Oh, fine! That one, then," the blond said, pointing at, and then almost flouncing over to the the door on the right (although he would have called it a cross between stalking and stomping). To his pleased surprise, it opened for him when he operated the handle. With a triumphant smirk over his shoulder at Harry, he went through it.

Harry grinned, shaking his head in amusement, and followed.

The passage obviously hadn't been used for ages. Although there wasn't much dust, spider webs, both new and old, clung thickly to the ceiling edges.

Draco hadn't gone but a few feet into the passage before coming to a halt. "Ew!" he complained. "It's filthy! I'm *not* going in there."

Harry grinned. "I hate to have to tell you this, love," he said, "but you're already 'in there'."

Draco glared at him, then turned around and pushed past Harry, back into the alcove. "Well, I'm not going *back* in there until it's cleaned!"

"It's probably just as well," Harry said, catching him up. "We were cutting it close, anyway. We need to shower and get ready for supper."

After a long shower in which they participated in some 'stress relief' activities, they dressed carefully and cast some minor glamours on their clothing before making their way down to the Great Hall.

Supper was pork chops, wild rice with mushrooms, boiled new potatoes with butter and parsley, broccoli with a white cheese sauce, and fresh baked bread. They had only just got started when Blaise caught Harry's attention.

"It's on, Your Ma—"

"Not yet, Blaise," Harry said urgently, interrupting him. "But the alliance is on?" he asked.

Blaise looked askance at him, but nodded. "There were a few hold-outs, of course; those who either can't or won't go against their families."

Harry nodded sadly. He could wish it different, but he knew there would be fellow pupils in all of Hogwarts' Houses that he'd have to fight against.

Draco leaned against him, reminding Harry that he wasn't alone. No, more probably demanding that Harry pay attention to *him*, Harry mused, the thought effectively distracting him from the direction they'd been going – which was probably Draco's intention in the first place. Harry gave him a slight squeeze and a smile of thanks before turning back to Blaise, and his meal. "It's a good beginning," he told Blaise. "Would you have any idea about the support we might get in any of the other Houses?"

The dark-skinned young man frowned thoughtfully. "I'd just be guessing at this point," he finally said. "Give me some time, and I can give you a better estimate."

Harry nodded, and swallowed his food before speaking again. "You have it. But in the meantime, what are your suspicions?"

Zabini obviously didn't like being put on the spot, but he answered anyway. "About half of Ravenclaw; maybe more. Hufflepuff? Probably most of them." At Harry's raised eyebrow, knowing how loyal Hufflepuffs were, he elaborated. "Royalty. They won't be able to resist the romanticism of a returned king."

Harry almost laughed out loud at that, but restrained himself to a cough and a broad smirk, which was answered by most of the people within earshot; all being among those who most wished to ally themselves with Harry, by Blaise' design. "Gryffindor's going to be the sticking point, aren't they?" he almost stated.

Blaise nodded, with a sneer. "Closed-minded lot, they are," he said.

"Not closed-minded, but very stubborn, yes," Harry corrected. "But I think I can pull a few of them, anyway," he said, looking over at the Gryffindor tables.

Just as the first students were starting to leave supper, Professor Snape rose from the Head Table, the carved box from the jewellers in his hands. Ignoring the questioning looks from his peers, he strode to the middle of the Great Hall. It was such unusual behaviour for him, that he had the attention of everyone there without having to speak a word. Those who had made to leave, rethought themselves, and sat back down.

"Show time," Harry murmured.

"What?" Draco asked, confused with the expression, but the situation revealed its probable meaning. "Oh, you mean – we're about to be the centre of attention?"

"Yes. And you needn't look so pleased about it," Harry admonished his love. The grin on his face rather belied his words, however.

Harry and Draco stood from the table. A murmured "*Finite*", and their clothing was fully revealed, crests and all.

"This is what you meant," Blaise murmured with a grin, as he took notice of the crests. He appreciated the showmanship.

Harry and Draco each felt the other's nervousness increase as they walked to stand in front of their Head of House, even as they tried to support each other mentally. When they got there, they, and everyone else who was witnessing the occasion, got the biggest shock of their lives. Severus Snape knelt, going to one knee, and bowing his head while opening the box.

*'Wake up, Harry! He's not going to kneel all night,'* Draco thought at him.

That brought Harry out of his state of shock. He reached into the box and brought out a neckpiece. Draco knelt and bowed his head, and Harry slipped it on him. There were gasps from a few places in the Hall, as those who had received training from older families recognised the crests on their clothing, and what was happening.

It wasn't until after Draco had put the other torc on Harry's relaxed, but proudly upright form, and Snape had returned to his feet, that the shock started wearing off, and the first sign of unrest appeared.

"A poor joke, Potter," a seventh-year Ravenclaw declared loudly. Murmurs of agreement could be heard here and there all over the Hall.

Harry looked first to Professor Snape. When the man returned his look with only a slightly raised eyebrow, indicating he was waiting to see how Harry would handle this, Harry turned to the heckler.

"It would be, if it were a joke," he said, then continued before a rejoinder could be forthcoming. "Do you truly believe that Professor *Severus Snape* would be party to such a jest?" Harry shook his head, impatient with himself to have used such an obvious foil. "Regardless, it is no joke."

"The royal family—" the girl started to protest.

"Was killed," Harry interrupted, finishing the sentence for her. "Except for one, who had been in a stasis bubble as a baby for over a thousand years."

Harry's declaration was met with silence; then there were a few snickers as the improbability of the statement sank in.

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but Harry stayed him.

"Can you prove it?" came another voice as Harry was about to speak. He knew that voice well, though rarely before had it held such a cold tone. He had called its owner 'friend' for several years.

Harry turned to face Hermione. However, he didn't reply to her immediately.

*'Liloriennne; the ceiling is already enchanted to show pictures. Can you show one of your memories on it?'* he asked.

*'I don't know. I've never tried.'* Liloriennne's 'voice' sounded intrigued.

Before Harry could ask, the scene in Dumbledore's office when Sirius Black had presented baby Harry, in the stasis spell bubble, to Dumbledore, started to play on the ceiling. Through means best known only to herself, the voices of the two men were heard only moments later. Though the sound wasn't of the best quality, still the voices were recognizable. Every head was craned to watch the scene playing out, even the instructors'. Albus Dumbledore, the one at the Head Table, appeared to be attempting to cast a spell at the ceiling, or several, but with no visible results.

When the first scene was finished playing, the Headmaster's, then Draco's, then Snape's attempts to find out Harry's parentage were played out, along with the results.

*'Thank you, Liloriennne,'* Harry said to her, *'that should be enough.'*

*'Any time, Harry,'* she replied, sounding amused.

Harry looked back to Hermione. "Is that proof enough?" he asked her.

"How did you do that?" she replied suspiciously.

Harry took that as a 'yes', and ignored her question, turning his attention back to the Great Hall in general.

"I'd like the answer to that question myself, milord," Snape said, sotto voce.

Harry hesitated, then answered the man rather than address the Hall. "May we provide it elsewhere?"

Snape declined his head in assent, then raised it again.

Harry again turned his attention to the rest of the Great Hall. "For those of you who have yet to be informed, what you just witnessed was an engagement ceremony practised by the high aristocracy of our world."

"And what rank are you, then?" asked a coarse voice from the Hufflepuff tables.

Harry raised an eyebrow in that direction. "My sire was Salazar Slytherin, and I was born to Godric Gryffindor, as you just saw. Think about it." With that, he took Draco's hand, and they made their way out of the Hall.

Snape followed them. "I'm sure you had other plans, gentlemen," he said with slight distaste after they had the Great Hall doors behind them, "but I believe you . . . Mister Slytherin-Gryffindor, were going to explain that little show in there to me?"

Harry sighed and nodded, and fell in behind the professor as the man made his way to his office in the dungeons. He couldn't afford to alienate the only adult who had all but sworn fealty to him. It was an odd thought, that the man who had made his life hell in Potions for years, would be the first adult to join with him.

"That could have been handled better, Harry," Draco said quietly as they walked, "but all in all, it went well enough."

"Thank you *so* much, love," Harry said, sarcastically. He nudged his fiancé and winked at him, to show he wasn't all *that* put out.

Draco grinned back at him.

"Dumbledore isn't going to make thing difficult for you, sir, is he?" Harry asked the professor.

"He'd be a fool if he tried," Snape replied. "I'm too valuable to him: one of the best potion masters in Great Britain? Many families send their children here merely on the strength of having them taught by me," he added haughtily.

Harry held his laughter. It wasn't so much that the man had exaggerated – he was sure Snape hadn't – but that those parents surely had no idea of the harsh methods the professor used. Harry found it ironic.

Draco didn't share Harry's opinion, despite his reasoning, and elbowed Harry for his thoughts.

Although Harry tried to protect the secret of Lilorienne's existence, the fact that she had shown things that nobody could have known by regular means or magical, made that rather difficult, and Harry had wound up telling his professor that the castle was sentient, without giving any other details other than that it had chosen, for reasons of its own, to speak to him, and was cooperating with him.

Snape was impressed, despite himself. Although knowing the castle was quite magical, he, nor anyone else he knew of, was aware of its intelligence. Although he pressed, Harry refused to divulge anything further, and Draco followed Harry's lead in that matter, though for his own reasons. Draco liked knowing things other people didn't know.

Finally, the professor let them go. It was a strange dynamic they had: Harry would have the political power and temporal authority, but while he was in school, Snape had authority over him.

When they got back to their suite, Harry and Draco almost dropped into bed, taking only enough time to disrobe. It had been a long, stressful, event-filled day, but their official engagement edged out all other concerns and they dropped off to sleep, happy.

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They spent the next five weeks attending classes, catching up on missed work, cementing the alliance with the contingent of Slytherin House that had decided to support Harry, and granting interviews to the media. Since the announcement in the Great Hall, Voldemort would know of it anyway, so no damage was done in that way. Dumbledore's popularity took a nosedive as a result, however, and letters poured in for Harry from all over Wizarding Britain; some being hate mail, but most pledging



support. Fortunately a handful of Harry's Slytherin supporters sorted through the small mountain of mail, and passed on only those that might be of importance.

The Ministry of Magic demanded Harry retract his claim and statements, claiming that they were obviously false. But when Harry presented the proof, they had little option but to grant his claim to his parentage. However, they denied he had any right to the throne based on his age, lack of governmental knowledge, etc. Harry didn't comment. He knew, based on experience and the advice of those who had more knowledge of such matters than he, that if he pushed it now, the Ministry might just create a way to make his taking power illegal. He was content, for now, to leave things as they were until he *had* learned what he needed to know, and had a sufficient power base to make his claim stick.

Dumbledore resorted to trying to make Harry and Draco's life difficult by splitting them up into different classes, and in any other way he could. However, this just gave Draco the freedom to work independent of Harry's shadow; a situation he relished. He loved Harry almost to distraction, but he couldn't work with his fiancé there without stepping on Harry's proverbial toes. Besides, after not seeing each other for most of the day, their greetings each evening were all the warmer, most often resulting in clothes needing to be picked up, later.

As the holidays approached, Harry convinced Draco to join him in searching out the cave he had been found in, in hopes of finding more clues to his origins. Draco agreed, despite his concerns involving his father, other Death Eaters, and Voldemort. They hadn't discussed their plans for leaving the castle with anyone, so if they left after all the other students who were going home for the holidays, the news shouldn't leak out, and they should be safe enough.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Harry and Draco hadn't forgotten the other secret passages, but Draco insisted that a contingent of house elves clean them first. It took two weeks. The passage that he had chosen that first time and then abandoned, led to the Gryffindor suite. It was done all in wood tones, with touches of green and fall leaf colours here and there as accents. The effect was so warm and welcoming that Draco almost insisted they move to it. Only his pride, and loyalty to Slytherin kept him quiet.

The other passage off of the alcove under the Slytherin apartment did a split of its own. The one that meandered off to the left wound up at the Slytherin House common room. The one to the right eventually opened up into a small cave in the Forbidden Forest, the door cleverly camouflaged to blend in with the cave wall – likely an escape route.

The passage behind the wood box led both to the royal suite and, after meandering around a bit and going up several flights of stairs, went up a spiraling staircase and wound up at the top of a tower in a small, semi-circular room barely larger than a closet. A door led out onto a small balcony. The only clue to the use of this tower was an empty broom rack, with spaces for several brooms; another escape route. It was a sobering indication of the dangers that must have existed over the years that so many escape routes were deemed necessary.

Harry made a mental note to buy a few brooms with which to stock the rack. Even if it was never needed, it would be a good investment. Come to that, installing a broom rack, with brooms, in the tunnel that let out into the Forbidden Forest would be a good idea as well. With the passages they had found out of the Slytherin suite, there surely had to be more out of the other suites. One escape route for them, when Salazar had two, didn't make sense. That search would have to wait for a time when they had more leisure, however. Lilorienne should be a great help there, if only indirectly, as she had been with the Slytherin suite.

Also during those weeks Harry and Draco had spent quite some time in the libraries; the school's, and the ones in Slytherin's and Gryffindor's suites. Each time they found a spell revealing charm they tried it on Harry's wand. They must have tried out over a dozen before one that they'd found in a book in the Gryffindor suite made Harry's wand glow a pale, sickly blue – a positive. That was good, because Harry had been about to give up and put it all down to paranoia. Now that they knew which spell detection charm was on Harry's wand, they had to find the spell to remove it. The spell name was included in the text accompanying the revealing charm, but now they had to find its counter. That took another three days, utilizing the greater portion of their free time between classes, meals, homework, and other necessary activities.

Draco prepared the potion in which Harry's wand would need to soak. When it was ready they set Harry's wand to marinating in it, and set up everything else that would be needed. Since it was Harry's wand that was needing to be de-spelled, it devolved upon Draco to do the work. It took the whole of the weekend, what with time needed between procedures and another soak in a different potion, but finally Harry's wand was free of detection spells.

"I'm going to kill that crazy old goat," Draco growled softly, and sighed as he sank into a comfortable, cushioned chair. "He definitely didn't want anyone taking that spell off your wand." He then grinned with grim satisfaction. "But he can't track what you cast, now!"

Harry had sat at the chair's side and put his head on Draco's leg during this time. "Thank you, love," he said, kissing the nearest portion of Draco's leg that he could reach. He too was tired. He had stayed by Draco's side the entire time, assisting where he could and offering moral support when he couldn't do anything else, despite Draco's sometimes acerbic protestations.

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"We've been wandering around for *ages*, Harry! Are you sure this is the area?"

"Yes!" Harry was very frustrated. He'd *seen* the memory. He knew the cave had to be around here somewhere. It was a dead certainty that it hadn't been moved. But perhaps.... "Right!" Harry exclaimed, causing Draco to jump slightly. "It's been hidden!"

Draco looked at Harry as though his fiancé had lost his mind. "Who would hide an empty cave?"

Harry shrugged. "We *are* talking about Dumbledore, right?"

Draco's expression cleared. "Right." Dumbledore usually had a reason for the things he did. That didn't mean that the reason was logical or would make sense to anyone else, however.

Both young men started casting revealing and direction spells at likely-looking places; usually rock piles at the base of a steep slope. But it was Harry, a half-hour later, who found it by casting a revealing spell at a shadowed area behind a large boulder, causing the boulder to appear to reduce drastically in size, and the shadowed niche to expand into a small cave opening surrounded by rubble.

"I'm not about to crawl to get in there!" Draco averred.

"You're exaggerating, Draco. It's not *that* small; and we'll only have to crouch a bit," Harry replied, eyeing the opening a bit doubtfully.

"Harry . . . did I konk you too hard when you made me fall in that puddle?"

Harry grinned wryly. "All right; it *is* quite small. But I'm sure we can make it."

Draco eyed the opening again. "Whatever you say – Your Majesty."

Harry grinned and aimed a light blow to the back of the blond's head which Draco dodged easily, returning the grin.

Draco's grin faded however, as he watched Harry crouch down as far as he could, bending over, then folding his knees down before he started to awkwardly waddle into the cave opening. If it hadn't been winter, with the ground wet and muddy, it would have been easier to crawl in on their hands and knees. For a moment Draco considered staying outside. But he reconsidered when he recalled that he'd be alone, and a few of his father's 'old crowd' might be wandering about. They'd like nothing better than to get their hands on Harry Potter's betrothed, unless it was getting Harry Potter himself.

Draco sighed. "The things I do for you, Harry," he muttered in fond irritation as he readied himself to copy Harry's actions.

*'Yes, I know; and I love you, too. Now get your delectable buns in here!'* Draco heard in his mind.

"I swear, sometimes I do see why others have committed regicide," the blond muttered, despite his warm feelings at the comment, and the pictures that ran through his mind of things Harry had done with his 'delectable buns' (not that he hadn't returned the favour a time or two). Then he squatted down and 'duck-walked' into the cave (not even ex-Malfoys 'waddled'). He stood as soon as there was room to do so, and carefully made his way over to Harry, who had his wand lit, at the same time drawing his own and lighting it with a whispered "Lumos."

"Regicide, eh?" Harry asked slyly as Draco joined him. "Then I wouldn't be able to do a repeat performance of some of those things you were thinking of."

Draco blushed, but otherwise ignored him, choosing to look around, instead.

There really wasn't much to see. It was a fairly small, irregularly-shaped cave with an uneven, rubble-strewn floor. After a short conference, both young men started their search. They kept together in case of any sort of nasty surprise, and so their combined wand light would eliminate as many shadows as possible. Then, starting on the right, they started their exploration of the cave.

Surprisingly, the little cave was larger than it looked. The main area was rather small, but the many offshoots, though not large or long in themselves, each added more space. They had gone about three-quarters of the way around the cave when they noted the first oddity; a regularly-shaped alcove about three feet in height, two feet wide, and two feet deep. In it was a shallowly cupped pedestal that would have been about the right size for a baby in a stasis bubble.

Harry just stood there, staring at it.

"Do you think that's it, Harry?" Draco asked in hushed tones.

There was a long silence during which Draco decided Harry wasn't going to answer, when suddenly he did. "I don't know. Could be, I suppose. Right size, isn't it?"

Draco nodded, and as he did, another regular curve caught his eye. Turning his head a bit, he saw the arched top of what could have been another alcove, except there was a stone slab in place of an opening.

"Harry?"

"Hm?"

"Do you suppose you might have had a brother or sister?"

Harry shrugged, leaning in to examine the interior of the little alcove more closely. "I'll never know, will I?" he replied.

"You might find out sooner than you think," Draco replied, a strange tone in his voice.

"What? What are you going on about?" Harry asked, straightening up and turning to face his fiancé. There hadn't been anything more to see in there anyway; just a bit more rubble. Still, it was a strange feeling to see where you'd 'slept' for almost a thousand years. And then he noticed that Draco had a rather strange look on his face, and followed the blond's gaze to....

"Another alcove? But...."

Harry's thoughts became so chaotic that Draco closed their mental connection. He couldn't do it for long – neither of them could, although damping it down to give each other a little privacy was fairly easy – but they could close it for a little while. Normally neither of them would bother even if they were having a spat, since it took more energy and effort than they liked to expend.

"Harry, calm down! For all we know, it could just be your spare nappies! The only way to know for sure, is to open it."

Harry immediately pointed his wand at the stone slab.

"Wait!" Draco said urgently, trying to keep control of the situation. "What spell are you going to use? You don't want to damage whatever's inside," he explained.

Harry hesitated. "Right," he replied. He was quiet for a few seconds as he thought it through, then cast the strongest revealing spell he knew to find out what defensive spells might be on the opening; and then another one to detect wards, and yet another one to try to detect anything that the first two hadn't. There were bare flickers of light indicating that there had indeed been anti-detection spells, avoidance and impermeable wards, and a couple of nasty defensive spells, but that they had long ago lost their strength.

"Can you think of anything else to try?" he asked Draco.

Draco was rather proud of Harry for being so systematic in the face of his emotional turmoil – after his own initial intervention, of course – but he did know a few Dark detection spells that Harry hadn't learned yet, and used them – with similar results. There *had* been Dark magic spells cast on the alcove, but as with the other magics, their strength had faded over the centuries. The only reason magical jewellery and other artifacts retained their strength was due to being in at least occasional contact with magical auras that their spells could feed from. These alcoves hadn't had that option – yet.

"Open it," Draco suggested.

Harry took a deep breath, then started with 'Alohomora', and worked his way up through the stronger spells.

Finally, Draco lost patience. "*Partegio!*"

The stone slab cracked. Draco kicked it. Harry pulled him back, having just recovered from the shock of Draco casting the stone-breaker curse, putting it to its proper use –

and which could put a man in traction for a month, even with the best healing potions and charms.

"What are you.... What was.... What did you...?"

"You were being too blasted cautious," Draco said irritably. "We'd have been here all ruddy day!"

"It might be my brother or sister in there!" Harry retorted.

Draco drew a deep breath, then with exaggerated patience, said, "Harry – how did your alcove get opened?"

"How should I bleeding know?"

Draco sighed. "Sirius found you, but he obviously didn't find this one, or it would have been opened, too. Doesn't that suggest anything to you?"

Harry's eyes widened. "The earthquake," he said, as if it were obvious. Which, of course, it should have been. "If it broke that one open," he said, pointing at the one he'd been found in, "then he would have seen me, and wouldn't have looked around for his haste to get me to Dumbledore."

"Exactly. So if an earthquake didn't damage you – and I don't count your hair —"

"Hey!"

"- then it's not likely anything we can do is going to damage whatever is in this one," Draco finished, ignoring Harry's protest. "If you don't want me kicking it in, then you do it.

Harry looked undecided for a moment, then with a look of determination, he turned to the now-cracked stone slab. With a few more strong kicks, the slab gave 'way.

Draco's delicate sneeze, due to the dust stirred up, was the only thing that broke the silence as both boys looked at the bubble resting on a pedestal identical to the one in the other alcove.

Finally, Harry asked, "What is it?"

Draco shook his head. "I've never heard of anything like it," he replied. "Obviously it's an animal of some type, but...."

"Are those wings?"

"They *do* look like it."

"I've never heard of a winged cat," Harry said.

"I don't think it would be a proper cat, Harry, even without the wings. If you look closely, there are a couple of rather obvious differences. For one, its hind legs bend the wrong way."

"Are you sure? It's rather curled up upon itself."

"I'm sure," Draco replied. "For another—"

He was interrupted by a voice in their minds.

*"Master? You're awake?"*

Although neither knew how, both young men knew that the mental voice was addressing Harry.

"Wha-?" But before a flabbergasted Harry could say anything more, the form within the ball began to glow, brighter and brighter.

"I think that's another difference," Draco called out over his shoulder as he sped for the opening to the cave.

Harry only just noticed, but he was totally caught up in what was happening before him.

"Harry! Get the bloody hell out of there!" Draco yelled at him.

But Harry ignored his fiancé, caught up in the wonder of what was going on in the alcove.

The glow was now bright enough to fill the offshoot of the cave, and was spilling out into the cave proper, but only enough to relieve the dark. It didn't fill the whole space.

And then suddenly the light died. In the aftermath, Harry's still-lit wand seemed dim. Indeed, it took awhile for Harry's eyes to adjust to where he could see anything at all. When he could, it was to see the cat-like creature sitting up alertly, tail curled 'round its feet, wings folded neatly, and regarding him with what seemed to be great curiosity.



*'It is obvious that you were woken long before me, but why did your fathers leave me here so many years, and then send you to waken me?'* it asked.

Harry was struck dumb for a few moments. How did you tell – whatever this was – that nobody knew of its existence, and that it was found mostly by accident?

"It's been almost a thousand years," Harry began.

"Harry?" Draco called.

"It's all right, my brave hero," Harry called out teasingly.

Draco was stung. "I'll leave the bravery and damsel saving to you," he replied cuttingly, coming into sight. But when Draco spied the winged animal awake and alert, he stepped back and leveled his wand at it.

"Harry?"

"It doesn't seem to be dangerous, love," Harry said, trying to reassure the blond.

*'I assure you, I am quite dangerous, or I would be of no use as a guardian for you,'* the beast inserted.

"You're supposed to . . . guard me?" Harry inquired.

*'Yes. But I assume,'* it said, a tone of humour in its voice, *'judging by the endearments you're using with this one, that you don't need to be guarded from him.'*

"Um, no," Harry replied, blushing. "We're to be wed."

*'Then perhaps you need guarding, after all.'*

"What?" Draco exclaimed in outrage. "I'll have you know, you unnatural beast, that—"

*'Lacks a sense of humour, does he?'* the animal asked Harry, interrupting Draco's rant.

"Ah...." Harry squirmed a bit, having been put on the spot, but ex-Gryffindor that he was, he grabbed hold of what bravery he had, and said, "Only on certain subjects – and you happened to pick one of them."

Draco glowered at his lover. "It's the couch for you, tonight," he murmured murderously.

Eyeing the blond with humourous caution, Harry addressed the beast. "I see what you mean." A mental snicker from . . . the thing – was his reward.

"Do you have a name?" he asked it, tired of mentally stumbling over things to call it.

*'Hrawn, Master,'* it answered.

"Hrawn, then," Harry repeated, noting that Draco seemed to be pouting. "And if you don't mind my asking, *what* are you?"

*'I used to be a fire elemental, although I still retain many of those abilities,'* Hrawn replied.

"And now?"

*'Your parents made of me a sort of demon,'* it said, *'in order that I could interact with the physical world without harm, and be a guard for you – a job which I seem to have failed at so far.'* Still, Hrawn didn't seem too upset with the fact. *'But you were saying it's been a thousand years? Surely you haven't been awake all that time?'*

"Not at all. Just a bit over sixteen years, in fact."

While talking with Hrawn, Harry walked over to Draco, but the blond turned away from him, spurning his overture of peace.

"Don't be like that, love," Harry cozened his fiancé. Taking Draco by the shoulders, he manhandled him around and drew him into a hug. Although truth to tell, Draco didn't struggle very hard, and latched onto Harry quite firmly once the blond had been completely 'captured'. At the same time, however, he kept a watchful eye on the now reclining and self-confessed 'demon'.

Hrawn had watched the byplay with interest, holding his questions in check until full attention should come back to him. Not that such activity was new to him. But it was interesting how similarly these two interacted to the little he'd seen of how Harry's parents had interacted before they'd hidden the two of them away. But a thousand years? What could have gone wrong, that he and the boy hadn't been retrieved? Come to that, who had finally retrieved the boy, but neglected to retrieve him? Hopefully there would be answers to these questions.

"Um, Hrawn?"

*'Yes?'*

"Draco suggests that you might know what my name was?"

*'Heremon. I think your fathers said it meant "handsome and fair",'* Hrawn replied.

"Where would they get a name like that?"

"It's Irish – I think," Draco said, snickering.

"What's so amusing?" Harry wanted to know.

"A thousand years ago or now, you're still a 'Harry'," Draco explained, breaking out into full laughter.

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## Chapter Nineteen

Hrawn didn't know much to tell Harry, since he had been captured and transformed only shortly before Harry's birth. He did have to clear up one misconception, though; he was *not* a demon. He was only demon-like in that he had powers and abilities from his elemental nature while still being in a material body, such as being able to become a substantial creature of flame without harm to himself. On the other hand, Harry and Draco spent many hours educating Hrawn about the wizarding world of today, as well as informing him of Harry's personal past.

When Hrawn thought to question Draco about *his* past, however, the blond abruptly found other subjects to discuss. It was strange how his master also looked uncomfortable when the subject was brought up.

Harry had found out a little more about the past Draco had before the blond had become his bond slave however; enough to know that his fiancé had been both spoilt and controlled to within an inch of his life, with serious consequences for those times he didn't measure up to his father's expectations. Although Draco hadn't said so, Harry suspected that had been far too often, and that there had been worse than those things to which Draco had admitted. But he didn't pry. Draco would, he was sure, tell him when he was more comfortable with him. In the meantime, Draco had a new life with him now, and as long as it didn't interfere in their lives, that corpse could stay buried.

Hrawn was always close by Harry now as well, although like most elementals he had a knack for remaining unobtrusive. That's not to say he was never noticed and marveled over. Hrawn was unique. But Harry refused to explain his familiar, and Draco followed Harry's lead. The blond loved to create mystery, and he was just as happy to help perpetuate one.

Shortly after term started, Harry was startled to have one of his Slytherin followers bow to him. It wasn't much – just a slight inclination of head and upper body – but it had clearly been meant as an obeisance. Harry didn't have a chance to ask about it, though, because the boy in question had, immediately after, gone about the business he'd been about before. Today was one of the days in which Harry had no classes with Draco, too, so he'd have to wait to find out if Draco knew anything about it, since the blond seemed to be ignoring Harry's mental queries. As the day wore on he became certain that Draco was behind it, because it started happening more and more often.

"Draco," Harry said, when he finally cornered the blond at supper, "the strangest thing kept happening to me, all day." Harry had fixed his lover with quite a stern gaze.

"Oh? Do tell?" Draco asked innocently.

"Yes. It seems as though quite a few people have been developing muscle problems in my vicinity. They keep jerking about. Almost looks as though they're bowing or curtsying to me. Strangest thing. Can't imagine why they'd do that. Can you?"

"Mm," Draco said noncommittally, as he took a bite of steak. He was a bit nervous, however, so couldn't properly appreciate its tenderness and flavour.

"So were you hoping that I'd just overlook such strange behaviour from my fellow pupils and not figure out how it got started?" Harry kept his tone at conversational level while trying to look and sound stern just in case Draco looked at him, but he couldn't help but feel amusement at his mate's nervousness.

Draco felt it through their bond. "Don't laugh at me," he demanded querulously, finally looking at his fiancé.

"I'm not laughing at you, love," Harry assured him as he took Draco into a tender side embrace, unable to maintain his pretence. "But it *is* amusing that you try to assume innocence with me when I can feel what you're really feeling," he added with a grin.

"Prat," Draco mumbled, looking at his plate, his face tinting.

Harry laughed delightedly and pulled the blond closer into the embrace. Draco just sat there, stubbornly refusing to react for a few moments before he sighed and leant his head onto Harry's shoulder. "It's not fair," he complained petulantly, finally letting his arms find their place around Harry's waist.

"Mister Potter," came the frosty voice of Minerva McGonagall, "it is against school policy to allow public shows of affection. Ten points off Slytherin; five for each of you."

Harry closed his eyes, his nerves thrumming with tension. He didn't need a rule nazi on top of everything else. He turned around, ignoring Draco's silent warning to not over-react.

"Professor McGonagall," he said to her retreating back, replicating her tone, "did the Headmaster neglect to inform you that this was *my* school?"

The woman came to a full stop, her form visibly stiffening before she turned around. "And a detention with Mister Filch for your cheek," she said, and made to leave again.

She hadn't a clue that Harry was being quite literal, and thought he was being impertinent.

"I suggest you talk to him, Professor," Harry said, steel in his voice. "And I suggest you may have forgotten some of the codicils of the rules – such as one of the codicils of the rule you just invoked."

There were urgent whisperings here and there throughout the Great Hall, but for the most part those present had fallen silent – either through the entertainment value of the situation, thinking Harry was digging his own grave, or through sheer shock that anyone would brace the Deputy Headmistress.

The professor was holding onto the last shreds of her patience only with an effort. "And what would that be, Mister Potter?" Minerva was not used to being defied, and was white with anger.

"Why," Harry replied, smiling triumphantly, "that the particular rule to which you refer does not apply to officially engaged or married couples, of course." With that, Harry turned around, kissed a shocked, but gloating Draco briefly, and applied himself to his neglected meal, waiting for his ex-Head of House to react.

Turning his back on her was a mistake, as Minerva took it as a flouting of her authority.

Harry's meal disappeared. That the Deputy Headmistress would go so far shocked Harry. It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. First Dumbledore, and now Professor McGonagall? He quickly became angry, and then he started to lose control of his temper. The air in the large room slowly started to move, and then began gaining momentum. Harry stood. His hair floated away from his head. His robes billowed. He turned and faced the woman.

"For the sake of the esteem and affection I hold for you, I request that you return my meal to me," he said to her with a very brittle calmness.

Minerva McGonagall had not become Dumbledore's second in command by being faint of heart. "And I suggest, Mister Potter, that you bring yourself under control immediately, and retire to your quarters. Your defiance has earned you a week's suspension."

Harry's eyes glowed briefly, but Draco put himself square in front of him and put both hands on his shoulders, which distracted him. He looked at the blond for a moment

before looking back to the Deputy Headmistress. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Very well," he said.

The way Harry Potter uttered those two words had almost every person in the room shuddering – partly because it *was* Harry Potter, and this behaviour was totally unlike anything they would expect, or had seen from him before. Nor was McGonagall unmoved, although she refused to show it. The whole episode from start to finish only went to show that Slytherin had spoiled her 'golden boy'.

Upon relating the incident to the headmaster later that day, however, she was shocked to learn that Harry did indeed hold property rights to the school and the land it was on, and that the codicil the young man had mentioned did indeed exist. Minerva could be forgiven for having forgotten it however, since it had been over fifty years since the codicil had been invoked. However, Dumbledore stopped her from going to apologise and lift . . . most . . . of the punishments on the boy. Harry's attitude would still have earned him a detention.

"It will do him good to learn that he can't have his own way," was the reasoning Albus offered his second-in-command. In reality he hoped to bring enough pressure to bear on the boy to bring him to heel. If necessary, he could threaten to expel Harry's fiancé for practicing political subversion.

At about the same time that Professor McGonagall was having her meeting with the headmaster, Harry was having a meeting of his own.

"Lilorieanne; what would happen if you decided to shut down?" Harry asked, staring into the fire in the Slytherin suite.

*'Shut down.... In what manner?'* she asked.

"I mean to halt services. Stop the staircases in the most inconvenient places possible; passworded portals stuck open; that sort of thing. Would it present a danger to anyone, or just an inconvenience?"

"Harry, that's . . . so Slytherin!" Draco exclaimed gleefully as he plopped himself in Harry's lap, and then proceeded to give him a huge congratulatory kiss.

"Um . . . Lilorieanne? Did I miss your reply?" Harry asked as he smirked grimly at Draco, hugging the blond so hard that Draco swore he could hear his ribs creak.

*'No,'* she replied dryly, *'I was merely waiting for an opportune time to do so.'*

"Oh. Well?" Harry asked, as a hint of colour tinted his cheeks.

*'Just an inconvenience I believe, if I don't leave the end of a stairway out in mid-air.'*

"You know why I'm requesting this?"

*'I saw the incident,' she replied, 'but isn't this a bit of an extreme reaction?'*

"Perhaps," Harry admitted, "but I'm tired of being pushed around. This, in addition to another little plan I have, should make it clear that I am declaring my independence, and I will not be anyone's pawn. I'm almost positive that Dumbledore was behind that."

*'He wasn't,' Lilorienne informed him. 'He's just now learned of it, but he's enforcing the McGonagall woman's decision. Now against her will, however,' she added.*

"Against her will? But she—"

*'Changed her mind,' Lilorienne said, interrupting. 'Once she knew you had told only the truth, she was going to lift the punishments. Headmaster Dumbledore is enforcing it, now.'*

"Really," Harry said flatly.

"I can't believe that old fool!" Draco exclaimed angrily. "What's your other plan?"

"To make a visit to the kitchens," Harry replied coldly, although his anger had nothing to do with Draco and was now directed solely at Dumbledore.

"What?" the blond inquired in bewilderment.

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"Is Dobby around?" Harry asked the first house elf he saw in the kitchens.

"Yes, Master," it replied. "Kammy will be finding him for you."

"Thank you, Kammy."

"Are you going to have the house elves start playing pranks on the staff, now?" Draco asked.

Harry laughed. "Nothing so drastic, love," he replied.



"Master Harry Potter!" Dobby exclaimed gleefully as he ran into the room.

"Hello, Dobby," Harry replied with a smile.

Dobby had taken Harry to the Head House Elf. This elf was so old that he actually had grown a fringe of short, white hair running around his head from ear to ear. Upon Harry being presented to the elderly elf, the old one had bowed deeply. The House Elves, through means known only to themselves, had found out that Harry was the owner of Hogwarts. Being the owner, their loyalties belonged only to him. So when Harry offered his proposal, it was agreed to with only a minimal amount of protesting and wailing. Housekeeping and laundry services would be suspended, and except for Harry, Draco, and Harry's supporters, only cold meals with milk or water would be served.

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Back in their apartment, Harry ran his hands up Draco's back, pressing the blond to him. Kissing him tenderly, Harry then drew back a fraction and looked into his fiancé's eyes. "When will you marry with me, love?" he asked.

"Whenever you say," Draco replied with a contented sigh, laying his head on Harry's shoulder.

Harry gently took Draco's slender shoulders in hand and pressed on them, creating a bit of distance between them. A mildly perplexed Draco looked back into Harry's troubled eyes. "You don't know?"

Draco frowned. He didn't like Harry knowing something he didn't about his world, but the fact was that he was clueless about what Harry might be talking about.

Harry reached up and caressed the torc around his neck. "These," he said softly, peering intently at Draco to make sure he was paying attention, "are more than symbols of our engagement. When you have no more reservations about it, they will merge with our skins, making them permanent and more powerful than they now are."

Draco stared at Harry in shock, then blushed deeply as he realized that yes, he *had* been holding back a part of himself from the man he could now admit he loved.

"That is the true marriage. Anything else is only ceremony," Harry added.

"I *do* love you, Harry," Draco said intently as he snuggled back into Harry's arms, willing his dark-haired love to believe him – and with their link, the depth of the blond's love was evident.

"But?" Harry asked, enfolding Draco in his arms.

Draco shook his head violently. "No 'buts'." He was quiet for a moment as he gathered his thoughts while drawing invisible patterns on Harry's chest, and then, "I've always been controlled and ordered around, Harry, but I always kept a part of myself separate – private – a part of me that was only for me and that nobody else could reach."

"And now?"

Draco almost never admitted to a weakness, but he did now. "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know!" Draco cried out, clutching Harry as he suddenly broke down in tears.

To say that Harry was surprised would be an understatement. The blond had always seemed to have control of himself. But he rose to the occasion and held his lover more firmly. When it seemed as though Draco would be crying for a while, Harry picked him up and carried him to their bedroom, laying him on the bed, then climbing onto it himself. He didn't have to gather his fiancé to him, as Draco seemed to try to almost crawl into him, clutching at the front of Harry's robes, then wrapping himself around his dark-haired love.

Harry held Draco, stroking the blond hair and slender back, making soothing noises, and feeling rather anxious and helpless in the face of his lover's breakdown. But Harry was determined to ride it out with him.

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## Chapter Twenty

"What do you think you're doing?" Severus roared, and then belatedly added "my lord," with no change of expression and only a slight modification of his tone.

Harry's eyes widened, and he involuntarily shrank back a bit before he straightened his shoulders and faced the raging man. He hadn't had any reservations whatsoever about admitting his Head of House to his and Draco's apartment when the guardian had announced him, but he hadn't expected to be facing such an angry advisor, either. But even if the man was scaring the piss out of him right now, he was going to do his damndest not to show it. He'd stood up to Voldemort before, so he could do it here, too.

Draco's eyes had widened as well, and from his position curled up on the couch he watched, his mouth slightly open in shock – but he remained silent. He had no intention of drawing his potion professor's attention to himself. Severus was known more for cutting people down to size with well-chosen words, tones and attitudes, not volume. For him to lose this much of his vaunted self-control meant that he was far more angry than Draco had ever heard of or witnessed. Perhaps angrier than *anyone* had ever witnessed.

"About what?" Harry asked, trying to keep the quaver out of his voice.

Professor Snape was almost apoplectic, but regained enough control of himself to keep his tones near conversational level. "'*About what?*' About what you're doing to this school, you self-indulgent...." Severus bit off his words before he could say too much.

Despite the apprehension he was feeling, Harry pulled himself together, pulling his posture completely erect and looking defiantly proud. "What have I done, then?" he asked challengingly. "Introduced some Muggle conditions and stopped hot meals? My, such hardship."

Draco winced at Harry's response. 'Wrong, Harry,' he thought. He agreed with what Harry was saying, but it was entirely the wrong approach to use with the Slytherin Head of House. "Harry, maybe—" he began, but Snape shot a brief, searing glare at him, cutting him off.

"You have also, Your Majesty," the man grated out through clenched teeth, his tone making a mockery of the title, "shown that you are immature and unready for the throne."

"What I have done, Professor," Harry replied, his intensity now almost matching that of his advisor as he started to get angry, "is show that I will not be pushed about any longer – that I *will* fight back!"

Severus helped himself to a chair and gazed up at the young man, but his position in no way placed him at a disadvantage. "And just who were you trying to impress?" Now the man's calm, biting, snide tones were back. "How many of those affected are deserving of your largesse? It's a wonderful way to gain supporters, this is."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, and realized he didn't *have* a reasonable argument. Snape was right. Harry had been so focused on showing Dumbledore that he wouldn't be messed about with, that he had totally lost sight of the big picture. It was galling, but, "You're right. I focused too much on Dumbledore," he said, his posture relaxing a bit as he made a moue of distaste at his failing.

Harry sat down, chewing on his lip as he debated what he should do. Innocent children shouldn't suffer for what that manipulative . . . *headmaster* was doing, but damn it, he didn't want to let the old man off scott-free, either.

*'Then why not just restrict it to Dumbledore?'* Draco mentally suggested, having followed Harry's thoughts.

*'But what about the portals and stairs and . . . other things?'* Harry asked.

Severus watched the two, their changing expressions telling of a conversation to which he wasn't privy. He'd give them enough rope to hang themselves with, then bring them up short, if need be.

*'None of that is really more than a bit of an inconvenience; I think we should leave it,'* Draco said.

*'So.... Just Dumbledore otherwise?'* Harry thought about that. *'I think maybe we should include any supporters he has, as well.'*

*'Does that include the Mudblood?'* Draco asked vindictively.

Harry shrugged. Although he still didn't like the insulting term, he found his anger towards his former friend made it much easier to tolerate. *'If you like.'* His decision made, Harry stood.

"Dobby!" Harry called out.

"Are you paying the slightest bit of attention to what I've been saying?" Snape growled.

Harry shot him an angry look. "I'm calling him to try to set things to rights again . . . sir," Harry replied. His relationship with his instructor/advisor made terms of address a bit tricky as, depending on the situation, the authority of one could be superseded by the other.

"I would think so!" was the rejoinder.

Draco got up from the couch and joined his mate, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder in support. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Draco blamed himself. He really should have seen the angle that Severus had pointed out, and advised Harry.

*'Don't blame yourself, love,' Harry told him privately. 'It was my decision. I didn't think things through, again.'*

*'Liloriennne....'*

*'Yeah, she tried to caution me,'* Harry admitted ruefully.

The castle remained silent, although she was quite alert to what was happening and what was being said.

The elf popping in brought that conversation to a close. "I is being sorry to take so long, Master," he said, cringing. "Should Dobby be punishing himself?"

"No, Dobby; that's all right. You're free, remember? You needn't do that any more." Before Harry could continue for the reasons he'd called the elf, Dobby was speaking again.

"Dobby is being having dishes and plates to sit down." Then Dobby started fawning. "Master Harry is being so good to Dobby, Master Harry, sir! You is always being so good to Dobby. Dobby doesn't deserve it, he doesn't. Dobby is being eternally grate..."

"Dobby!" Harry interrupted sharply, to get the elf's attention. Once he had it, he spoke again, more gently. "I need to modify the order I gave yesterday."

"Modify?" Snape said sternly. He had been expecting Harry to rescind the order entirely, and still hoped to sway the young man's decision in that direction. However, he was willing to hear what Harry had planned before making further protests, should the boy prove to be set on his vengeance.

"Modify," Harry replied firmly, looking the man in the eye. When it appeared as though Severus wasn't going to say anything else, he turned back to the waiting elf with a sense of relief.

"Dobby, I'd like you to carry a message to the Head Elf for me," he said. "Tell him that services and meals may return to normal for everyone but Hermione Granger, Dumbledore, and those who are still following him, to be continued until further notice. Can you do that for me?"

"Oh, yes, Master Harry!" Dobby enthused.

"A moment," Snape put in. "My lord, I happen to still be pretending to follow the old fool." He didn't like the idea of a steady diet of cold meals one little bit.

"Point taken," Harry replied with a small frown. As the only – as yet – adult supporter he had, Harry didn't want to alienate the man. "Perhaps if you were to take your meals in your rooms?"

Severus raised an eyebrow in askance, but when Harry gave no sign of offering to modify his instructions further, he gave a slight bow of the head in acquiescence. He could put up with a cold meal or two when he absolutely had to, but for the most part he could do without the puling chatter of hundreds of pupils and the mostly bland company of his fellow educators. A hot meal in the privacy of his own chambers? He could live with that, he thought with some measure of satisfaction.

"Was there anything else, Professor?" Harry asked.

"No, I don't believe so."

"Then I shall see you in class tomorrow, barring circumstances that would cause us to need to meet sooner?"

"Yes, my lord," the man replied stiffly, recognising a dismissal when he heard it. Harry Potter might be the best chance the wizarding world had, but long habit made taking orders from the . . . young lord . . . difficult at best. He turned and started for the door.

Harry shook his head at the man's back, wondering yet again how the potions professor managed to get his robes to billow about his legs like that.

"Oh, and Professor?" Harry called to him. When Snape turned around, Harry said, "Thank you."

Snape gave a short nod, paused at the threshold, and then addressed Draco. "With our young king's background and lack of training, I expect him to make mistakes," he sneered, "but you should know better. I expect you to keep . . . *him* . . . informed." With that, he finally made his exit.

"I need something to drink," Harry remarked to Draco as he stared after the moody man. "That left a bad taste in my mouth."

"Dobby can get the master whatever he would like," the elf offered.

Harry had forgotten he was there. "Thank you, Dobby, but I think we have something here. Do deliver that message to the Head Elf, won't you?" he said. Harry didn't think the house elf would approve of what he was in the mood to drink.

"Yes, Master Harry, sir!" Dobby said, nodding enthusiastically, and disappeared with a soft 'pop'.

Draco shook off the annoyance he'd felt at Snape's words, and laughed. "We do," Draco said, referring to beverages. "Professor Snape does have that effect though, doesn't he? So . . . pumpkin juice, butterbeer, or . . . cola?"

"Cola?" Harry echoed, in surprise. "You know about soda pop?"

"I might be a pureblooded wizard, Harry, but that doesn't mean I'm *totally* ignorant of the Muggle world."

"But where did you get cola? What sort do you have?"

"I asked Dobby to get some," Draco replied casually. "I think we have orange, grape, and . . . something called 'pipsee'."

"Pepsi?"

Draco shrugged. "That might be it," he admitted.

Harry captured Draco by the waist, pulling him close and resting his forehead against the blond's. "You're a wonder, you know?"

Draco smirked, putting his arms around Harry's neck. "Of course!" he said, then leaned in for a kiss.

"But I expected *you* to have some firewhiskey or something available," Harry whispered in Draco's ear.

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"Harry?"

Harry turned, even as he recognised the voice. "Hello . . . Ron," he said cautiously, only just deciding not to use the redhead's surname. "Can I help you?"

Ron was having difficulty meeting Harry's eyes. "I – I'd like to apologise. I.... Well, I suppose I was being a prat. Actually, I know I was. Can you forgive me?"

"It's not *my* forgiveness you need," Harry replied. He appreciated the gesture, but he wouldn't give his forgiveness at any rate, until Draco was satisfied with the apology extended to him.

Ron remained still for a few moments, then nodded. "I'll apologise to him as soon as I can."

Harry hesitated. Ron had been his best friend for years, and he really didn't want to lose that, but the redhead had hurt him. Nor was it the first time. "You do realize that we may never be as close friends as we were, don't you?"

"Yeah," Ron replied sadly, "but I want to try. I just don't want to lose you entirely. I.... I realize you really didn't have a choice."

"Ron," Harry said gently. When Ron looked up at him, Harry said, "I *didn't* have a choice at first; not and be able to live with my conscience. But I'm in love with him, now." He paused as Ron gave a small wince, then saw the redhead accept the fact, and continued. "You know we're engaged."

Ron nodded. "Yeah. I know," he said quietly. He sighed. "I was there. I guess I'm okay with that. It's just going to take some getting used to, you know?"

Harry felt some hope, after hearing those words. "You extend your apologies to Draco. If you can convince him you're sincere, and he accepts the apology.... Well, we'll go from there, right?"

Ron's shoulders sagged a bit.

"I love him, Ron. I can't leave him out," Harry replied to that gesture.

Ron nodded, turned, and started to leave, then paused and turned back. "Do you know anything about why the stairs aren't working? Or—"



"Ask Dumbledore," Harry interrupted, his voice now hard with anger.

Ron nodded thoughtfully, as his guess was confirmed. "What did he do to piss you off?"

Harry's eyebrows rose at this sign of his friend's perspicacity, then he grinned wryly. "Same old thing, only more so," he replied.

Ron nodded again, returning his own wry grin, although a bit more weakly. "I thought so. See you soon," he said, then departed.

'Now we see if the leopard has changed his spots,' Harry thought as he watched Ron leave.

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After classes Harry and Draco had met back in their apartment and after a bit of snogging, settled down to cuddle with each other as they watched the fire.

"So did anything . . . odd happen today?" Harry asked.

"Mm . . . like what?"

"Nothing, eh?" Harry was disappointed. He had really hoped that Ron would apologise to Draco.

They sat there for a few more minutes, cuddling, before Draco broke the silence. "Well, I *was* accosted after last class."

Immediately, Harry was ready to go hex someone. "What? Who?" he asked fiercely.

"Relax, Ree," Draco said with a small laugh, "it was only the Weasel."

'*Oh! Maybe Ron did apologize,*' Harry thought.hopefully to himself, then something else Draco had said caught his attention. "Wait a mo'.... 'Ree'?"

Draco suddenly seemed a bit bashful and unsure of himself; something Harry had only glimpsed momentarily before. His fiancè was usually rather brash.

"Yes, well.... You don't mind, do you?" Draco asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied thoughtfully. After a slight pause, he decided, "No, it's rather sweet. Your pet name for me?" he guessed.

Draco nodded his head against Harry's chest, where he'd lain it. Harry bent his head, kissed the blond locks, and gently entangled one hand in them. What he could see of Draco's face was a bit more pink than usual.

"What did Ron have to say?" he asked softly. He was touched that Draco had given him a pet name, but changed the subject to lessen his fiancé's evident embarrassment over it.

Draco was grateful for the change of subject. "He apologised," he said with a shrug, indicating he didn't think much of it. "It was rather half-hearted," he added.

Which probably meant that Draco had thrown it back in Ron's face. And with Ron's pride, he wouldn't offer another.

"I accepted it anyway," Draco went on, surprising Harry greatly.

"Why?" he asked, his reaction evident in his voice.

Draco sighed, raising his head from its position on Harry's chest. "When are you going to wise up to the fact that I love you, you silly twit?" he replied, looking deep into Harry's eyes. And then it happened. He felt the last of his moorings to himself come loose, and he felt himself falling, losing himself, and being held only by Harry's gaze. The strange thing was, he felt safer than he ever had before.

At that moment, Draco's torque sank into his skin, becoming merely a tattoo-like design.

The odd thing was, Harry's didn't, although he didn't twig to that right away.

Harry's eyes dropped to Draco's neck. "Your torque...", he said.

Draco felt for it, only to feel nothing but skin. "It's gone!" he exclaimed, starting to panic.

"Sh.... It's all right. It's just . . . merged," Harry said soothingly.

Draco's eyes flew to Harry's torque. "But yours hasn't," he replied almost accusingly. He felt confused, and a bit betrayed.

Harry's hand flew to his neck, and the still-physically-manifest torque. An expression of dismay crossed his face.

"What were you telling me, Harry? 'When you have no more reservations'?" Draco's voice was softly bitter.

"I.. " Harry's shoulders slumped in defeat. "I'm scared, too," he confessed. "You know my fears about people close to me getting killed."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Draco said softly, but without a trace of resentment. "I haven't since my father planned to give me to You Know Who."

"That doesn't stop me worrying about you," Harry pointed out, frowning distractedly as he thought of his past failures.

"Well, stop, then," Draco said, irritated, causing Harry's attention to focus solely on him. "I'm no more helpless than you! Yes! All right! I might get killed. So might you, or anyone. Hell, Harry, some of the things we do in *lessons* could kill us!"

Harry's frown become more pronounced as he took that in. And, in truth, he had to agree. Dangerous spells learnt in DADA, dangerous potions made even more dangerous if mucked up, transfigurations that could go wrong, deadly plants.... He closed his eyes, sighed, and gave up, accepting Draco fully into his heart. His torque sank into his skin.

Draco's heart leapt as he saw Harry's torque become an elaborate design on his now-husband's tanned, slightly olive skin. Without his conscious volition he leapt into Harry's arms, his own arms going tightly around Harry's neck, and mashing their lips together *very* enthusiastically before backing off a bit and continuing the kiss just as passionately, but far less painfully.

Despite his surprise, Harry responded. They didn't make it to the bedroom, but made love to each other right there in front of the fire.

There were still trials and tribulations ahead of them, from winning free of Dumbledore's manipulations to regaining Harry's throne and defeating Voldemort, but they would face those troubles together, their combined will making them stronger.

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**END**

Sorry folks, but there will be no sequel. Maybe someday I'll continue this story, but right now the muse just isn't there.

Please stay tuned for original stories that are in the works.

