

Harry Potter

# Underwater Light

*Maya*

# Contents

<b>Underwater Light.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Chapter One	
<i>I Want My Life To Make More Sense .....</i>	<i>5</i>
Chapter Two	
<i>If I Reached Out A Hand.....</i>	<i>15</i>
Chapter Three	
<i>Down the Pub.....</i>	<i>31</i>
Chapter Four	
<i>Find Out Who You Are .....</i>	<i>45</i>
Chapter Five	
<i>The Young Order of the Phoenix.....</i>	<i>60</i>
Chapter Six	
<i>Expeditions .....</i>	<i>75</i>
Chapter Seven	
<i>Straight Talking.....</i>	<i>103</i>
Chapter Eight	
<i>Calming Storms.....</i>	<i>125</i>
Chapter Nine	
<i>The Onlooker Sees Most of the Game .....</i>	<i>144</i>
Chapter Ten	
<i>The Last Test.....</i>	<i>161</i>
Chapter Eleven	
<i>When It Darkens.....</i>	<i>185</i>
Chapter Twelve	
<i>Look Before You Leap.....</i>	<i>211</i>
Chapter Thirteen	
<i>The Way We Were.....</i>	<i>237</i>
Chapter Fourteen	
<i>Shadows of Ourselves.....</i>	<i>265</i>
Chapter Fifteen	
<i>Keeping Faith.....</i>	<i>296</i>
Chapter Sixteen	
<i>Disaster Beckons.....</i>	<i>328</i>
Chapter Seventeen	
<i>We All Fall.....</i>	<i>354</i>
Chapter Eighteen	
<i>Condemned .....</i>	<i>380</i>
Chapter Nineteen	
<i>Exile .....</i>	<i>412</i>
Chapter Twenty	
<i>The Summons.....</i>	<i>446</i>

Chapter Twenty-One	
<i>The Spy at Hogwarts</i> .....	462
Chapter Twenty-Two	
<i>The End</i> .....	478
Epilogue.....	501

# Underwater Light

**Fandom:** Harry Potter.

**Author:** Maya.

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**Characters:** Draco Malfoy. Ginny Weasley. Harry Potter. Hermione Granger. Pansy Parkinson. Ron Weasley.

**Pairings:** Draco/Harry. Hermione/Ron.

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**Summary:** Featuring an extremely depressed Harry in a war-torn wizarding world, about to get the shock of his life when he discovers that Draco Malfoy is slightly more important to him than he would have ever guessed. Including a very odd friendship, lots of angst, suspicions, conflicted loyalties, clueless Ron, on-the-warpath Hermione and two very messed-up boys.

**Warnings:** Character Death. Torture.

**Note:** This fic was written prior to the publication of OotP, and although it utilises some aspects of that (namely, the existence of the Order) many things are incorrect with regards canon of the last three books.

# Chapter One: I Want My Life To Make More Sense

*This road is crooked, cracked and wrong  
They've got the odds stacked nice and high  
I don't know how they get along  
Me, I just internalise.*

Harry thought about himself as he entered the water. Or... perhaps he did not. He thought about the person he saw reflected in the eyes of others.

Harry Potter.

The Boy Who Lived.

The boy whose miraculous defeat of Voldemort had become so absolutely futile because he had been unable to stop his resurrection. Because he had been a vital part of his rising again, more powerful than ever.

The boy who had been all but worshipped, yet could not even save his schoolmate.

Just another helpless child, but one who was more trouble because Voldemort wanted him dead, and because he had nobody to care for him.

Harry Potter, the boy who failed.

The one they were all so nice to. The one they all pitied.

It was like... being the hero of a story, for four years, and then suddenly being a bit player again. An insignificant annoyance, as the bleak grey war whirled past the windows of Hogwarts.

Everyone had a tired, strained expression on their faces which turned into a false smile as Harry passed. He could hear their thoughts by now - poor injured Harry, we mustn't make Harry feel bad...

As if he was still the child.

It had been that way for three years, and nobody had ever let up an inch in their ceaseless, grinding attempt to Make Harry Feel Better.

Pity is such a remorseless, wrenching thing. Something you offer when you see something weak, and cannot summon up the energy for contempt. Something so far away from love.

The pressure of all those pitying stares drove him into corners, into the back of classrooms, under the covers of his bed. Anywhere to get away from the Valentines everyone sent, all imitations of Ginny Weasley's second year tribute. From the Quidditch matches where Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs seemed to lose deliberately, so that Harry Potter could be ecstatic about a glorious victory like that of his third year.

Harry had almost grown resigned to it. They wanted to do something for him, why stop them? It was all - inevitable, and entirely useless.

And now had come this.

The final indignity, the final insulting gesture to a pathetic wounded creature. The next Triwizard Tournament, held three years later.

Let Harry get over it, let Harry win, let him see that nothing bad has happened and then we can all clap and the orphan boy will be happy. Won't that be nice?

He had almost flung it back in their faces, those terrible pitying faces. But in the end, he complied as he always did.

If that was the price, if they had to convince themselves he could get over Voldemort's resurrection so they could get on with their lives... then so be it.

Harry loved some of them. He wanted them to be content.

So he flew his Firebolt against the dragon. He accepted Parvati Patil's invitation to the ball, and danced with her until she drifted off to her boyfriend, Dean Thomas. (Then he drank some of the water Seamus Finnigan had Transfigured into rum, just enough to make everything mercifully numb but not enough to make anyone worry.)

Harry remembered the ball very clearly, the heat and light of the room overpowering. He had felt dazed and sick after a while, trying to smile at everyone who passed. Receiving the smiles of Hagrid and his wife, and Dumbledore, Hermione and Ron, as if they were unforced. Eventually everything blurred around him, the dazzling lights mingling with everyone's hair. It seemed as if a light had been turned on a still-wet picture and paint was running, colours blending and changing.

The figures of Hermione and Ron dancing becoming one blurred shape. Dumbledore's blue eyes falling dizzily into the sky-pictured ceiling of the hall. Padma Patil's black hair suddenly streaming out across the room to mingle with the sharp shock of Malfoy's white-blond locks, as he sat at the Slytherin table getting systematically drunk.

It had been a nightmare. Harry had eventually leaned his head in his arms, overwhelmed with slow pressing despair, and pretended he was simply tired.

The second task could be nothing to that.

He had gone to the prefects' bathroom, quite legitimately this time because of course he was a prefect, how could poor dear Harry not be a prefect? He had figured out his clue. He had found the Gillyweed neatly placed on his pillow by loyal Dobby, still feigning a devotion which must have long faded.

God, he was grateful for the coolness of the water now, the murky green swirling around him, absorbing him and protecting him from stares. He almost wished he could stay down here forever.

What if he did? Harry thought suddenly. He knew that Gillyweed could be dispelled with a wish. He

could just to tumble down to the bottom and his lungs would burst with the effort to breathe. Then there would be nothing but silence and washing water forever. But how everyone else would feel... and how right he would have proved them. He would have become that weak child they believed him, unable to bear it.

Harry had never been one to take the easy way out. Even now, he could fight. Even now, he wanted to fight.

So... he would find Ron, then. Find Ron, and wait by all the hostages, and get points and praised for his gallantry.

Find Ron.

Harry swam through the all-enveloping waters, swam listlessly through all the dangers which would not touch him. Swam grateful for the soothing movement of water against his tired body.

Swam until he found the place where the mermen lingered, where the hostages were tied up, and his eyes searched wearily for Ron's bright red hair.

Which was when something reached inside his chest and twisted his heart as if it was a Portkey, turning the centre of his being to transport him to another, much more immediate and terrifying world.

He stared in panic at the empty green of the lake, stared desperately at the strange faces of the hostages. He felt as if the Gillyweed had not worked and he was suddenly drowning, starved of oxygen and with his eyesight failing, refusing to see what was before him. He couldn't help seeing.

There in the lake, the moody turquoise waters giving a stained-glass cast to his pale face and his tendrils of silver hair drifting in the lazy currents, was Draco Malfoy.

\* \* \*

Harry utterly forgot about the Gillyweed, and choked on water, flailing, panicked, convinced he was drowning.

He couldn't breathe.

Later, he realised this was shock.

Somewhat helplessly, still gulping, he tumbled in the water in a desperate attempt to put his head between his knees. He'd heard that was good for... for...

Oh, what was happening?

Malfoy refused to go away. He remained on the rock, his hair describing silver scribbles against the green. It was as if the lake had suffered from a hostile Slytherin takeover. Could this be some kind of *joke*? No, Dumbledore would kill Malfoy if he tried anything like that.

It had to be a mistake, Harry decided. Or maybe there had been some fiendish trick in the riddle, and it had really meant you had to rescue your worst enemy.

*God, I have to know!*

Harry was aware of the role he was supposed to play. He was supposed to be down here first, and then wait behind for all the hostages. That was what hopelessly heroic Harry did. And suddenly, he couldn't bear it any more.

*I'm so sick of all this crap!*

*I have to know.*

Harry tore at the ropes which bound Malfoy. He was taking his hostage, and then he would find out what the hell was going on!

He wasn't a stupid child any more. And if the hostages really had been about to die, he might have left Malfoy behind him.

It hadn't been so difficult holding onto Ron. Of course, Harry had felt less uncomfortable touching Ron.

He settled with linking an arm around Malfoy's waist, and thanking heaven the boy was slim. A positive aspect of Malfoy? Alert the Ministry.

Harry set his face, forcing down the panic that wanted to grab people's collars, gibber at them and demand an explanation. He took several deep breaths of water.

Then he surged upwards to the light.

Brightness and clarity lay ahead. Simplicity.

Just then, Harry didn't give a damn what anybody thought. He wanted reasons, and he wanted them now.

He broke the surface of the lake, taking a calming gulp of air.

The sky above him was a beautiful, simple blue, stilling the tumult of Harry's brain. He wished away the Gillyweed and began to swim lightly, easily, towards shore. Which was when Malfoy opened his eyes and gave a stifled scream. He then made a sterling attempt to strangle Harry.

Harry gave a startled gasp, and had time for nothing more.

They sank, Harry fighting to surface again, limbs twisting and robes billowing in the water. Amidst the green blur and black swathes of material, Harry caught a glimpse of Malfoy's pale angular face, the features drawn taut by fear, the grey eyes wide with horror. Harry recognised that look from the mirror, washing his face after a nightmare. He knew how to deal with this.

He grasped Malfoy by the shoulders, and tried to mouth distinctly.

"Stop it, or you drown!"

Malfoy blinked. Underwater and scared out of his mind, he looked younger than he had when he was



eleven.

Slowly he nodded, hair flaring about his face in a silver corona.

Harry gripped him harder and tried to help him keep afloat as they surfaced once more. His whole body was tense with terror.

"Okay, Malfoy, breathe. Hey, it's all right," said Harry Potter, Sucker For People In Distress and completely disgusted with himself for being such a pushover.

"All right?" snapped Malfoy, winner of the Hogwarts' Total Prat Award seventh year running. "I'm soaking wet in a lake, clinging to a complete idiot and trying not to have hysterics. How does that qualify as all right?"

"Shut up and I'll get you out of the lake."

"Why am I in the lake, Potter?" inquired Malfoy in his most supercilious tones.

"I don't know!" Harry cried in exasperation. "I was hoping you could tell me!"

"How am I supposed to know? Dumbledore sent for me, and I came up to his office, and then suddenly I was unconscious!"

"There wasn't an explanation?"

Malfoy looked shifty, a not uncommon expression on him.

"Well," he temporised. "There may have been."

"What?"

"I didn't hear it, did I," Malfoy returned sharply. "I was late. Malfoys don't go scurrying off to the headmaster's office straight away. Malfoys are fashionably late."

His haughty voice faltered for a second as he looked down at the lapping water, and Harry softened fractionally. He might be acting obnoxious because he was frightened. Of course, in that case he must have been in a state of paralysing terror for the entire course of his schooldays.

"I didn't know you were scared of the water, Malfoy."

"We hardly do show-and-tell about our feelings, Potter. And everybody has phobias." Malfoy's voice turned malicious. "I recall a certain person swooning over Dementors..."

"Shut up right now, Malfoy! I wish I'd left you tied up with the other hostages."

"Hostages?"

Harry winced and wondered if his ears were bleeding. "Yeah," he answered cautiously, hoping that it would not provoke another unholy scream.

"What, you mean like - the Triwizard Tournament?"

"No, Malfoy, I mean bandits have kidnapped half the school. Yes, the Tournament!"

"But - bugger it, how...?"

"Clearly," said Harry, "there has been some horrible mistake."

"Like your birth?" was Malfoy's helpful suggestion.

"And once I get to Professor Dumbledore, I'm sure -"

"And here, I believe, comes Hogwarts Champion Harry Potter now!"

Lee Jordan, the twins' friend and the old Quidditch commentator, had become a surprising success in the Ministry and had taken Bagman's place as Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Rumour had it Percy Weasley was green with jealousy. Rumour also had it that he was a bit of a hog when it came to the magic microphone, though he always glanced uneasily over his shoulder whenever Professor McGonagall was around. Just now, Harry wished Professor McGonagall would cosh him.

"The whole school has been in fevered suspense about the identity of Harry's hostage, since his best friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley are in the audience. Everyone's agog to see who the lucky girl is..."

Just then, Malfoy made a noise which suggested asphyxiation.

Harry realised he was splashing up onto the shore with Draco Malfoy, their arms around each other, Malfoy's head practically on his shoulder, both of them absolutely soaking wet. In front of the entire school.

"It... it looks like..." Lee's uncertain voice trailed off with a weak, "Well. Good heavens."

Hogwarts stared at them for all of five thunderstruck seconds, and then erupted into a frenzy of noise.

"Bugger," said Harry.

Malfoy paused to deliberate, and then launched into a rather impressive stream of obscenity. Only Madam Pomfrey did not seem paralysed. She sprang on them as they made their way onto dry land.

"Honestly, this stupid Tournament," she fussed. "Ducking delicate children into a nasty cold lake..."

"I'm NOT delicate," said Harry and Malfoy in cross unison.

Harry gave Malfoy a slightly puzzled look.

"Of course you're not, Draco," Madam Pomfrey said soothingly. "Look at you," she continued. "You can't stand up straight. You look like you're going to be sick."

"I would have been, if Potter had worn swimming trunks," Malfoy murmured, and extricated himself irritably from Harry, standing up straight out of sheer bloody-mindedness. Harry grabbed him again as he staggered.

Malfoy scowled and Madam Pomfrey seized him, handling him as easily as if he had been Gabrielle Delacour.

"Tch," she said. "What the headmaster can be thinking of... you'll be in shock next."

"I will not," snapped Malfoy, who still looked far less assured than usual as he struggled with Madam Pomfrey. He seemed ill and his hair was all over his face.

He peered through the plastered blond locks and his eyes widened in horror as Madam Pomfrey announced briskly: "Have to get you out of these wet clothes immediately," and pulled his robes over his head.

Nurse undresses student!

Further sensation around the school.

Harry was the first to realise that, in fact, Malfoy was wearing a full set of Muggle clothes underneath his robes.

He thanked God. He had had enough trauma for the day, though he would never have guessed that Malfoy was into the current Muggle clothes fad in Hogwarts. Of course, he'd definitely never given any thought to what Malfoy wore under his robes. Madam Pomfrey did not seem to share Harry's relief.

"Ridiculous things you children are wearing," she commented, and grabbed the edge of Malfoy's sweater.

She had lifted it about an inch, revealing a gleam of white skin, when Malfoy intervened vehemently.

"I will not have pictures taken of me without my shirt on!" he exclaimed. "At least, not without substantial financial remuneration," he added thoughtfully.

"Pic-" Harry's attention was finally diverted from the spectacle of Malfoy and Madam Pomfrey to the gang of photographers bearing down upon them.

"Oh, God."

Behind him, he heard Malfoy break into another string of curses, interspersing them with demands for a blanket.

Voices burst in on Harry from all sides.

"Harry, can you tell us - ?"

"Harry, how does it feel to be in the lead - ?"

"Harry, isn't that Draco Malfoy - ?"

"- the son involved in that tragedy - ?"

"Here's your blanket, Mr Malfoy, and may I say that I have never heard such language from a student in my life!"

"Fairly shoddy blanket -"

Harry was blinded by the white light of snapping cameras, but he could make a shrewd guess as to which speech was Madame Pomfrey's.

And of course, Malfoy's cool drawl was unmistakable.

Harry blinked into the painful lights, surrounded by the clicking of the cameras all around him as Madam Pomfrey wrapped a blanket tightly around him. He felt the weight of those stares press down upon him again, those wondering, pitying, expectant stares reducing him to that small, dumbfounded child...

"Oh, don't question the poor wounded orphan," sneered Malfoy. "He finds it hard forming coherent sentences on his best days."

Harry straightened up and shot Malfoy a venomous look.

"Harry, can you explain -" said a lone photographer.

Harry focused on her. "No, I can't," he said in a clear strong voice. "It seems there's been some kind of mistake about my hostage. I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will have a good explanation, though - and I plan to ask him as soon as possible."

\* \* \*

"I can think of no explanation but the obvious one," Dumbledore said calmly. Harry had considerable affection for his eccentric headmaster. He was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. However, the very respect he felt for him had always, in some measure, kept him on his best behaviour.

Now, however, he was going absolutely berserk.

"What do you mean, you can't...? How are the hostages even *chosen*?" Harry shouted. "Did you do it? How does it work? Who made the mistake?"

Dumbledore, impassive in the face of a raving boy, ate a sherbet lemon. To Harry's mind, this was heartless levity.

"The Goblet of Fire chooses the hostages, of course," he said patiently. "Really, Harry, do you think we only use an object of such mystical power for selecting champions? The Goblet is a fount of occult knowledge. I do think we can trust it."

"Bollocks!"

Harry had never sworn in front of a teacher before.

"Didn't it select me as a champion because Crouch fiddled with it?" he demanded. "Occult knowledge, I don't think! It'd probably take Voldemort less Dark Magic than hexing a vegetable!"

"Harry, sit down and at least attempt to calm down."

Dumbledore paused and looked expectantly up at Harry, like a serene old monarch giving audience to an erring subject. Harry, who hadn't realised he'd stood up, returned his glance with a distraught but defiant look.

"Naturally since the last -" *time when you ruined everything, got Cedric killed and helped raise the Dark Lord* "- unfortunate incident, we have placed extensive safeguards over the Goblet. I assure you, Harry, it has not been interfered with."

Harry made a helpless and incoherent protest, but Dumbledore stilled him with a gesture.

"Moreover, Harry, I fail to see why Voldemort would have done such a thing. If the extent of his dark plans is to give Mr. Malfoy a dunking, we might as well all call it a day."

"But... but why?" Harry stammered.

Dumbledore ate another sweet.

"I really couldn't tell you, Harry. I hardly know Mr. Malfoy, I'm sorry to say. I haven't had time of late to become properly acquainted with all my students. Anyone can see he is an unhappy, hostile young man, but considering the tragedy, who can blame him?"

Dumbledore gave him a piercing look.

"Surely you know him better than that? In light of current evidence."

"No!" Harry almost screamed. "I *don't* know him, I mean - well, obviously I - I don't know anything *about* him. I mean, I *hate* him, I absolutely loathe him, I think he's -"

"Refrain from thumping my desk, if you would. It seems to me," Dumbledore observed placidly, "that this loathing is a little excessive. We all have a common enemy, do we not? Mr. Malfoy is on our side."

Harry's hands clenched into fists.

"In any case, Harry... I have no answers for you." Dumbledore sighed. "There seem to be fewer and fewer answers these days. I am, however, a little busy. If you would be so good..."

Harry looked at Dumbledore's face, more weary and even more lined than he remembered it, and felt his selfish panic collapse in on itself.

Dumbledore was holding the war-torn wizarding world together. Everybody knew Fudge was an ostrich with his head in the sand, everybody knew about the disappearances, everyone was so scared... Dumbledore was the only thing that stood between wizards and chaos. And, Harry realised

with a slow pain in his chest, Dumbledore was a very old man.

"I'm - sorry, sir." His voice was a whisper. "If there's anything I can do -"

"Oh no, Harry. Don't worry about it."

That was that. Harry Potter always had to be the protected child. Harry Potter always had to be part of the burden.

Harry's shoulders sagged.

"All right. Thank you, sir."

What more could he do or say?

"One more thing, Harry."

Harry paused on the threshold.

"Remember the exact wording of the clue."

*Ponder this...*

The door shut in Harry's face, leaving him staring at the darkness.

*We've taken what you'll sorely miss.*

He didn't understand. But he was going to work this out.

# Chapter Two: If I Reached Out A Hand

*Every time I try the words make little sense  
Until you're gone, and everything must change  
And so I must resolve to say it  
It's just me myself again and I'm just talking to the wall  
It's just me myself and I deciding on a plan  
Deciding on my plan  
And everything must change, change  
Inside and out*

Harry stumbled into the Gryffindor common room. He blinked, holding up a hand to shield himself from the light and to shield his confused eyes from the others. A burst of greeting immediately assaulted him.

"Good on you, Harry!" Seamus.

"Poor Harry, imagine saving Malfoy!" Ginny.

"That was brilliant, Harry, but couldn't you have managed to duck him a bit more?" Ron.

"So what did Professor Dumbledore say?" Hermione.

And now Hermione had asked the obvious question, and each of those faces had turned to him, sure that he could explain everything.

Harry felt utterly exhausted.

"He has no idea what happened," he replied. "Nor do I."

There was silence, and then a great, hearty burst of conversation.

"Well, whatever it was, you were amazing!" Seamus exclaimed.

"You must have gone into shock when you saw Malfoy there," commented Hermione.

*Malfoy.*

*God. I have to think about Malfoy.*

He had to get away, and then he had to think about Malfoy.

He looked around the room. Neville Longbottom waved a goblet at him, his suit jacket and dungarees somewhat lightening Harry's mood.

Now that the wizarding world was split into two halves, both halves had become extremist. You killed Muggles or you loved them.

Those opposing Voldemort had therefore embraced every Muggle custom they could lay their hands

on. Muggle clothes were commonly worn outside the classroom.

People from pureblood wizarding families like Neville were getting things slightly wrong, though. Harry still treasured Colin Creevey's photo of the 'Tutu Incident' in fifth year. Hermione laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"You look a bit tired, Harry."

He looked up at her with gratitude.

"I am," he said fervently.

"Maybe you should get some rest."

Harry's fingers closed around her hand in mute appreciation. She squeezed back with that terrible sympathy.

Everyone waved to him as he left, and then he was free.

Harry leaned against the door. Now he had to try and understand.

*We've taken what you'll sorely miss.*

Why Malfoy?

\* \* \*

He could understand it not being Ron. He loved Ron, he would always love Ron - but a distance had grown between them, a tiny fraction which nevertheless left Harry feeling lonely.

Ron had never been terribly good at empathy. He had not understood, three years ago, that Harry would never have entered the Triwizard Tournament without telling him. Now Harry was in even graver need of understanding, and Ron could not give it. It didn't help matters that Ron had been devoting so many hours to being Hermione's besotted boyfriend.

If it had been Hermione... She was the smart one, the one among them all who came closest to understanding.

Or if it had been Sirius. Sirius had been away for Harry's fifth and sixth year, but now he was teaching at school, helping with Lupin's workload. Lupin was trying to deal with Herbology and Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Sirius had been welcomed with that half-desperate warmth shown so often these days.

Harry had hoped they would grow closer, though those golden thirteen-year-old dreams of an adopted father had long faded.

Still, if it had been Hermione, or Sirius...

If it had been anyone but Malfoy!



Harry walked quickly across the room and sat on the windowsill, curling his legs under him, pressing his cheek against the cold glass.

He shut his eyes.

So. Malfoy.

A pale sneering face came instantly into focus against his closed lids. Harry was vaguely startled by how clear and immediate the image was. He supposed he was familiar enough with Malfoy. The prat had been around for years, after all. But what was familiarity? Familiarity bred contempt. In the case of Harry's familiarity with Malfoy, it bred contempt like rabbits.

What had changed over the past three years?

Very little.

Malfoy was still the same malicious little git, still the one who got so far under Harry's skin it was amazing he didn't hit bone. Harry still absolutely loathed him.

Except now, apparently, according to some damn goblet and his own traitorous subconscious, he didn't.

How had *Malfoy* changed over the past three years?

Very little.

No... perhaps that wasn't fair.

There had been the - Lucius Malfoy thing. Malfoy's father had been killed early into their fifth year. The rumour that had filtered through the wizarding world was he'd tried a doublecross on Voldemort in an attempt to gain more power, and Voldemort had executed him. Harry didn't know the details. With the war going on, the families disappearing, fear everywhere... nobody cared enough to investigate.

Harry had even felt a grim satisfaction, remembering how Lucius Malfoy had almost killed Ginny, how he had stood in a circle of Death Eaters and watched a boy of his son's age duel hopelessly with the Dark Lord, and laughed...

In retrospect, that satisfaction seemed almost horrible. Harry had never felt the smallest shred of sympathy for Malfoy. All he had thought was - 'Well... that will shut him up.'

*They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back!*

Draco Malfoy had been wrong - his father had been one of the first to go.

And Harry had, almost unconsciously, agreed with Ron's blunt verdict of "It served him right."

Malfoy had never seemed particularly grief-stricken. He and his usual gang had turned up to Lupin's Young Order of the Phoenix, to the slight surprise of many, and had immediately become its most disruptive element, to the surprise of nobody at all.

Dumbledore had been right, then. *Mr Malfoy is on our side.*

So Draco Malfoy wasn't a Death Eater.

Wait. Do we have a character insight here?

*Surely you know him*, Dumbledore had said.

Malfoy had always been extremely annoying, but despite his Death Eater father he had never seemed murderous. He hadn't even retaliated to Hermione's slap in third year. He said disgusting things and played dirtier than a professional mud wrestler, but he wasn't a killer. Fine. Harry was prepared to concede that he was not the heart of blackest evil. He didn't see how this led to him being what Harry would miss most in the world. After all, Malfoy was the most irritating person he'd ever known.

Harry pressed his face harder against the window.

It *bothered* Harry that he had not felt the slightest sympathy for Malfoy. Harry liked to think he was a - fairly decent person. He had told Blaise Zabini that he was sorry about his mother, and nobody knew whether Mrs Zabini's disappearance had been death, flight or conversion to the Dark Side.

That was the most irritating thing about Malfoy. He was the only one who could bring Harry down to his own level.

Oh, he could disobey the Dark Lord's order for him to beg under the Imperius Curse... and then he went off and behaved like a prat because of Draco Malfoy.

Mustn't let Malfoy see him sooty and with broken spectacles. Mustn't let Malfoy see him led off to the infirmary because of the Dementors. Must beat Malfoy at Quidditch.

Harry suddenly remembered the start of his sixth year.

He was sixteen, and the growth spurt he had been praying for had finally arrived over the summer. Sadly, still lacking manly muscles, but at least he wasn't ridiculously short any more.

He knew who would be. That was why he had been dashing around the train like a maniac, more animated than he had been for a year and more, desperate to find Malfoy and laugh down at him.

Harry recalled with a peculiar intensity the fierce spurt of anger inside him when he had run into a carriage and met a pair of icy grey eyes exactly on a level with his own. He had been *furious*. It felt as if Malfoy had grown deliberately to annoy Harry. Which was absurd.

But he had been furious all the same. Malfoy had that effect on him.

Like in the Young Order meetings when Malfoy would make an off-colour remark about Muggles, and Harry would snap out of a dreary reverie into outrage. Or during those monotonous Quidditch matches when Harry would suddenly be galvanised into action by Malfoy's ever-spiteful face in the crowds. The boy would make a show of himself supporting Hufflepuff as long as it got to Harry.

Not to mention the Slytherin/Gryffindor matches. In the last one Malfoy had, according to rumour,

kept a Quidditch rulebook with him and ticked off every rule as he broke them. He cheated furiously and shamelessly, but he most definitely played to win. He and Malfoy had ended up screaming at each other until Madam Hooch forcibly dragged Harry away. Harry had been alive with seething rage.

Harry had felt... alive.

Harry got up from the window ledge, very carefully.

He walked to his bed and lay down on it, watching the well-known slide of faint moonlight and shadows on the wall opposite him. Light writhed palely against plaster, as if pinned there. He didn't like Malfoy. He had never liked Malfoy.

*We've taken what you'll sorely miss.*

But Malfoy had somehow become - important to him. He was the challenge that nobody else dared to be. He made Harry want to get up and strangle him, but at least he made Harry want to get up. He was - providing a motivation for Harry's life.

This was messed up.

And this had been going on for years. Not that Malfoy had even done much. He had simply been himself, a needle under Harry's skin, a constant infuriating pain. Harry had never even realised - and now that he had, he was appalled.

Life had actually come to a stage when he was clinging to anger to help him live it. When only anger could make the blood pound in his veins, crackle along the very ends of his hair, bring the world into sharp focus and make him react to it.

It was as if he was an adrenaline junkie, and Malfoy was his dealer. And this - this had somehow become more important to him than his friends.

What did it say about him, and his life?

This was an insult to those he loved. And if Malfoy was important to him, at all, in however twisted and terrible a way... it was terrible that Harry hadn't been sorry about his father. Harry sat up and drew the curtains on his bed.

He was horrified to realise that he was sharply focused on the world now. He was not lost in depression, and his very breath was coming out fast and strong.

He twisted on the bed, as if trying to jack-knife through water away from it all.

This couldn't be true. He wasn't certain - it didn't seem entirely true.

It seemed uncomfortably close to the truth, though.

He had to find out everything about this. If Malfoy was important to him, he could not stay this hostile rival. There had to be a reason why he could affect Harry. Harry had to find that out too.

He'd gone as far as he could alone. And Dumbledore couldn't help him.

There was no use thinking any longer. But he did think, he kept thinking. He thought as he tossed restlessly on the bed, forgetting to take off his clothes or slide under the covers.

Tomorrow...

Tomorrow he would have to confront Malfoy.

\* \* \*

"Harry, you seem a bit jumpy."

Harry jumped.

"I - uh, no. I'm fine," he said uneasily.

Hermione was looking at him in concern, her piece of toast poised in the air. Harry tried desperately to look as if he hadn't been up half the night, wasn't wearing the same clothes as yesterday and really, really wasn't watching the doors to see when Malfoy would arrive. Hermione looked at him for another long moment, and then returned to her toast.

*I'm just looking at the door, Harry tried to project to the world. The door. Fascinating door. Haven't appreciated it properly over the past six and a half years, must appreciate it now.*

Breakfast wore on, and Malfoy did not arrive.

Oh come on! This was disgraceful. Breakfast was the most important meal of the day. People shouldn't go around recklessly skipping it.

Even Crabbe and Goyle were there, and Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini, all of his usual crowd. Otherwise known as 'Malfoy's court'.

Harry stared across at them until they noticed and gave him nasty looks. He looked away in a hurry.

*It's not my fault. I just want to talk to him. People should eat breakfast.*

"Harry, you're not eating any breakfast," Hermione said.

Harry, extremely distracted, took some toast and spread it, and took a large bite. Then he realised that he had just bitten into toast and porridge.

This was ridiculous.

This continued all day.

*Seven years, thought Harry. Almost seven years of wishing he would fall into some black hole and the day I'm trying to talk to him he disappears off the face of the earth.*

Oh, no. He couldn't be one of the disappearances, could he? Not now.

Harry was shocked to feel something like fear.

This disturbing emotion was thankfully wiped away when he spied the palest hair in school among a group of Slytherins going to Potions class.

*Right!*

"Come on," he said to Ron and Hermione. "Quickly now, to Potions. No lollygagging."

*Lollygagging?* He was going mad.

No time to think about that. He would go to Potions, and then Malfoy would push disdainfully past his desk as usual, tossing him a rude comment, and instead of gritting his teeth and resisting the urge to start throwing punches he would...

Um. Well. He hadn't quite worked out that part yet. But say something, definitely. Words. That was the plan.

The plan was entirely useless.

Malfoy didn't go near Harry's desk. Every other Slytherin went by, though, muttering even more virulent things than usual. They seemed to think the entire affair was a plot to humiliate their chief.

Harry had no idea what Malfoy thought. He sat at the back of the classroom as usual, and was very quiet.

It would have been lovely if Snape had been quiet as well.

"Well, well, well, Mr Potter," he said, his face looking more disgruntled than ever. "It seems your plan is not only to glorify yourself but to make the Slytherins look bad. Congratulations on a very childish display."

"But Professor," Ron said in outrage, "Harry couldn't possibly -"

"It was a mistake," Hermione chimed in. "Harry didn't -"

Harry turned around in his chair to see if Malfoy agreed with Snape.

Malfoy was staring straight ahead, his face perfectly blank. It was a narrow, ascetic face not made for expression, and Harry had no idea of the thoughts going on behind it.

"Mr Potter," Snape called out. "Eyes to the front of the classroom, please. Where the lesson is going on? Thank you."

Harry could feel himself blush. This was all terribly embarrassing.

So he'd talk to Malfoy after the lesson.

He didn't. Malfoy was encircled in a crowd of Slytherins as he walked out. The same went for lunch,

and Care of Magical Creatures, and the hallways, and dinner. They clustered around him like bees around a flower, and Harry found it extraordinarily frustrating.

Why do you all like him so much? He's an annoying git!

Years and years of Malfoy showing up all over the place to laugh at Harry, and now people decided to build a human fortress around him.

And then he was back at the Gryffindor common room after a very, very tiring day in which absolutely nothing had been accomplished. He felt dispirited and frustrated and...

He'd had enough. Harry was tired of hanging around Malfoy waiting for the boy to grant him an audience.

If he wanted to go talk to Malfoy, he was going to go talk to Malfoy.

"I'm off for a walk," he announced to the common room at large, and sprinted away before anyone could offer to accompany him.

\* \* \*

Halfway to the Slytherin dungeons, Harry changed his mind.

This was ludicrous. He didn't want to talk to Malfoy. He hated the prat. He certainly didn't want to go wandering into the midst of the Slytherins and making a fool of himself in front of Malfoy.

Oh, God. That senseless pang of anxiety again.

Harry remembered hearing Ginny's Valentine in second year, and the clutch of desperation in his chest when he realised Malfoy was going to hear it too. The stupid idiot's opinion mattered to him, for some reason.

He had to find out why.

Harry took a deep breath and hastened through the corridors, concentrating on getting to the Slytherin common room before he could lose his nerve.

Once he had reached it, he hammered on the stretch of bare stone that Harry remembered was the Slytherin entrance. Just like the Slytherins, he reflected, to have an entrance hidden from the other houses. Slytherins were always doing things like that, and appearing in the bottom of lakes where nobody wanted to see them, and then refusing to talk to people all day.

He hit the wall more vehemently.

The wall behind him slid open, and he whirled around and tried to look as if he had been facing that way all along.

"Honestly, Pritchard, have you forgotten the Slytherin password *again?*" said Malcolm Baddock, a small and rather shifty-looking fourth year.

He stopped and stared when he saw Harry Potter, champion of all things Gryffindor, looking rumpled, decidedly nervous and standing on the Slytherin threshold.

"Er," said Harry, losing control of his tongue at the crucial moment.

Baddock blinked, and looked stunned when Harry was still there.

Harry wished desperately for self-possession. "Er," he said again, cursing himself. "Er. Um. Could I see Malfoy, please?"

There. Not exactly eloquent, but it certainly got his message across.

Malcolm Baddock stared for just one more moment, and then turned and pelted away with a yell of, "Everybody! Come *quick!*"

In a couple of seconds, Harry found himself faced with a huge crowd of Slytherins, jostling and peering to get a look at this unbelievable sight.

To the fore were Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, wearing identical scowls. This had been a bad idea.

"What do you want, Potter?" inquired Blaise, his dark face suspicious and distinctly unwelcoming.

Pansy crossed her arms, as if Harry was going to attempt storming the common room. Harry swallowed. "Could I see Malfoy, please?"

Oh, good. Now he had turned into a parrot, hysterically repeating the same phrase over and over.

"Why?" Pansy demanded stonily. "What else do you plan to do?"

"Nothing! I didn't do anything!" Harry protested. "I just need to talk to him!"

Blaise and Pansy exchanged hard glances, and seemed to come to a decision.

"Well you can't," Pansy informed him curtly, making to close the entrance.

"What the hell is going on here?" demanded an imperious and bad-tempered voice. "Some of us are trying to get some *work* done, you know..."

There was no mistaking that aristocratic tone, nor indeed that white-blond head as Malfoy made his way to the front of the crowd.

Harry simultaneously felt relief, and a flash of the fear he had felt when he thought Malfoy had disappeared.

He realised that he was not only afraid of what might happen to Malfoy, but of what Malfoy might do. If Malfoy was important to him - Malfoy could hurt him. And Malfoy liked to hurt people.

When Malfoy reached the front of the crowd, he stood staring for a moment, grey eyes wide. He seemed as thunderstruck as Malcolm Baddock had been.

"You!" he exclaimed blankly. Then, collecting himself in an instant and rather to Harry's envy, he asked coldly, "What do *you* want?"

*I will remain calm.*

"I want to talk to you," said Harry, and reddened uncontrollably.

Malfoy leaned against the doorframe with careless ease, his arms folded. He watched him with those opaque eyes, reflective, silvery and giving away nothing.

Harry noticed he was wearing a white jumper and jeans. He was one of the very few Slytherins in Muggle clothes.

"Well, here I am," Malfoy replied. "Talk."

Harry looked around at the ranks of dangerous-looking Slytherins, arrayed in the mouth of the door like teeth in a shark's mouth.

"Couldn't we talk alone?" he asked desperately.

Malfoy looked vaguely startled, but then waved down the outraged buzz behind him.

"I suppose," he said slowly. He stepped out from the threshold, Harry backing up a few paces as he did so.

The stone wall slid closed, replacing the stunned faces of the Slytherins. Harry was pleased by this improvement.

Then he looked back at Malfoy, who was now leaning casually against the wall, and got back to the business of being nervous.

He was beginning to understand why making a fool of himself in front of Malfoy was so terrible. Malfoy had far too much self-possession for a boy his age, and it seemed to put you at an automatic disadvantage.

"So - er," said Harry. "Shall we, er, find an empty classroom to talk in, or something?"

He certainly didn't want to hang around in the corridors where anyone could spot them and spread God-knew-what rumours all over the school.

Malfoy raised a pale eyebrow.

"I spend too much time in classrooms already, thanks. We can go for a walk around the lake."

"Malfoy, it's icy out there and neither of us have cloaks!"

"So?" Malfoy inquired. "You said you wanted to talk. I want to walk around the lake. That's where we can talk - unless, of course, you've changed your mind."

Harry was reminded, at this point, that he still hated Malfoy.



"Fine," he said, through gritted teeth.

Malfoy smiled one of his faint triumphant smirks. Harry felt his blood come to a simmering boil.

"Splendid," said Malfoy. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

The wind swept in a ravaging sheet across the grey land and water alike. Everything seemed subdued and flattened by it, until you noticed the tiny rebellious ripples on the lake's surface. The wind came sharp as a sword from the sky, which was so covered in clouds that only an occasional tinge of steel-grey relieved the vast whiteness.

Harry was freezing, and the wind seemed to have adopted his hair and robes as playthings to buffet around.

Malfoy strolled slightly ahead of him, hands in his pockets, as if out walking on a mild summer's day. His fair hair was only a little stirred by the wind, lifted and rearranged by invisible fingers, blown back a shade from his brow.

Harry wondered what on earth he was going to say.

This was pretty much as far as his plan had gone, and now he had a supercilious Slytherin on his hands waiting for words he hadn't actually worked out.

They walked in silence for a while, Malfoy seeming quite comfortable with both the silence and the weather. He had lost all traces of uncertainty he might have shown earlier. Eventually he turned around. His eyes seemed darker out here, matching the shadowed uneven grey of the lake beyond.

His unhurried drawl was the same as ever.

"Did you simply want to indulge in a bit of taciturn bonding, Potter? Because I have a date with some hot cocoa and a textbook, and frankly this is getting dull."

"A - a textbook?" Harry stammered. It seemed bizarre that Malfoy might do something as commonplace as study.

"Why, yes, Potter. This is a school, you know. I would have thought even you might have that worked out after all these years. Classes do tend to be involved."

"Malfoy, shut up," Harry snapped. "I'm trying to say something here."

"Say it, then."

Malfoy stopped and looked at Harry, his air almost amused but his glance a direct challenge.

"Er," said Harry. "Ah. Um. That is -"

"I take it this isn't one of your lucid days?"

"Malfoy!" Harry exploded. "Could you just be quiet, and pretend for a second that you're a halfway decent person? I really do have something to say, and I can't say anything if you keep interrupting with your nasty comments."

Malfoy shrugged. "Sure."

"You'll be quiet?" said Harry, suspiciously.

"I don't have all day to listen to your pathetic bleating. I'll be good," Malfoy promised. "On my honour as a Slytherin."

Harry was extremely dubious about the validity of this pledge, but...

"OK then. I, uh, you know yesterday and the lake, um, thing?"

He paused and waited for a response. Malfoy observed him in silence, and it wasn't until Harry noticed the smirk still playing about his lips that he realised.

"You can speak when I'm asking you a question, for God's sake!"

"Oh, can I?" Malfoy asked innocently. "So sorry. I didn't want to interrupt the narrative flow. Of course I remember, you pillock."

"Er. Didn't you, kind of, wonder what it was all about?"

"Not really. I put it down to my irresistible sexual appeal and moved on. Life's too short."

Harry had conceived of a new plan. Kill Malfoy, hide the body in the lake, and then see if he really missed him all that much.

"Malfoy, stop being stupid," he exclaimed. "I have been thinking about it."

"What conclusion have you come to, Wonder Boy? I have no doubt it's brilliant."

Malfoy's eyes said: *Imbecile*.

Harry screwed his eyes up, and stared at the lake. His train of thought was liable to be derailed by impulses to beat Malfoy senseless if he kept looking at him.

"Oh, spit it out, Potter."

Harry took a deep breath and plunged into an explanation.

"Well... Dumbledore said it wasn't an accident so I had no idea what to think, but I knew I had to figure out by myself so I stayed up all night thinking and I could only come up with one possible reason and this is it. You know how we're sort of rivals?"

"No," Malfoy responded. Harry turned and squinted at him in disbelief. "We're *enemies*, Potter," he elaborated condescendingly. "You hate me and I hate you. We'd like to see each other fry. It's not a jolly little competition over Quidditch. This is a virulent loathing we have going on here."

Oh... Well, this was promising.

Harry was still scrutinising Malfoy. Malfoy had lifted a hand to his hair and caught one flyaway lock absently between his fingers, twisting the fine strand as he waited for Harry to continue. He looked rather thoughtful.

"Whatever," Harry said hurriedly, rushing on. "It was just - I was thinking about that, and it was the only reason there was. And now I have no idea how to put this, but er, so, I came to the conclusion that your opinion might matter to me somewhat, which obviously was a thick conclusion, but I still can't think of anything else, and so I wanted to see if that was true. And I can't imagine why it should, since basically you seem to be, no offence meant, one of the most horrible people in the world, but if you're not that might explain somewhat and I just wanted to see and to figure out why so um... Er."

Harry was deeply thankful that he had to stop his gabbling because he was short on breath. Malfoy tilted his head to one side, seeming caught between diversion and bemusement.

"Potter, you completely incoherent sod, are you trying to be my friend?"

Harry exhaled sharply. "Yes."

"Oh. Hmm."

Malfoy was looking meditative again. Harry was unfamiliar with this expression of Malfoy's. It replaced his habitual sneer with an abstracted gaze, and was almost pleasant. He watched it for a while.

Eventually, Malfoy said: "What's in it for me?"

This blunt and extremely Slytherin question threw Harry.

"Wh-what?"

"Well, if I'm your friend can I have the Gryffindor password so I can sneak up and leave dead animals in Weasley's bed?"

"No!"

"OK, will you tell me all of Weasley and Granger's dirty little secrets so I can embellish them and then spread them around the school?"

Harry was torn between startled laughter and horror. "No!"

"Can I trick you and turn you over to the Dark Side?"

"N-" Harry stopped, and looked at him in some concern. It was, after all, a fairly serious question. "Would you want to?"

Malfoy pursed his lips, which made his cheekbones appear knife sharp.

"Not particularly. Be quite funny, though."

Harry shook his head in disbelief.

And yes, fine, in mild entertainment. Nobody could be quite so blatantly nasty as Malfoy, and somehow he was so shameless about it that it almost made you forgive him.

"All right," Malfoy said at last.

Harry blinked. "You - you're agreeing?"

"That would be the general meaning of the phrase, yes."

Harry couldn't restrain his bewilderment. "Why?"

"Ahhh..." Malfoy tilted his head back, looking at the sky. The line of his throat seemed vulnerable, suddenly. "I'm not sure. Call it morbid curiosity."

Harry found himself oddly at a loss. He had achieved what he had set his mind on, and now... Exactly what was he supposed to say to Malfoy? Talk to him about how rotten Snape was? Call him Draco? The idea seemed preposterous.

They walked on for a minute, and Harry risked another glance at Malfoy. He was looking at Harry, and by now he was quite windblown himself. He looked rather lost, staring at him under that silvery fringe.

"What do you do with your friends?" Harry asked him helplessly.

"I tell them what to do, then they go off and leave me in peace."

"Oh." The idea didn't seem that attractive to Harry.

"Will you do what I tell you?" Malfoy asked brightly.

"No!"

"Oh," said Malfoy, in morose tones. "Well... what do you do with your friends?"

"Er, we talk a lot about how awful you are."

"You could do that. I'd take it as a compliment."

Harry was silent. Some part of him was clamouring for him to tell Malfoy it had all been a bad idea, and run off.

The rest of him just didn't... exactly want to.

Malfoy's face was slightly screwed up against the wind.

"While we're having this awkward silence..." he remarked in an unusually small voice, "could we get

inside? I'm shockingly cold."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing again.

"Shut up, Potter."

"I told you so, Malfoy."

"And I told you to shut up!"

Malfoy turned and began to walk briskly back, giving up the pretence of a graceful saunter.

"I only wanted to get a look at the bleak landscape for Creative Magic," he grouched.

"For...?" Harry had a dim memory of a list, and talk of homework in the common rooms. "Oh, the subject. Is it any good?"

Malfoy stopped dead. "Are you joking? It's the best subject in the world."

"Oh. I just picked the ones Ron chose," Harry admitted. "I didn't really know what they were about."

"For crying out loud... That's what they get, throwing people of Muggle birth into magical schools." Harry was about to make a decided objection to this racist comment, but Malfoy was continuing oblivious, striding into the wind and speaking loudly over his shoulder. "Creative Magic is like... Well. It's a transcendence of talent."

Harry looked blank.

Malfoy sighed impatiently.

"It's like - there are wizards and witches who can make utterly fantastic books, or plays, or paintings, by being able to transform magic and talent into a single thing so even Muggles are spellbound... So even Muggles say that it's just like magic."

Harry had never seen Malfoy get enthusiastic before. He noticed, however, that the extravagant gesturing which Malfoy commonly used in his cruel impressions was oddly suited to this exuberant description. Malfoy's eyes were shining, and he looked more open than Harry ever remembered seeing him.

Harry bet that the entire Slytherin common room was sick of hearing Malfoy talk about this subject - clearly a favourite.

Still, he had to admit, he was almost charmed. Malfoy was acting like a kid. Even when they had been younger, Malfoy hadn't acted like a kid.

Unless you counted his all-too-frequent snotty brat moments.

"Muggles wonder where the time has gone after listening to a Magically Created concert or seeing a Magically Created painting. Because the magic does soak up time, it takes them briefly to another

dimension, and then they return to their own dimension never knowing what happened but knowing they experienced... something," Malfoy continued eagerly, "and... can we hurry up, Potter? It's getting dark, and I am freezing out here."

"You Slytherins are so fragile," Harry said.

"Oh, shut up. And walk faster. I'm going to die of pneumonia. Can't you walk faster than that? I'm cold, I'm cold, I'm cold!"

Ah. Another snotty brat moment.

Harry sped up. Obviously, Malfoy could not be allowed to act in this dictatorial manner, but... somehow it seemed natural, coming from him.

It was certainly a change from the Gryffindor policy of 'don't breathe too hard on Harry or he'll break'.

Malfoy kept complaining until they were safely inside.

"We're in the warm now," Harry said, laughing. "Quit your whining."

"I wasn't whining, I was about to die of hypothermia," Malfoy grumbled. "I... Hmmm."

Malfoy looked up, and Harry followed his gaze.

Ron and Hermione were coming towards them.

"Harry, we've been looking for you ev-" began Ron, and stopped abruptly. Malfoy's eyes were luminescent and contemplative in the shadows that hid his face.

"See you tomorrow, then," he murmured. "Same time, same place."

He sloped off, his pale head in the middle distance before Harry had a chance to agree. Harry realised that it had not been a request but a command.

The boy was insufferable. But Harry's traitorous subconscious might have had something there.

Shaking his head, Harry laughed a little ruefully, and stepped forward to meet Ron and Hermione.

"Harry - was that *Malfoy*?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Er," said Harry.

# Chapter Three: Down the Pub

*So walk with me, talk with me,  
Tell me your stories  
I'll do my very best to understand you  
You're flesh and blood...*

Harry told Ron and Hermione that yes, it was Malfoy. He had wanted to talk to him about the lake incident.

He told them nothing else.

He didn't want to lie to them, he wasn't ashamed, but he did feel - as if the whole matter was fragile. It had gone surprisingly well so far, but add Ron, the Reason Redheads Got Their Bad Name, to the mix and Draco Malfoy would be a dot on the horizon. A dot pointing Harry and Ron out and saying, 'They tried to kill me, Professor Snape!'

Harry didn't want that to happen. Harry was surprised at how much he didn't want that to happen.

It wasn't that Malfoy had been pleasant. Of course, a sweet, kind Draco Malfoy might have sent Harry running to Dumbledore gibbering about Polyjuice Potion. Malfoy had been his usual nasty, spoiled brat self, just short of hostile and well into insulting.

All the same... It had gone well.

For some reason, Harry was happy about it.

Harry didn't tell Ron and Hermione about the situation because of one more thing. For the same unintelligible reason, he felt a bit... possessive about the entire business. It had been a long time since he'd had anything at all private, which the media didn't seize on, which Ron and Hermione didn't know everything about while keeping their own special 'couple' secrets.

He had a feeling they would be distinctly aggrieved when they found out. He didn't tell them, just the same.

And at breakfast the next day, seeing Malfoy come in and Blaise Zabini put a hand under his elbow, encouraging him into the seat beside him, Harry felt a twinge of that same possessive feeling.

*What do you think you're doing, Zabini? There's no need to be grabby.*

Harry Potter, the boy who went cuckoo.

"I'm so glad you don't seem depressed lately, Harry," said Hermione.

"Depressed?" Harry replied absently, as Malfoy took the seat by Zabini. "Why would I be depressed?"

Voldemort. The war. Cedric. The shriveling pity surrounding him. The numbing guilt. Oh... That.

*I forgot*, Harry thought wonderingly. *I forgot.*

Hermione beamed approbation. "No reason at all. You're quite right, Harry."

*I should never forget*, Harry thought. *But I did... and it felt good.*

"C'mon, Defence Against the Dark Arts is first class," Ron said. "I wonder whether Lupin or Sirius will be taking it."

Harry got up, helping Hermione with her stuffed book bag.

Leaving the Hall, he saw Malfoy and Blaise Zabini having an animated discussion. He saw Malfoy's mouth shaping the words 'Creative Magic' and almost smiled, seeing Zabini's wellfeigned interest. Some impulse made him pause for a moment going past the Slytherin table and say:

"Hi, Malfoy."

Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini all shot him *Die Potter Die!* looks. Malfoy, as placid as if he didn't have bloodthirsty wolves in human form all around him, reached out for a piece of toast and answered, "Good morning, Potter." Harry felt an obscure sort of triumph about these three words, which reduced the Slytherins and Ron to helpless, choking incredulity.

Of course, after *that* he had to explain more fully, since Ron was on the point of announcing that Voldemort had Polyjuiced himself into Harry and had to be immediately exterminated.

"I just decided to be more friendly," he said as they went to Defence Against the Dark Arts class. "I want to know what was going on about the lake."

"Well, yes, I can understand that," agreed Hermione, compulsive seeker after knowledge. "But really, Harry, Malfoy..."

Ron was almost spitting.

"I can't understand that! It was *clearly* an evil Slytherin plot! You're too trusting, Harry. Those Slytherins aren't like us. They're monsters I tell you, crazed, vicious..."

He paused in his tirade to acknowledge Professor Lupin.

"Hello, Professor. I was wondering whether it would be you or Sirius. Isn't it getting a bit close to..." He mimicked howling at the moon.

"Please take your seats," said Lupin with an indulgent smile.

"Right," Ron resumed. "Where was I?"

"Telling me how Slytherins were crazed, vicious monsters," replied Harry. "But then you got sidetracked by the werewolf."



Harry couldn't believe it when he found himself checking his watch.

The minutes were crawling by. And Malfoy didn't appear at lunch.

*Skipping meals all the time*, Harry thought. *That's how you make yourself sick.*

"What are you fretting about, Harry?"

"I'm not fretting!" Harry exclaimed indignantly. Hermione shrugged and took a bite of her apple.

Maybe Malfoy was sick. He certainly looked pale enough.

Madam Pomfrey should be paying more attention to this. Vitamins should be provided. Those dungeons were probably unhealthy for delicate people.

Harry brooded about this for hours until it came as rather a shock when Malfoy met him at the lake, striding over a hillock about twenty minutes late and looking the picture of health.

"Come on, Potter," he said briefly, turning away and walking back. Harry ran to catch up, much to his own disgust.

"Hey, Malfoy. You're late. What do you think manners are for?"

Malfoy looked bored. "I think they're for other people. Come *on*."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"I'm not catching my death by that lake," Malfoy informed him. "Anyway, I noticed yesterday that you were having problems being coherent. So we're going down to the pub."

"The pub? That's supposed to make me *more* coherent?"

"Oh yes. Alcohol gives you this wonderful sense of false comfort," Malfoy assured him.

"Even though I need some comfort, being around you... Where are you going?"

"Into the school," Malfoy said promptly. "There's a secret passage that leads to Hogsmeade behind the statue..."

"Of the one-eyed witch," Harry finished slowly. "How did you know?"

Malfoy looked smug.

"I worked it out four years ago," he answered. "Weasley wasn't talking to himself on the way into Hogsmeade. He's not subtle, that boy of yours. So you must have taken a short cut through the school in your little Invisibility Cloak - and I found it."

*So he does it too*, Harry thought. *He works to show me up. It matters to him too.*

What he said was, "You know about my Cloak?"

Malfoy sneered. "No, Potter. I really thought I was hallucinating. Of course I know, and next time we go to the pub you can take it."

"Next time...? I haven't agreed to go *this* time!"

Harry stormed along in Malfoy's wake, feeling more and more like a dog being taken for a walk. Malfoy didn't reply until they were in the corridor leading to the statue. Then he glanced over his shoulder, and spoke casually.

"I don't think you've fully absorbed this situation, Potter."

Harry felt a quick thump inside his ribs, as if someone had tapped sharply on his chest.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I haven't taken you on as a lifelong comrade, you know." Malfoy's smile was cold as unexpected snow. "I'm perfectly capable of taking you back to the shop if you don't suit."

Harry felt the beginnings of indignation. "Do you mean that if I don't go drinking with you -"

Teeth gleamed. "Exactly."

Harry was about to tell Malfoy exactly where he could stuff this so-called friendship, and add a suggestion about following it with his wand and broomstick, when something quite unexpected happened.

Malfoy noticed he was angry, and smiled.

Charm was not something Harry had ever associated with Draco Malfoy. Nevertheless...

Harry felt the urge to blink.

For Malfoy, most acts were calculated. Smiling seemed to be an art.

It was a terribly subtle art. Light crept gradually across that pale and rather cold face, so his eyes glittered like the sun on frost.

He stood there in the empty corridor and he smiled that rich artful smile, until Harry was eventually forced to blink.

Once he opened his eyes, the smile had faded. He felt an obscure pang of disappointment.

"Come on, Potter," Malfoy coaxed. "I postponed Creative Magic homework to have a drink with you."

"Oh, I'm so honoured," Harry said, with a great deal more weakness than sarcasm.

"So you should be."

Malfoy turned and walked on, in the complete - and not ill-founded - conviction that Harry would

follow.

"And then you can tell me all of your shocking secrets," he added with satisfaction. He seemed injured by Harry's sceptical look. "What? I'll tell you mine!"

"Yes," Harry said drily, "but Slytherins love to boast about their evil deeds. I'm not sure it's a fair trade."

Malfoy gave him a quick, rather surprised glance, then laughed and shrugged. The laugh echoed behind them as they slipped in behind the statue.

\* \* \*

"Malfoy! That's a personal question!"

"That's a 'none', then, is it?"

"Malfoy, you can be such a bastard."

Harry squinted at the lights in the Three Broomsticks, which were somehow much brighter than they had been when he'd come in.

Hang on, that last word hadn't sounded right...

"You're plastered, Potter." Malfoy sounded amused.

Harry concentrated on Malfoy's face. At first it was merely a golden blur, mixing with the lamp that sparked silver in his hair and eyes, but after a few minutes it resolved into a grin.

"I am not," Harry replied in a dignified manner. He found forming the words a little difficult.

"After three meads, Potter. You lightweight."

Malfoy had had at least five, and he merely seemed more relaxed. These Slytherins needed watching.

"Answer the question, Potter," demanded the imperious brat. "This delay is unmanly."

"Oh - all right... Two."

Malfoy choked on his mead. "Oh, Potter, you Gilderoy Lockhart, you."

"Shut up, Malfoy!"

"Wait, wait. Were these maiden-aunt pecks on the cheek? Was there tongue?"

"Malfoy, you *cannot* ask questions like that... Not with the first one."

Malfoy seemed weak with suppressed laughter. "Who was this poor unfortunate, then?"

"Cho Chang," Harry answered reluctantly. "In fifth year."

He recalled that moment very clearly. Cho Chang had taken him aside, and told him that she couldn't stand the memories - that she was transferring to Beauxbatons for her seventh year. She had added that she did not blame Harry, and as he looked bleakly into her pretty face, she had leaned in and given him a soft kiss on the mouth.

How he had wished for that moment, and then, when it happened...

He had tasted pity on her lips, charity being pressed onto his mouth. Cho Chang's kiss had expressed the same feeling as every touch and word offered to him that year. She had stepped back, and he had looked into the face he had dreamed of once more, and wished with simple desolation never to see her again.

Draco Malfoy whistled. "Chang? Not bad, Potter... and let me see, the second. Was that rumour about Ginny Weasley true?"

"Yes," Harry answered reluctantly.

Those few awkward kisses with Ginny. He still felt guilty about that, about *using* Ron's little sister as something to stave off the loneliness. He had tried so hard to want her, to want something, back in sixth year...

It hadn't worked. He felt about Ginny almost as if she were his own little sister...

Reminded of the Weasleys and Malfoy's general attitude to them, Harry looked up sharply.

"Are you going to say something about the Weasleys?" he demanded.

Malfoy looked vaguely surprised. "No. I've always had a bit of a weakness for redheads. Your Weasley, of course, being a notable exception."

"Oh?" Harry was intrigued. "So now it's your turn, Malfoy. How many?"

"Er..." Malfoy blinked. "Hang on a minute."

He began to make furious calculations on his napkin.

Well, really. Snape should pay more attention to his students' morals.

"Who was your first, then?"

"Ah." Malfoy signalled for another mead. "Pansy Parkinson, third year. Remember when my young life was almost cut off by that Hippogriff? She came rushing into the infirmary and flung herself on me. I practically went into shock."

"You weren't that shocked," Harry commented, smiling. "You did go with her to the Yule Ball in fourth year."

"Well." Malfoy shrugged. "She asked me."

You couldn't help almost admiring his barefaced cheek.

"What?" Malfoy said, seeing Harry's raised eyebrow. "Malfoys always wait to be asked. Oh, and here's the number."

He handed Harry the napkin.

*Good Lord.*

"Are there even that many people in the school?"

Malfoy smiled wickedly. "If you count the staff."

"Ew!"

Malfoy burst out laughing at the look on Harry's face. Malfoy seemed to be laughing quite a bit tonight.

Of course, he must be a trifle drunk.

"There is life outside school, Potter," he added once he had calmed down.

Madam Rosmerta came up to Malfoy and handed them their drinks with a twinkle in her eye.

"Are you sure you haven't had enough?"

"Rosmerta!" Malfoy looked horrified. "You know me better than that. The night is young and so am I. We're going to get a whole lot drunker before we go home."

Harry was concerned that if he got a whole lot drunker walking might be beyond him.

"You're terrible, Draco Malfoy," she sighed, placing two more glasses on the table. "And you're trying to corrupt poor innocent Harry Potter. You horrify me."

"You love it!" Malfoy called after her. He turned back to Harry and gave him a rather impish grin. "Nice woman. She refused to serve me back in third year and I tried to flirt with her. She says I was the youngest who ever tried that."

"Malfoy, are you sure you're not an alcoholic?"

"I," Malfoy informed him in lofty tones, "am not the underage drinker here. I was eighteen in January."

"You weren't eighteen at the Yule Ball," Harry muttered.

"Nor were you. Anyway, stop talking back to your elders. Hmm - well, I did have another question, but since you've only kissed two people I guess that one is answered as well."

"What...? Oh." To his horror, Harry felt himself blush furiously. "Malfoy!"

Malfoy laughed and leaned back against the wall. "Poor pure little Potter..."

"Shut up! How many countless thousands have you collected, then?"

The corner of Malfoy's mouth lifted. "Countless thousands? Disabuse yourself of the idea that all Slytherins are depraved sinners. It's only... hmm... eighty-nine per cent true."

"How many, Malfoy?" To his surprise, Harry found he was actually curious.

Malfoy mused. "Hand me back that napkin."

Harry laughed, shook his head and had another drink.

Malfoy nodded approvingly.

"I knew you weren't as prudish as all that," he commented. "Honestly, you take the school rules and hit them with a big hammer and everyone acts as if you're an angel."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "And what do you think?"

"I think angels don't get pissed at Yule Balls, that's what I think. I've also seen you having completely unholy thoughts about punching my face in. No - you've got a bit of a nasty bastard streak in you." The calmly analytical expression on Malfoy's face transformed into a smirk. "That's why I decided to give you a chance."

"I'm overwhelmed," Harry said drily. It was a certainly novel. Nobody had ever expected Harry to behave badly before. "I'll try to come up with some suitably evil deed."

Malfoy waved this idea away. "Don't be absurd, you're a novice. Be reasonable. Do it my way."

Harry was becoming convinced that Malfoy was, indeed, rather drunk. His eyes were wild and bright, and the pale fringe of his hair was slightly disarrayed.

Harry had only limited control over his motor functions, and was out drinking with a Malfoy whose judgment was impaired.

This was quite interesting.

"I know!" Malfoy announced. "We should sing karaoke."

Harry stared at the delighted face before him.

"You're insane..."

"And it's much more fun," Malfoy assured him. He jumped to his feet with an agile grace that Harry couldn't have copied while sober, and made to drag Harry off his stool. Which was when Hagrid appeared in the pub, and Malfoy vanished under the table. Hagrid noticed Harry, staring in a rather bewildered fashion at his own knees, and ambled over.

"Oh no..." said Malfoy, in a tiny voice.

Harry desperately suppressed a laugh.

"Hello there Harry!" Hagrid greeted him with the same uncomfortable heartiness that all the Gryffindors did.

Just now his black eyes were surveying the slightly unsteady Harry and the table with two glasses on it.

"I was just poppin' down fer a drink," he continued. "Olympe doesn' like it much, so I was goin' ter be quick abou' it... Er, Harry..." he lowered his voice in a conspiratorial boom. "Am I interruptin' somethin'?"

Harry stared blankly for a few minutes, until light dawned on him.

A very, very soft obscenity sounded from under the table.

Harry coughed hurriedly.

Unfortunately, Hagrid took this as a sign of embarrassed assent.

"Ah... sorry, Harry... She'll be in the toilet, yeh?"

"Um," said Harry.

Hagrid elbowed him in a friendly teasing manner, which almost caused him to fall over.

"I'm glad ter hear it, Harry. It's abou' time yeh started enjoyin' yerself a bit more."

"Seeing as you have no life," said a quiet voice from the region of Harry's knees. Harry resisted the urge to either laugh hysterically or kick Malfoy.

"I'll be off, then," Hagrid boomed. "Don' wan' ter embarrass you. I'll jus' have one drink. Jus' tell me one thing, Harry..." he gave him another massive nudge. "Is she pretty?"

"Er," Harry replied.

"*Extremely* pretty," said that bloody voice from under the table. Hagrid meandered amiably off. As soon as he had his back to them, Malfoy emerged looking dishevelled. He seized Harry and dragged him out of the pub.

The night air came as rather a shocker for Harry, who concentrated on remaining upright. Malfoy's eyes were still fever bright, but otherwise he looked pale and relieved.

"Escape!"

Harry blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm terrified of him," Malfoy said candidly. "Have been forever. Hurling vicious animals at us and giving us bloodthirsty books. Not to mention the fact that he's appallingly huge."

Harry was stunned. Malfoy, who had always been so icily autocratic around Hagrid, who Harry knew Hagrid was secretly intimidated by.

It left him intrigued. What kind of person reacted to fear like this?

Malfoy blinked, looking thoughtful.

"Oh, dear. I don't think I would ever have admitted something like that sober." He shrugged, a gesture that looked bizarrely fluid to Harry's dim eyesight. "Oh well. I suppose there's always the risk of letting something incriminating slip."

Harry was a bit affronted. "I'm not looking for weak points to attack, Malfoy."

Malfoy tilted his head to one side, a street light making his hair a rival to the half moon.

"You do in Quidditch," he observed. "Sign of a good player."

"That's different. Life's not a game."

Malfoy smiled that annoying smile again. "Isn't it?"

At this point, Harry was too busy with the important business of not falling down to answer.

"Careful, Potter. Lying in the gutter should be reserved for real alcoholics. The ones who've earned it."

"Would you help me out if I fell in the gutter?" inquired Harry, who was having distressing doubts about whether he could remain upright.

"What do you take me for! I'd laugh you to scorn."

Oh, excellent.

Faced with this alternative, Harry staggered gamely onwards. He was surprised by the advent of a perfectly companionable silence.

Malfoy, damn him, had been right about the alcohol. Bloody debauched Slytherin.

"So you've taken me drinking," Harry found himself commenting. "What's on the menu tomorrow, a brothel?"

Anyone else would have been horrified by Harry suggesting such a thing. Malfoy laughed.

"Honestly," he reprimanded Harry. "We have to save something for Thursday." They made their unsteady way back to school. Harry tried very hard to walk straight. Malfoy swung around several lamp posts.

They parted in the corridor. Harry hesitated, searching for something appropriate to say.

Finally, he settled for: "Same time tomorrow?"



The next day Harry woke up with the distinct impression that it had all been a dream. Out getting smashed with Malfoy? It was too bizarre.

Then he tried to sit up, and a hangover hit him like a Bludger.

Oh. So it was true, then.

Very, very carefully, Harry got up. Then Ron's voice sounded in his ear.

"Harry! Where were you? We were frantic!"

Harry winced. "Could you... possibly not speak so loud?"

"You look like crap," Ron observed with the refreshing honesty that made him known and loved throughout the circles of hell.

"Well, I feel like crap. I'm co-ordinated."

Harry's sarcasm was inspired by bitterness. The buttons of his pyjamas seemed to be glued in the holes.

"Harry, you look like... you look like you were up all night drinking."

"Not all night."

The freckles practically jumped off Ron's face in shock.

"What! Where were you, who were you with... oh no, Harry, tell me it wasn't Malfoy."

"It may have been, sort of, Malfoy," Harry admitted.

Ron breathed hard through his nose. The alarming puce colour of his cheeks clashed violently with his hair.

Then he seized Harry's arm.

"Hang on, I need to get dressed..." Harry protested, struggling into his robes. Ron waited with barely controlled impatience.

"Where are we going?" Harry inquired, trailing in Ron's wake and feeling distinctly fragile.

"To Hermione," Ron said. "She can do the stern maternal speech much better than I can."

"You know, Ron, he's really not all that -"

Ron whirled on him, holding up a finger.

"Not until we find Hermione!"

"- can't believe you were so irresponsible, Harry, on a school night! How are you going to pay attention in class? Tell me you at least did your homework, Harry..."

"Who cares about homework!" Ron howled. "What about Malfoy?"

This had been going on for quite some time. At first the Great Hall had been empty, but now quite a few Gryffindors were eavesdropping with varying degrees of subtlety. Harry had sunk in his seat and was eye-level with his breakfast.

"Oh yes. Malfoy." Hermione looked disapproving. "Did *he* do his homework first?"

Ron made a noise like a kettle about to explode.

Hermione sighed. "And Harry, I know you're curious about this whole Triwizard Tournament affair. But that's no reason to skip your homework to spend time with a nasty little twit like Malfoy. We can always look it up in the library. Still, of course you're a free agent and you can do whatever you want."

Harry and Ron both stared at her incredulously.

"Look on the bright side, Ron," Hermione said pragmatically. "If Harry hangs around that idiot for any amount of time, he'll completely lose his rag and attack him. Then you can collect on your bets."

Harry sat up sharply, ignoring the sick pain it sent through his head.

"Bets? What bets?"

"Well, you remember that last Slytherin/Gryffindor Quidditch match."

Quidditch had not been cancelled this year because of the urgent pleading of all four houses.

"You and Malfoy looked as if you were about to leap on each other," Hermione continued placidly, buttering her toast. "Ron started to lay heavy bets that you would win. Got quite good odds, too, since Malfoy has a reputation for fighting dirty."

Harry was mildly insulted.

"Ron was awfully disappointed," Hermione informed him in serene tones. "But that just goes to show, doesn't it? I mean, you're never violent towards anyone else. You can't stand the boy. You won't be able to put up with him long."

Harry had to admit she might have a point, but nevertheless felt very contrary.

"Nobody could," Hermione assured him, patting his arm. "Malfoy is insufferable, as I keep telling Lavender. He doesn't fool me with those pretty-boy airs."

"Pretty!" Ron spluttered.

Harry remembered Hagrid's unwitting comment and smiled. Ron was apoplectic.

"Come on," said Hermione. "We'd better go to class."

They were going out the door when Malfoy came sauntering in, not a blond hair out of place and looking as if he had slept innocently all night long.

Ron, who was forging ahead, bumped into him.

"Watch it!" snapped Ron, who was in no mood to let Malfoy cheek him by deliberately existing.

"You don't need to hurry quite so desperately, Weasley," Malfoy drawled. "The phrase 'time is money' isn't literal, you know."

"Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed.

Hermione's eyes were narrowed with dislike.

Malfoy swept on regardless.

"I'd reconsider this whole friendship idea of yours, Harry," Ron said with barely controlled wrath. "In fact, I'd reconsider the whole 'murder is wrong' idea in his case."

Harry bit his lip.

He was upset that he was surprised, when he knew precisely what Malfoy was like. Malfoy had just been acting as Malfoy always did... and Harry was upset that he had let himself forget, and almost like the bastard.

\* \* \*

Harry was exhausted.

He had been defending Malfoy all day to Hermione and Ron, which was problematic since he basically agreed that Malfoy's behaviour was indefensible. He also wanted to have a few severe words with Malfoy on the subject of Ron.

Nevertheless, he had absolutely no intention of giving up on this... strange form of friendship. He was even wondering, with a kind of half-ashamed anticipation, what Malfoy had planned for tonight.

Yesterday had been... interesting.

And there wasn't much that was interesting these days.

Harry scanned the grey landscape for a blond head, that weird anticipation sparking within him.

Malfoy was not in sight.

And, over the next three quarters of an hour, it became very clear that he was not coming. It was cold by the lake.

Harry's growing anger kept him warm.

By the time he stormed back to the school, it was red hot.

# Chapter Four: Find Out Who You Are

*You said the air was singing  
It's calling you, you don't believe  
These things you never see  
And never dream*

Harry's intention of drawing Malfoy aside and ticking him off properly was foiled by the fact that he was once again surrounded by Slytherins everywhere he went.

He was extraordinarily popular - considering that he was a nasty, inconsiderate little prat who didn't even keep appointments!

Only the prospect of getting a chance to tell him off induced Harry to come to the lake next day.

Being forced into this indignity made him even more annoyed.

What really put the tin lid on it was Malfoy, sitting by the lake and rising to go as he saw Harry.

"What kept you, Potter?" he demanded.

He seemed completely free from guilt.

That did it.

"Where the hell were you last night?"

Malfoy raised one pale eyebrow, seeming mildly surprised at the question.

"I was playing cards in my common room."

"Why?" Harry asked sharply, realising through the anger that he was actually... quite hurt. Malfoy no longer looked so indifferent.

"Because my housemates asked me, and they're Slytherin."

"So what?" Harry hurled the question angrily at Malfoy.

Malfoy, who had clearly planned this entire scene, caught it with ease.

"So they always come first," he returned. "You don't understand that, do you? Well - I'm making it clear."

"Making it clear," Harry repeated coldly.

Malfoy began to pace, hands folded behind his back and face impassive. "Where I stand."

*You mean on the edge of a lake with a giant squid in it?*

"What are you talking about?" Harry snapped.

"It's a question of loyalty. My loyalty is to Slytherin. Because it has to be."

*What does that have to do with keeping appointments?*

Harry surprised himself by asking, "Why?" rather than kicking Malfoy into the lake. Malfoy stopped and turned abruptly towards him. The wind blew back his silver hair and his face seemed less confident without that shining frame.

"Have you never heard something bad said about Slytherin?"

"Heard? I've *said* bad things about Slytherin," Harry told him. "You lot are cheating bastards at Quidditch."

"Oooh, and the Gryffindor displays unexpected evasive talent. You know damn well what I mean - the general opinion that Slytherin house is a Death Eater training camp."

Harry was aware that his face was betraying him, so he didn't respond.

But he did remember: *There wasn't a witch or a wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.*

Malfoy's expression was under much better control. Harry could see no emotion as he observed:

"I see you have. Well, Potter, this is a war, and you know how prejudices explode during war. Every time another person disappears people turn further away from Slytherin. And we don't turn and pander to anyone. We don't play nice with the other children, because playing nice is no fun. We're Slytherins, and that means we're nasty and we're untrustworthy - but not all of us have a burning desire to become minions of the Dark Lord."

"I never said you did," said Harry with an uncomfortable memory of telling a hat: '*Not Slytherin...*'

"Is that so?" Malfoy inquired. "You never said a word? You never even listened to that kind of thing? Thought wouldn't have entered your pure little Gryffindor mind?"

*Stinking Slytherin.*

*Why not just chuck all the Slytherins out?*

Harry was quiet.

"Thought so."

This exchange was not going at all how Harry had planned.

"That doesn't mean you can -"

"Let you down?" Malfoy smiled. "It does. I can. I will. I want to. Are you clear now?"

"Crystal. You Slytherins have to stick together, so you'll treat me like crap any time you want."

Harry was hoping for some sort of denial. Instead, Malfoy regarded him with a strange smile, and nodded slowly.

"Well..." Harry said. "I don't think that's a great lookout for me."

"Oh, I don't know," Malfoy answered. "You don't have to be particularly polite to me either. I've never put too high a premium on consideration. Be late, be rude, don't show up at all. I suppose I'm offering you a chance *not* to play nice with the other children, for a change." He smiled again, somewhat wickedly and more at ease. "If it doesn't appeal to you, you can sod off. I know I'm not an easy person to l-" He paused, considering. "Be friends with."

Harry thought about it.

He had not... expected the confrontation to go like this. He had anticipated, with a certain amount of foreboding, an angry Gryffindor/nasty Slytherin brat conflict.

Which this had almost been. But... Malfoy had a point.

Harry knew about Slytherins. They went about in gangs. They were fiercely partisan - and that included Snape.

Malfoy was actually - being fair, in a torturous manner. He thought he should give Harry a warning. Malfoy had always been upfront about where he stood.

Harry wasn't sure about this. But he was, after all, a Gryffindor. Gryffindors rushed into things without thinking.

Besides, he was intrigued. If he left now, the curiosity would probably kill him.

He smiled back. "You're an almost impossible person to like, Malfoy. But I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Malfoy looked bored.

"Now you've got that out of your system, get moving."

"Malfoy, I am *not* going to the pub again... I felt rotten all day yesterday."

"Go to the pub again?" Malfoy looked affronted. "What kind of predictable bastard do you think I am?"

Before Harry could answer, he shook his head.

"No, we're going to the Quidditch pitch."

Harry looked around at the gathering dusk. Considered the fact he was still feeling a bit under the weather.

He looked over at Malfoy and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, I suppose if you're not already tired of getting your ass kicked..."

\* \* \*

"Come on, Potter. Show me what you've got."

Harry stared blankly at Malfoy. Malfoy gazed back with expectant poise, as if he was a society gentleman at a poetry reading, rather than a boy sitting on a Quidditch pitch and making a bizarre demand.

"Sorry?"

Malfoy exhaled. "Yes, you certainly are. Come on, let's see what you can do." Harry was at a bit of a loss. Malfoy had just cheerfully (and if Harry was any judge, competently) broken into the Quidditch supplies room, taken two brooms, thrown Harry one, flung himself down on the pitch and told him to do...

What, exactly?

Harry tossed down the broom and sat down on the other end of the bench.

"Malfoy, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Flying," Malfoy answered, looking at Harry in a perplexed manner, a tiny frown wrinkling his brow. "You know... playing around with your broom..."

Harry became far too scandalised to care what Malfoy looked like when he was bemused.

"Malfoy, if you're implying...!"

Malfoy's eyebrows hit his hairline.

"Good Lord, Potter, you Gryffindors have fevered imaginations. It must be all that staying in and playing chess that does it to you." He paused, brushing aside a wind-displaced lock of hair with a slight smile. "Chess would drive anyone to naughty thoughts."

"I'm not sure you need to be driven, Malfoy," Harry said warily. "Now can you please tell me what you're talking about?"

Malfoy was too busy snickering at him to do any such thing.

Harry would have thought that friendship involved less wanting to smack Malfoy around. Once Malfoy had stopped, he still insisted on musing along the same lines.

"I can just see Granger and Weasley whiling away these winter hours. 'Just like that, baby, checkmate me hard!' " Harry's quick, instinctive frown made Malfoy shrug. "You're no fun. Oh come on - surely you flew around a bit when you were a kid?"

"Hardly, Malfoy. Raised in a Muggle home, remember? We use brooms to sweep up dirt."



Malfoy's smile was incredulous.

"Bizarre... though I'd rather sweep a floor than try to fly on some brooms people are using these days." He shrugged again, the dismissive gesture of the spoiled brat Harry knew so well. "Yes, but you must have done some flying there. You knew about Quidditch."

"Er - no, I didn't."

Malfoy faced him now, making a gesture of bemusement.

He noticed once more that Malfoy was a great one for talking with his hands. He acted out what he meant to say as easily and cleverly as he acted out his cruel little imitations.

"But... when we first met in the robes shop, I talked about Quidditch and you said you didn't play. And then in our first flying lesson it clearly wasn't your first time on a broom -"

"Yes, it was," Harry interrupted.

A flicker of emotion passed over Malfoy's face.

"Really? I resented that little presumed lie for years." He paused and mulled over something. "Potter... could any of what I said be taken as a left-handed compliment?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Let's pretend it couldn't. I don't *do* compliments." Malfoy got up, dusting off hands that could not possibly have been dirty. "Now... if you've never done this before, I guess I'm going to have to teach you." He sighed in a martyred fashion. "You are so incredibly tiresome, Potter. All right then - follow my lead, and try not to fall off." Harry picked up the broom and weighed it in his hand, feeling that familiar rush of confidence.

"Don't worry. I won't. And if you're lucky, I might even try to catch you if you fall."

"Me fall! I wasn't raised among the Muggles."

"No, and you weren't the youngest Seeker in a century either."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, as if slightly surprised. What he said, however, was - "You'll see, Potter... this isn't exactly Quidditch."

With that, he grabbed his broom and was off.

Harry had forgotten that Malfoy moved like a snake.

He followed him.

It was a windy day, and Harry had to squint to make him out.

He was going very, very high. You normally didn't go too high in Quidditch - it would be counterproductive, since the Snitch often appeared near the ground and never went too far above

the hoops.

Harry became slightly nervous when he realised that he couldn't see that well not only because of his hair, but also because of clouds.

"Malfoy!" he yelled. "We're awfully high!"

"Scared, Potter?" Malfoy yelled back.

"Not likely! But these are school brooms - Fred and George Weasley told me that some school brooms vibrate if they're taken up too high!"

Insofar as Harry could make out Malfoy's expression, it seemed interested.

"Did they happen to mention which ones?"

"*Malfoy!*"

Malfoy shrugged, smiled and turned his broom upside down.

"Malfoy!" Harry made his broom jerk down and met Malfoy's demented and upside down face.

He was laughing.

"Go on, Potter, try it - but hold on tight!"

Harry hesitated. He wasn't crazy enough to try this.

Or perhaps he was.

He did.

The whole world seemed to be below him, extremely far below him, and for a moment Harry experienced intense vertigo. There was only his grip on the broom above to save him, he was too high -

It was very exciting.

Harry remembered that this was a broom. He could do *anything* on a broom. Malfoy saw he was getting the hang of it and, being the sadistic bastard that he was, switched to something else.

"Not bad, Potter," he said, swerving right side up. "How about this?"

"Malfoy, *stop that!* You're going to fall!"

Malfoy was standing on his broom, a look of intense concentration on his face. There was no way Harry was trying this. It was all right for Malfoy, he was graceful on the ground. Harry thought of himself more as a Krum type - he was only graceful when *sitting* on a broom.

"Too difficult for you, Potter?"

"Not on your life!"

It was at this point that Harry realised the teachers who constantly talked about how reckless he was had a point.

*I don't want to do this*, he thought as he clambered onto his knees. The broom lurched alarmingly. *I don't want to do this, I don't -*

He stood up, letting go.

The broom was still sailing forward, and he was just a tremble or a shudder of the stick from free fall. His arms were out for the pathetic amount of balance it would give him, his robes were whipping about him and he was terrified.

"I think I'm going to die!" he yelled.

Malfoy laughed. "Fun?"

"Yeah!"

\* \* \*

"Oh, my hair," Malfoy said mournfully some time afterwards, once they were back on the ground. "That's the worst thing about flying. My *hair*..." He was trying unsuccessfully to smooth down the licks of hair that surrounded his face, somewhat like a rumpled halo.

Harry suspected he himself might look a bit like a hedgehog, but he didn't care. He was panting and sweaty, but then of course so was Malfoy. He'd kept up. He thought he'd done pretty well.

So, apparently, did Malfoy. He gave him a rather appraising look.

"That wasn't bad at all, Potter. The first time I tried that trick with the broom I was about two inches off the ground."

Harry gaped. Malfoy continued unremorsefully.

"Well, of course I was. That's bloody dangerous, you know. Do you think I'm some kind of suicidal git?"

"Actually," Harry said in a strangled voice, "yes. I'm two inches from beating you to death with my broomstick."

Malfoy did not seem unduly bothered.

"A bit of practise, Potter, and you'd handle a stick very well."

"And a lot of practise, Malfoy, and you might beat me at Quidditch one day." Harry rolled his eyes. Malfoy looked lofty.

"I really cannot to descend to this kind of childish quibbling with you."

"Since when?"

"Oh, push off, Potter. I'll see you tomorrow." Malfoy looked thoughtful. "I think we'll do something that does not involve damage to the hair."

"Slytherins are so vain," Harry remarked. "And with so little reason for it."

Malfoy scowled. "Go brush your hair, Potter. You look like a hedgehog."

\* \* \*

The next day, Harry all but had his cloak on when something occurred to him. *I suppose I'm offering you a chance not to play nice with the other children.* It wasn't so much about that. It was - that Harry wasn't going to just *take* Malfoy's behaviour. He never did take any of Malfoy's crap.

He also wanted to see if Malfoy had meant it.

Slowly, Harry replaced the cloak. Then he went into the common room.

"Ron? Up for a game of Exploding Snap?"

Ron agreed with a swift delight that Harry was certain wouldn't have been in place had Harry not lately spent an inordinate amount of time hanging around with Draco Malfoy. So he stayed in the comfortable warmth of the common room, and the fact that he *could* have been somewhere else with someone else, that he could be absolutely sure they wanted him here... made everything a good deal more pleasant.

Exploding Snap was somewhat impeded by Harry and Ron's enthusiastic discussion of how Ron had finally pulled off the Wronski Feint. He was their most energetic but least technically skilled Chaser.

Hermione, reading her latest book by the fire, rolled her eyes on their third replay.

"Women in the Muggle world complain about homoerotica and male obsession in football," she commented. "They should really try living in a world where the sport of choice has four balls and the players are mounted on flying phallic symbols."

Ron choked.

"Snap," Harry said, taking advantage of this weak moment.

Ron recovered, albeit looking at them both in an aggrieved manner.

"Though even if you are cheating, Harry," he continued, after reproaching them roundly, "it's nice to have you around again."

"Yes, we're both quite fond of you," Hermione said, smiling over her book. "Can't imagine why."

"Don't be thick," Harry replied. "You're my best friends."

"Mind you don't forget it," Hermione admonished. "I still can't believe you're voluntarily spending time with Malfoy. It's sheer masochism."

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said, laying down a card. "He hasn't been so bad."

"I still say it's some kind of trick," Ron said, scowling. "You wouldn't catch him being halfway decent to anyone else."

Harry mulled this one over.

"There's an idea."

"What - what's an idea?" Ron looked vaguely panicked.

"Oh, nothing." Harry laid down another card. "By the way, Snap!"

Once the smoke cleared, he grinned.

"And the game is mine."

\* \* \*

The next day, Harry walked to the lake determined to wait only five minutes. To his slight surprise, Malfoy was there first. His long black cloak looked incongruous with jeans and a T-shirt, but since he was Malfoy he carried it off superbly.

"Keep me waiting, would you," he said.

"I'm sorry for not turning up yesterday," Harry told him, suddenly impelled to provoke a reaction. "I had to spend some time with the Gryffindors."

Malfoy looked blank. "Oh, you weren't here? Didn't notice. Come on, Potter -"

"No."

Malfoy raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"We keep doing what you want to do," Harry explained. "I want a turn."

Malfoy looked baleful. "I *like* always doing what I want to do."

"I'd noticed," Harry said dryly. "Come on, Malfoy."

"Where do you want me to go?"

"Well." Harry paused. "It's like this. Ron said you couldn't be halfway decent to anyone -"

"*What?*" Malfoy exploded. "The *cheek* of him!"

Harry nodded sagely. "So I thought we should prove him wrong."

"Bloody right. How dare he, I'm a Malfoy, I was brought up to have impeccable manners..." Malfoy kept muttering along these lines as Harry guided him towards his destination.

Who knew, he thought. It might cure fear on both sides, and it might... you know... go some way towards proving that Malfoy might be a halfway decent person. It might be good for him.

And it had the potential to be extremely amusing.

"I'll show him, the total..." Malfoy looked up, and his eyes widened in alarm. "Potter. What are we doing here?"

"Proving that you can be halfway decent," Harry answered innocently.

"Not here I can't be! No, absolutely not! Let me go this instant!"

Harry seized hold of Malfoy's arm and knocked on Hagrid's door at the same time. Hagrid opened the door almost at once, and stared at Harry, who was holding on determinedly to a ferociously struggling Malfoy.

"Hi," Harry gasped. "Can I come to tea? I brought a friend."

He shoved Malfoy inside.

\* \* \*

Malfoy's face was white in the light of Hagrid's hall.

Out of the corner of his mouth, he said: "Potter, you will die for this."

"What is it, Malfoy?" Harry whispered. "Scared?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Oh, *hardly*."

"Then prove it."

Hagrid was still looking at them in an extremely startled manner. Harry saw Malfoy's look up at Hagrid. All the way up.

He also saw the reflexive curl of his lip.

*Come on, Malfoy...*

Malfoy stopped sneering with a visible effort. "Nice house," he said with only the barest trace of disdain. "Er - relatively speaking. As compared to the hut."

It was rather a nice house, actually. When Beauxbatons had become so depleted it had to be closed, Madame Maxime had insisted on a house.

Harry wondered if this was Malfoy trying to be nice. It didn't seem that different from Malfoy at all other times.

Hagrid shot a look at Harry that said: *What the hell is he doing here?*

Harry tried to appear unconcerned.

Hagrid cleared his throat. "Er - I guess yeh'd better come in, then."

"Thanks," Harry told him quickly, grabbing Malfoy's shirt and propelling him forward.

"Cease manhandling me, Potter," Malfoy hissed. "I said I'd prove Weasley wrong and I will."

He yanked himself free and strode into the sitting room, where Madame Maxime was sitting over the cradle.

Malfoy tossed his hair back and a determined expression crossed his face that Harry knew from Quidditch matches.

Malfoy usually got that look just before a spectacular foul.

He smiled brilliantly, walked over to Madame Maxime and kissed her hand. *Oh my God! What the hell is he playing at?*

"So good of you to have me," said Malfoy, gazing deep into her eyes. Madame Maxime actually blushed. "Charmed."

Harry stared.

"Do you want to see ze baby?" inquired Madame Maxime, still a little flushed.

"I'd be delighted," Malfoy replied smoothly.

This was becoming a love fest.

She actually placed the baby in Malfoy's arms. This was a mark of great favour. Malfoy almost fell down. He shot Harry a look that said *Help me!* and Harry, repressing a grin, went over to help Malfoy support the baby.

"Guess 'ow old she is," Madame Maxime said, giving the child a fond look.

"Er - four," guessed Malfoy.

"Aren't you clever? She *is* exactly four months."

"*Months?*" Malfoy said, still staggering under the weight. "I mean, ah - I'm a good guesser."

"My leetle girl," cooed Madame Maxime.

"And what a beautiful little girl it is too," Malfoy said winningly. Hagrid visibly softened. Which meant he was still looking at Malfoy as most people looked at a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but as most people did *before* it stung them. Hagrid was besotted with his daughter, despite her lack of fangs and surplus heads.

"Sit down, both of you, and 'ave some tea," Madame Maxime invited them graciously.

Malfoy gratefully relinquished the baby. When they took their places around the tea table, Harry caught him surreptitiously trying to massage life back into his arms.

"The rock cakes look really good, Mad- Mrs Hagrid," Harry said. He really would have to get used to that. They had been married, after all, for a year and a half. It hadn't taken him long to get used to the improved standard of cooking at Hagrid's.

"Do call me Olympe," she urged sweetly. "Both of you."

"What a lovely name," said Malfoy.

*I can't take him anywhere.*

"Come 'ave some tea, Ruby," Madame Maxime said.

Malfoy tried to hide a smile behind his teacup.

Hagrid went a bit red.

"Ruby loves tea," Madame Maxime proceeded, her voice growing just a touch steely. "Nevaire drinks anyzing else."

Hagrid began to look gloomy. Malfoy was desperately trying to suppress a snigger with his cup.

"Must be a great comfort to you," he said in a rather choked voice. "Tell me, Olympe, when are you next visiting France?"

"I am not sure," Madame Maxime replied. "It is a great sorrow to me. France is such a beautiful country."

"It is, isn't it?" Malfoy agreed. "I went to Bordeaux last summer with my mother."

Madame Maxime glowed. "You 'ave been to France?"

Malfoy and Madame Maxime began a spirited conversation about France. Harry gave Hagrid a rather helpless smile.

Hagrid brightened as he took this opportunity for a confidential talk.

"Got a letter from Charlie Weasley the other day," he said. "Norbert's the leader o' his herd now. Disembowelled another dragon ter do it," Hagrid added proudly.

"Er - that's great, Hagrid."

Malfoy had tilted his head towards them.

"Was that the dragon you had back in first year?" he inquired in conversational tones. "He was gorgeous."



Harry blinked. "You - you like dragons?"

"Oh, yes. My father taught me all about them. That's why he called me Draco. He loved them too," Malfoy said. "Well, that's why I didn't turn you all in right away. I wanted another look at it. It was a Norwegian Ridgeback, right?"

Hagrid thawed further. "Yeh."

"I think they're my favourites," Malfoy told him.

Harry relaxed. What had he been worrying about? After all, Hagrid liked nasty creatures.

\* \* \*

"Do come back soon," Madame Maxime said at the doorway, her eyes fixed approvingly on Malfoy.

Hagrid still looked dubious, for which Harry could hardly blame him, but he cleared his throat and conceded, "I s'pose yeh can, an' all."

As the door closed, they clearly heard Madame Maxime say, "Such a *nice* boy."

Malfoy gave the door a triumphant look.

"Tell Weasley that," he ordered Harry. "Ha. Ha. I think my manners were perfect."

"What about when Hagrid offered some of his personal cookery and you said: 'Are you trying to kill me, man?' "

"Momentary lapse."

"Ah. I see."

"Not that I am ever forgiving you for doing that to me," Malfoy continued. "For a start, I think holding that child has crippled me. How would you feel if I took you on a social call to visit Professor Snape tomorrow?"

"You won't, will you?" Harry asked in horror.

"Of course not. I like the man. Why should I inflict your company on him?" Malfoy looked thoughtful. "No, I have something else in mind for tomorrow."

"What?" Harry asked apprehensively.

Malfoy smiled beatifically. "You'll see."

\* \* \*

"The *Forbidden Forest*? You're mental. You're absolutely stark raving mad. I can't believe I'm doing this."

"It's my turn, and I get to choose," Malfoy said obstinately, surveying the forest in a leisurely manner. "And I feel like a nice nature walk."

"Nature walk? Malfoy, do you *remember* the last time we were in the Forest?"

"Well, yes. But I feel the Dark Lord is unlikely to be wandering around the Forest these days. He's a bit busy, if you hadn't noticed."

"There are other dangerous things around here. And as I recall, in a crisis you tend to pelt off screaming like a girl."

"As opposed to being frozen with terror? Yes, that's a *much* more sensible thing to do... I thought you were right behind me, you pillock. And I was not screaming like a girl." Malfoy looked around at the forest in a proprietorial fashion. "It was a - manly yell."

"Right..."

Harry smiled, and followed Malfoy, who was stalking forward. He was beginning to realise that Slytherins had extremely strange ideas about what constituted a good time. Not that Malfoy had been exactly *wrong* about what constituted a good time. So far.

"You have to wonder why they put a school right next to a terrifying forest of doom," Malfoy said casually. "I suppose they think a certain amount of blinding fear builds character."

Harry felt that if this was the case, his character should be truly impressive. Actually, this forest seemed much less blindly terrifying than he remembered it as a child. The fading light made the leaves seem almost transparent, and cast faint green shadows on the pale surface of Malfoy's hair.

Harry relaxed fractionally. "I suppose it's not so bad."

Malfoy looked smug.

"I guess I just have nasty memories of it. Those giant spiders that tried to eat me and Ron..." Harry shuddered.

Malfoy stopped looking smug.

He also stopped walking.

"Giant *what*?"

"Er, spiders."

"You're not serious."

Malfoy's face was always pale. It might have been Harry's imagination that made him think he looked paler just now.

"You are serious," Malfoy said, staring at him. "You maniac! How could you let me come in here?"

"This was your idea -"

"I'm not the one who knew about the bloodthirsty arachnids!"

Malfoy spun around and began to walk back at speed.

Harry was trying not to laugh. "What about fear building character?"

"My character's built enough," Malfoy snapped. "Besides -"

He stopped, listening. Harry heard the rustle of leaves behind him and saw Malfoy's grey eyes widen.

"Get *down!*"

# Chapter Five: The Young Order of the Phoenix

*'The years of Voldemort's ascension to power were marked with disappearances.'*

- Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

*Things are gonna slide*

*Slide in all directions*

*Won't be nothing you can measure anymore*

*The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold*

*And it's overturned the order of the soul*

*And now the wheels of heaven stop*

*You feel the devil's riding crop*

*Get ready for the future*

*It is murder*

Hermione was looking for Harry.

She walked through the dark corridor, arms wrapped tightly around herself. She could keep her thoughts cool and logical despite the hot insistent hammer of panic beating in her chest.

Harry had been seen last with Draco Malfoy, walking down the school steps. Nobody knew what had happened to them next - that had been five hours ago, and in that time...

Hermione was holding fast to her wand, though she knew that a wand would be useless to her, as it had been to the others. She bit down on her lip and told herself to stop thinking about it.

Ron was looking around the Slytherin dungeons, although Hermione figured the only way the Slytherins would let Harry onto their turf would be in pieces.

She had checked the fourth and was about to check the fifth floor.

*Please, please let him be all right. Please, please let him be...*

"Malfoy, get out!"

*... here.*

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, and ran down the corridor to hug him. He reciprocated, looking rather startled. He also looked a right mess. His hair was all over the place, his face was streaked with mud, his clothes torn and filled with twigs - and he was smiling a little, looking far more at ease than usual.

It was... strange. Almost disorienting.

"Harry - what happened?"

"Oh - um." Harry blinked. "Nothing much. Malfoy and I went for a walk in the Forbidden Forest -"

"You did *what*? Why? Where did all the, er, mud come from?"

"Well, there was this ditch."

Hermione resisted the urge to tear out her own hair in handfuls.

"Harry. What happened?"

Harry smiled again. "Ah. I happened to mention certain things about giant spiders, and *somebody*," he raised his voice, "lost it when he heard a noise and dragged me into a *ditch*."

A querulous and, Hermione thought, distinctly unpleasant voice answered him. "It could have been something dangerous."

"It was a *deer*, Malfoy," Harry said to the door. "A little, helpless, harmless fawn, to be exact. And I'm covered in mud, and you've been hogging the bathroom for over an hour. So get out."

Hermione was just... too tired for this.

"Harry - why couldn't you have used the Gryffindor bathrooms?" she asked.

"This git said he'd only be a minute!"

"Correction, Potter," came Malfoy's cool voice. "I said I would only take as long as I needed to get my hair right."

"You've been in there an hour! And you've probably used up all the ice-white foam."

"I just happen to like it, all right?"

"Did you know that there's a ghost in school who likes to peep at prefects from out of the taps?"

"*What*?"

There was a hasty splash, as if someone were diving under protective layers of foam. Hermione was beginning to feel left out of this conversation. She was also horrified at the thought that nudity of a Malfoy nature was happening nearby.

"You seem to know all the school's dirty little secrets, Potter," Malfoy observed in his condescending voice. "It's hardly decent for a Gryffindor."

"And how would a Slytherin define decency?"

There was a pause.

"What's Granger want, then?"

And that was when Hermione felt her surface worry and relief fade, leaving only the grim reason

she had come looking for Harry.

"Yes, Hermione, what –" Harry saw her face and the small smile left his lips. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Hang on, if it's interesting I want to hear too," Malfoy announced. "I'm getting out – but if any ghosts peep at me there will be very serious consequences."

Hermione was quite ready to tell Harry at once whether the prat liked it or not, but to her amazement Harry held up a hand. She just didn't have the strength to argue now. In a moment Draco Malfoy appeared in the doorway, a billow of steam preceding him as if to herald the arrival of a demon king in a pantomime.

Rather appropriate, Hermione thought.

The wretched boy's figure became clear after a few moments, vigorously towelling his silvery hair.

"Well, Granger?" he said. "What's going on?"

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest again, to protect herself from Malfoy's uncaring eyes, from Harry's concerned ones... and from her sudden chill.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley and Ernie Macmillan have – gone," she said slowly. "Just like the others. They were in the Hufflepuff common room and – then."

There was a heavy silence.

Eventually, Harry said, "They couldn't have... run?"

"Don't be stupid, Potter," Malfoy told him sharply. "They were Hufflepuff's representatives in the Young Council. They were taken, all right."

Hermione pressed her palms flat against her sides, trying to soothe herself, to pretend that it was Ron holding her and she was safe. "Besides, the –" She swallowed. "The Dark Mark was seen again. Over Hogwarts."

There was another silence.

People had been screaming the words until it seemed futile.

*How is he doing it?*

Nobody ever uttered it.

They were all held still and quiet, linked together by bleakness, and however much Hermione might dislike Malfoy she knew this link must remain. Each of them remained to carry the burden of those who had been taken. Each of them was the next potential victim.

"Oh no," Harry said at last, his tone deadened in the oppressive atmosphere.

"That about sums it up."

Hermione felt as if she was looking in on this scene, an indifferent observer noting the actions of three scared children.

Malfoy was leaning against the doorframe as both Harry and Hermione were leaning against the walls, unwilling to bear their own weight. The gesture was familiar to Hermione as everything about this situation was familiar.

These disappearances were more serious than before. Both the Hufflepuff representatives... a quarter of the Young Council...

*We're being targeted.*

Hermione resisted the urge to slip down the wall onto the floor, to clasp her arms around her knees and wait for comfort.

Instead she said, in a voice pinched into calmness, "Professor Lupin is holding a meeting of the Young Order tomorrow. The Young Council will probably be asked to stay afterwards."

Harry nodded wearily. It was no more than was expected.

Malfoy gave a sudden shiver. Hermione glanced over at him and noticed that he was still wet. His T-shirt was clinging to his skin, his hair looked like soggy tinsel, and his face gave no hint that the shiver was caused anything other than a chill.

When she looked over at Harry, she saw his face change from distress to... concern. Bloody hell. Concern for Malfoy? This friendship thing was going a long way too far.

"I'd better get back to my people," Malfoy said, in the muted tones they had all been using. Hermione noticed with a little quiver of distaste the casual, proprietorial way he referred to his housemates. "They'll be worried."

Hermione couldn't see the Slytherins being worried about anything.

"Yeah, of course," Harry replied at once. And now he definitely sounded concerned. "Will you be all right going down there...?"

He seemed to be looking at Malfoy's neck, where another droplet was coursing a path down the pale curve. Hermione had seen this before, of course - in the face of tragedy, you looked everywhere but into people's eyes.

Malfoy's eyebrow quirked.

"If the Dark Lord pounces from behind a corner, I'll give a girlish scream and you can come running to rescue me. Honestly, Potter!"

Harry laughed softly, almost reluctantly, and went with Hermione. She was feeling quite aggrieved.

All that worry because Harry had run off somewhere dangerous with Malfoy, and it wasn't like

Malfoy could be trusted in a crisis - it wasn't like Malfoy could be trusted *ever*... Something could have happened to him, but that was too terrifying even to contemplate. So many people had simply vanished - but not Harry.

Please, let it not happen to Harry.

Ron greeted her with a kiss and Harry with a hug - and he was not usually demonstrative, Hermione reflected.

She held onto him tightly and tried not to think about what had happened or what could happen. She looked over to catch Harry's eye and share more unspoken comfort. But Harry was looking away, clearly thinking about something else.

\* \* \*

Ginny Weasley was sitting through the minutes of the last Young Order of the Phoenix meeting and trying not to stare across at Harry.

She spent a great deal of her time in these meetings doing this, lulled into security by the fact that he either hung on Professor Lupin's quiet words or seemed lost in thought. Of course, she also spent a great deal of time doing this during Quidditch matches, and at meal times, and just passing by in the corridors...

Ginny knew this was ridiculous. Crushes were not supposed to last for seven years. Crushes were not supposed to last a lifetime, to have been taken in with a four-year-old's bread and milk. What small child could listen to a fairy tale about Prince Charming and not want to fill Cinderella's glass slippers?

What child could hear about a dark-haired hero who had saved the world, and been stranded like the princess in her tower among Muggles, and not want to reach out to him?

Ginny reckoned that every girl of her age had once cherished a secret fantasy about being the Girl Who The Boy Who Lived Loved.

It was just that every girl's brother didn't befriend Harry Potter. Every girl's mother did not practically adopt him.

Every girl was not rescued by Harry Potter when she was a lonely, trembling first year. Every girl did not realise that he was just what the propaganda said - brave, noble and true. A boy like that only came by once in a lifetime.

Ginny had *tried* to stop embarrassing herself. She had exchanged awkward first kisses with Colin Creevey. She had even briefly dated Dean Thomas, that introspective artistic boy she had *cared* about, really cared, but... it hadn't lasted.

She had come to realise that her crush had been hammered diamond hard by time, and no-one else was ever going to measure up.

After all the hero-worship and the silly Valentines, the persistent yearning remained, and she had



decided to just patiently wait it out.

There had to be a chance, just a chance. He had kissed her a couple of times last year, soft experimental kisses which had set her heart hammering with hope. He had not followed up on them - which she understood, of course she did, he had been wounded and unloved throughout his whole life, he couldn't possibly know that she loved him. There had never been a whisper about him and any other girl, for which Ginny was profoundly grateful. His kiss with Cho Chang had been an unrepeatable incident. One day, Harry might reach out for Ginny again. And if he did, Ginny would be waiting.

Ginny surveyed Harry with shy joy. He was looking better recently, she thought, less unhappy. He was taking more care of his clothes and laughing more often. The Triwizard Tournament was clearly doing him good.

Even this odd little idea of friendship with Malfoy made Ginny smile indulgently. It was so like Harry to try and reclaim people, even hateful Slytherins like Malfoy. If Malfoy could distract Harry, and moreover could take up time that Harry might otherwise spend finding a girl, Ginny was all for it.

Harry would get tired of it soon, in any case.

Perhaps even today. Malfoy was bound to air his disgusting prejudices as usual. Ginny glared over at Malfoy, whose head was bent over a piece of parchment. The hand that held his costly-looking quill seemed expensive too, all fine bones and pale skin. He was such a cosseted, detestable creature.

Ginny felt that girlish thrill - *Oh, Harry's wonderful!* - when she thought about the last time Malfoy had made a particularly off-colour remark about Mudbloods.

Harry, who had been sitting with that absent miserable look on his face that broke her heart, had looked up and his eyes had burned green fire.

Her fearless hero.

Ginny remembered it vividly.

"Say that again, Malfoy. I dare you," he'd snapped.

Malfoy, in his horrible icy drawl, had said it again.

Harry and Malfoy had stood up and leant across the table, snarling words of hatred at each other, their noses practically touching.

"Go on, Potter," Malfoy had urged him. "What better time to start a fight than in front of an admiring audience of Weasleys?"

He had sneered over at Ginny, who had gone cold.

Harry had grabbed the front of Malfoy's robes, looking about two seconds away from jumping over the table and doing something desperate.

"Leave them out of it!"

Ginny had glowed with adoration.

If Professor Lupin had not quietly broken up the meeting, who knew what could have happened?

Ginny noticed that Harry was watching Malfoy too.

Good. He wouldn't let that Slytherin get away with anything.

\* \* \*

Harry was wondering if you could be schizophrenic for someone else.

He had the very distinct impression that there were two Malfoys hovering around Hogwarts, when one would be enough for anyone's sanity.

The two Malfoys bore a certain similarity to each other, but only an idiot would be fooled. Both the Malfoys smirked, and tossed around mean comments as if they were going out of fashion. Both the Malfoys had extremely dubious morals.

But one of the Malfoys laughed much more freely, and had ideas that were more about fun than evil. One of the Malfoys, whatever his opinions on Muggles, refrained from using the dreaded 'M' word. The other Malfoy didn't give a damn what he said.

One Malfoy was able to talk without malice. The wind constantly tumbled his hair into silver tangles, giving him a slightly softer look than the other Malfoy.

The second Malfoy was sitting across from Harry now, making some kind of notes on a piece of parchment. His hair was immaculate, the groomed tips of blond silk tucked behind his ears, and he did not look up from his parchment except when Pansy or Blaise spoke to him. Harry was unobtrusively trying to attract his attention, for no reason he could think of. Perhaps he wanted some kind of reassurance that Malfoy would behave.

He didn't want to get into a fight with him today.

Eventually, he abandoned the indirect path and let out a noise that was half cough and half 'Malfoy!'

Malfoy looked up, smiling slightly.

"Potter, you master of subtlety, you."

And in spite of the Slytherin death glares immediately trained on him, Harry felt a little reassured. He would have spoken further, but at that moment Professor Lupin came in.

\* \* \*

Harry had liked Professor Lupin even back in third year.

He did more than like him now. He revered the man.

At the beginning of fifth year, Hogwarts had been frantic. Over the summer it had become clear to everyone that Voldemort was indeed back. People had begun vanishing. The whole wizarding world had been suddenly plunged into war.

But children could not fight in a war. All they could do was go to Hogwarts, and wait in fear... for the news of the Mark being seen over their home, for the final horror. Lupin had taken these terrified children and formed the Young Order of the Phoenix. Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had flocked to the meetings, seizing the chance to discuss things - to feel as if they were contributing something and could learn. Slytherins had not gone near the meetings.

Until Lucius Malfoy had died - over the Christmas holidays - and Draco Malfoy had turned up at the next meeting with a white set face and his Slytherin friends behind him. Harry had been beside himself with annoyance at the intrusion. Lupin had accepted them quietly, and coped with the additional numbers by forming the Young Council, with two representatives selected from each House, for emergencies.

Many people hadn't taken the Young Order seriously until the next year, when the graduates from the Young Order used what Lupin had taught them to become formidable soldiers in the war.

Everyone knew now that the Young Order was vital. If you were against Voldemort, if you wanted a chance at survival... You learned the tactics and the reality of war around that table which Lupin headed.

Professor Lupin, always unassuming and yet utterly in charge. More reliable than the impulsive, temperamental Sirius, more available than the overburdened Dumbledore. He had become like a father to those whose parents had been - lost. And his calm presence had a great deal, Harry suspected, to do with so many people remaining at Hogwarts. When even Hogwarts began to suffer disappearances, there was mass panic.

Lupin had stayed calm, had made them feel safe, had *talked* to them. He had won the love of most of his students, and the respect of even the Slytherins. Harry knew that the seventh years that were leaving Hogwarts would go into this battle with those steadfast grey eyes before them, seeing him as a symbol of hope, relying on what he had taught them.

He had done it all, this greying, shabby teacher who had been an outcast for most of his life. Harry respected him greatly. Harry could see the adoration in many students' eyes when he called the meeting to order.

And that was why Malfoy's cracks at Young Order meetings had always annoyed Harry so much, and why Harry was dreading another now.

If Malfoy insulted Lupin...

Professor Lupin cleared his throat.

"We all know that - another disappearance has occurred," he said in his understated voice. "It would be pointless to tell you not to be afraid, or distressed. But do not let your fear or grief overwhelm you. Those who are left still have important work to do. Hufflepuff House has my deepest sympathy, and my admiration in that they have already appointed Hannah Abbott and Susan

Bones to the Young Council."

Everybody clapped, a murmur of approval rising around the table.

Harry watched Malfoy clap in his decisive manner, much like the applause he gave new Slytherins at the start of every school year.

It struck him as strange that he knew how Malfoy clapped. Stranger that it was their last year, and that he would never notice him clapping for new Slytherins again.

Lupin was still talking.

"- am sure the other Young Councillors will do their utmost to help them. In other news, I'd like to commend Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Boot for their excellent diagram of their plan on last year's storming of the Riddle House. I believe their way would have ensured fewer casualties."

Terry Boot blushed red with pleasure. Malfoy inclined his head, accepting the applause as his due.

*Insufferable git*, Harry thought with a smile. *So he was working on something with a Ravenclaw. Are they friends?*

He watched Terry's hesitant glance over the table at Malfoy, but was unable to decide whether it was friendly or not. Malfoy was busy making eyes at pretty Susan Bones. It was commonly known that Malfoy had little time for Hufflepuffs, and he was completely ignoring shy Hannah. But Malfoy always made exceptions for the cute ones.

"We have two motions to put to the vote, one practical and one theoretical."

Harry noticed that Malfoy almost returned Lupin's calm smile.

"Firstly, the question of protection, including drills. As we all know, there has been no year that has not suffered losses. Measures have to be taken to protect students. From now on, according to Miss Granger's excellent plan, teachers will accompany all first and second year students to their classes."

*We are too desperately short-staffed to guard the elder classes, as you all know.* That part of Lupin's speech remained unspoken.

"The other students are requested not to go anywhere unaccompanied. Moreover, after the Duelling Club on Fridays we will have drills in case of a full-scale attack on Hogwarts. I want to see how quickly our Young Councillors, with prefects assisting, can bring the all the students down into the Great Hall and then put themselves into defensive positions at the entrances."

There were solemn nods all around. The Order voted unanimously in favour, though Harry noticed the Slytherins glancing at Malfoy before they voted.

"And then there is the theoretical vote."

Gazes were focused on Lupin all around the table. Everyone took theoretical votes seriously these days, since they knew that once they left school these issues would be reality.

"Should we, or should we not, share Mediwizard secrets which could save the lives of Muggles?"

"Absolutely not." The sharp, cold voice rang around the room.

"I realise *your* viewpoint is different," Hermione said sharply. "You don't care whether Muggles live or die."

"And your viewpoint is different too," Malfoy snapped. "All you care about is your Muggle relatives, Mudblood."

An angry buzz rose around the table.

Malfoy had used that word several times in meetings, but he rarely applied it to another person. Especially not to Hermione Granger, their most respected Councillor. Ron's face flamed red and Hermione's hand clenched. Lupin's remonstrations were lost amid the rising voices.

Harry felt his chest tighten, outrage and disappointment forming one fierce emotion that burned under his ribs and dimmed his vision.

He saw Malfoy in a haze, his pale face defiant and utterly without regret. His eyes met Harry's coolly, as if they were strangers.

"Malfoy." Harry heard his own voice almost with surprise, slicing sharply through his cloudy emotions. "Outside. Now."

Malfoy's lip curled.

"Why the hell should I go outside, Potter? Are you planning a little brawl out of the teacher's sight?"

"Harry, sit down," he heard Lupin say quietly, but Harry was past caring.

"I'm planning to get you out so everyone doesn't have to suffer from your revolting comments. And I'm planning to have a talk with you about your filthy mouth."

Malfoy crossed his arms over his chest. It was only then, when he noticed he was looking at Malfoy from a height, that Harry realised he'd risen to his feet.

"That kind of talk might well get you into a fight," Malfoy informed him with that slow, sneering air of his.

"I don't care," Harry said. "Get out here, and we'll talk. And then, if you like, we can fight."

Malfoy smiled suddenly, that lazy disdainful smile, and rose to look Harry directly in the eye.

"Well, Potter," he drawled, "it's always a good day for you to go down."

Harry strode over to the door, aware that his face was stormy.

"Get out here. And we'll see who goes down."

Ginny Weasley was leaning across the table, her eyes wide. Harry hoped the poor girl wasn't too horrified.

Malfoy had not moved. He seemed rather contemplative.

Harry met those cold eyes again, his gaze a direct challenge.

Malfoy walked out, sweeping past Harry and leaving him to shut the door against the incredulous gazes of the Young Council.

As he did so he heard Hermione say: "Shouldn't we stop them, Professor?"

"Hermione," said Professor Lupin, "if we allowed our meetings to be broken up every time Harry and Draco Malfoy clash, we would never finish any of them."

Then Harry closed the door, and turned around to face Malfoy.

He was leaning against the wall, head tilted back to give Harry the full benefit of his chill scrutiny.

"Well, Potter? I'm eager to hear what you have to say - the sooner you're done, the sooner I get to give you what you've been asking for for years."

\* \* \*

"I want to know what the hell you think you were doing in there! Don't you realise what you're making other people think about you? Don't you care what *I* think?"

"When I want your opinion, Potter, I'll give it to you," Malfoy drawled.

Harry slammed Malfoy against the wall.

"Get your hands off me!" Malfoy ordered, his eyes flashing.

"I will not!" Harry said, breathless with anger.

Malfoy lifted his chin, looking every inch the irate aristocrat.

"I can say what I think."

"Yes, but you're smart." Harry hadn't realised he thought that until he'd said it. "You can't possibly believe all that racist crap."

"I certainly don't believe in Lupin's do-gooder little motion."

Malfoy's voice was like ice. His supercilious tones were only making Harry's fury hotter.

Harry was so wrathful he stumbled over the words. "You - you don't think that helping people to survive would be a good thing?"

"I'd rather survive myself. Don't you realise that letting doctors and patients into magical secrets

would just be another way to make the Muggle world aware of the magical one? Stop being Lupin's model boy for just a second and think!"

"It's people's lives we're talking about!"

"Yes." Malfoy's voice was flat. "It's us or them. Just like it's always been. You believe all that history they feed us about the Burning Times, Potter? Cutesy little stories about Wendelin the Weird making the flames tickle? You think that's all there is to it? Those were times of fear. Muggles soon learnt that all you have to do is take a wizard's wand. Once they've done that, they can burn you, drown you or break every bone in your body, and thread your limbs through the spokes of a wheel. That's what they did, and that's what they would do now. This is a time of war, it's a time to be more careful, and I don't care if Muggle-lovers are running the show, it's not safe to let our secrets out!"

Malfoy's voice had slowly become more impassioned. His eyes were gleaming now, and he had stepped forward, closer to Harry.

Harry took a step backwards, startled by the force of Malfoy's words.

"You didn't have to use the Mudblood crack," he replied in low tones. Malfoy leaned back against the wall, his voice chill again.

"I don't trust that kind of people," he returned. "Each one of them gives the Muggles more chance of learning about us and attacking us. Don't you know the kind of resentment a magical person could stir up in a family?"

*I was the only one who saw her for what she was - a freak!*

Harry crushed down Petunia Dursley's words into the back of his mind.

"Take You-Know-Who," Malfoy said. "His father was a Muggle. My father told me that kind of people are unstable - well, what more proof do you need? Magic makes the Muggles mad. We should keep away from all of them."

"So why don't you refuse to work with Hermione?"

"I'm against You-Know-Who. She's already integrated into the magic world. I'll take allies where I can get them - it doesn't mean I have to like it."

"We're fighting this war against bigotry!"

"I'm not."

"Then... why?"

Malfoy shut his eyes, a move which left Harry staring. He seemed oddly vulnerable.

"I don't like Muggles," he said. "Doesn't mean I want to see them exterminated. But the main reason I'm in this war is - revenge." A small smile ghosted over his lips. "Is that so wrong?"

Harry had not dreamed he would be at a loss for words.

He had expected malice, not the reasoned argument of someone who had thought a lot on this subject. He had certainly not expected an explanation, however small, of Malfoy's motives. Lupin's suggestion had seemed so reasonable and good. Harry hadn't thought much about the consequences.

But now... He recalled Hagrid's words, back when he was eleven.

*We're best left alone.*

The picture of wizards' bones being broken... the bitterness behind Malfoy's words and the realisation of the fear behind the hatred those pureblood families felt, with the dark history being passed down the generations.

Harry didn't agree, but he would have found it terribly difficult to argue. He found himself... respecting Malfoy's point of view, which was perhaps the most unexpected thing of all.

He clung to one certainty.

"She's a good person," he insisted. "You have no right to fling foul insults at her."

"She started it," Malfoy defended himself.

Harry leaned back against the wall beside Malfoy, their shoulders touching. He felt somehow devoid of rancour.

"Don't pretend this is the first time."

"She started it the first time, too," Malfoy said darkly. "Saying I bought my way onto the team."

"Didn't you?" Harry asked, more in a spirit of curiosity than accusation.

"No, I bloody well didn't, Potter! I participated in perfectly normal try-outs after Terence Higgs quit. After I got the position, my father bought the brooms. My father didn't reward people until they showed themselves worthy."

"Look -" Harry decided to leave the question of Lucius Malfoy severely alone. "You know what that word means to everyone in there. It's the way Death Eaters talk, and it's a disgusting word to apply to someone who is honestly decent and kind. There's no reason to use it just to upset her. It's petty, it's childish and it's cruel."

"Cruelty is under-rated, you know."

Harry glanced over at Malfoy, who shrugged and smiled. The fierce surge of rage that had made him slam Malfoy up against a wall and shout had faded.

It was so bizarre, that Malfoy could make him that angry and then somehow be the one who could calm him down this fast.



"Come on, Malfoy."

Malfoy shrugged uncomfortably and looked away.

"Suppose I admitted you have a point. Would you do the same?" he asked at last.

"What do you mean?"

Harry was intrigued. This was becoming a not-uncommon feeling around Malfoy.

"I mean... I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said."

"Just think?"

"Certainly. It's beneath my dignity as a Malfoy to bargain." Malfoy smiled suddenly, that rather impish smirk which was less malicious than usual, and which Harry was getting used to. "Bribery is quite another matter."

Harry considered, and then smiled back.

"All right then. It's a - deal."

As they returned by silent but mutual consent to the meeting room, Harry added:

"You do realise that I will fight you if you call Hermione that again."

Malfoy lifted an eyebrow. "I look forward to taking you down."

The Young Order looked stunned to see Malfoy and Harry returning, both apparently unharmed and in good humour.

Hermione poked Harry suspiciously in the side, apparently checking for internal damage. Harry was amused to note Pansy Parkinson doing the same across the table. Malfoy glanced over, and they shared a small rueful smile.

Ginny Weasley glared at Malfoy as if she thought he had performed a quick Imperius.

"Could we have the vote now?" inquired Professor Lupin wryly, choosing to be judiciously blind about the entire affair.

Harry thought about it. Malfoy *had* had a very valid point about this motion...

He voted against it.

Now most of the room looked as if they thought Malfoy had performed a quick Imperius.

"And the motion is lost by one vote," Lupin observed in his neutral tones.

"Hard luck," Malfoy told Hermione in his gloating manner... and the whole room winced apprehensively as he opened his lips to add another word.

What he said, in thoughtful tones, was "Granger."

Now the whole room looked nonplussed. Many people looked intensely relieved when Lupin broke up the meeting, and as the Young Order filed out the gossip was already rising behind the door.

\* \* \*

The Young Council stayed behind for Lupin's last words.

"Young Councillors," Lupin said, his voice graver now that the last members of the Order had left, "we all know that times are dark. You are in a sense responsible for your fellow students, without being able to protect them completely. Now is not the time for house rivalries or personal dissent. I am putting you all in charge of the practice drills. I want to see all of you working in amicable co-operation."

Harry looked around the table as Lupin spoke.

Hermione's dark intelligent eyes glowed beside him. The round fearful face of Hannah Abbott and Susan's quivering mouth were set in an effort at bravery. Terry Boot and Padma Patil appeared anxious. Blaise Zabini's dark cunning face wore a serious expression for once. All of them were joined in a sense of grave unity. All of them, in this moment, seemed trustworthy.

Malfoy had tipped back his chair and was smiling a rakish and distinctly unreliable smile. He looked bright and carefree and somewhat evil.

Harry shared that smile, just a little, like a whispered exchange of secrets. *I'll think about what you said. And you should think about what I said.* Well. Harry was thinking.

"Just try to be friendly," Lupin urged.

"I'll try," said a sudden cheerful voice. Harry was surprised to realise it was his.

Malfoy yawned and stretched. "Oh, why not?"

# Chapter Six: Expeditions

*The serious stuff, and the light-hearted  
Looking in your eyes and I'm just getting started  
Tell me your secrets, all your hopes and wishes too  
I want to know everything there is to know about you*

Harry Potter had been watching Draco Malfoy for years.

Of course, he hadn't *realised* that until now, but there it was. He remembered searching the Ravenclaw table for Cho's face back in fourth year, but his crush had proved far more ephemeral than his hatred of Malfoy. Harry had never begun a new year without searching among the crowds on the train and at the Slytherin table for Malfoy. He was unable to relax until that familiar loathed blond head was spotted, and he could sit back, enemy located, narrow his eyes and *glare* for a minute.

He hadn't realised that until now. Now that he was trying out this novel concept of friendship he observed how much he already knew about Draco Malfoy's daily life. It was amazing how much more he saw without his eyes narrowed.

The pattern of Malfoy's life seemed to be that there was hardly any pattern. Sometimes he came into breakfast at a respectable time, though he always looked a little severe. Occasionally Pansy and Blaise Zabini would be dragging him in, trying to force-feed him as he grouchy demanded coffee. More often than not, he didn't show up for breakfast at all. He wasn't a morning person, and he missed far too many meals.

But Harry did discern a certain pattern. He formed a pattern himself. Every morning that Malfoy appeared, Harry always walked past the Slytherin table and said good morning. And Malfoy would always respond, though he never seemed to think of volunteering a greeting. And every Friday, Malfoy arrived a little late to breakfast, but with shining eyes and barely repressed glee, and he talked almost incessantly and ate an obscene amount. Harry couldn't work that out, until his inquiries of Hermione discovered that Creative Magic was the first class on Friday mornings.

Whenever Malfoy received one of his packages of sweets from home, he had a very definite pattern of behaviour. He opened the exquisitely wrapped parcels carefully, slowly, casting gloating glances at the slaving Crabbe and Goyle. Then, with a flourish, he would tip all the expensive sweets onto his plate.

That done, he would tilt his head back and survey the entire Slytherin table, making sure that he had everybody's attention. He was always the arrogant and capricious prince, bestowing sweets upon those he considered worthy with deliberation and malice.

Whenever he saw that somebody particularly wanted a certain sweet, he would smugly eat it himself. Harry didn't like to watch this display, but he did watch - and it made him smile. And it unsettled him, slightly, to see the pattern established over these few weeks of friendship broken.

A parcel arrived at a Thursday breakfast. Malfoy's pedigree eagle owl glided toward the Slytherin

table with the same lazy grace as its owner, every wingbeat declaring that it was not bred to make clumsy movements, thank you very much.

Harry saw it before Malfoy did, though when it landed Malfoy looked up with no surprise. But when he saw the letter he hesitated.

Harry realised that Malfoy never got letters. There were those regular packages of sweets, even a few tasteful and costly gifts, but... Harry never remembered him getting letters before. Except now he had a letter, and he was turning it over in his hands, his face carefully blank as if he had not yet figured out the correct emotion to display. He tossed the parcel over into Pansy's lap, indifferent, preoccupied and - yes, this was very uncharacteristic. Malfoy seemed to have come to a decision. He rose slowly, and now there were emotions passing briefly over his face. There was a certain apprehension and wariness. Harry kept looking at him as Malfoy skirted the tables, making for the exit. He wondered if he should be concerned.

Then Malfoy's eyes lit on Harry. He flashed him a swift bright smile.

"Good morning."

Of course, one thing that this whole Malfoy business should have taught him was that sometimes a break in the pattern was good.

\* \* \*

In spite of the reassurance of Malfoy's greeting, Harry kept remembering the look of shock on his face, the quick fumble when he took the letter.

So he made his excuses to Hermione and Ron, and followed Malfoy to the Potions classroom. They both had Potions class first on Thursdays.

He found Malfoy in the empty Potions classroom. Malfoy was sitting on one of the desks, back propped against a wall and knees drawn up to his chest. His head was bowed, and he seemed to be deep in thought.

Malfoy looked up when Harry came in, his eyes widening in surprise. Otherwise his face remained unchanged.

"Potter," he said.

"Malfoy," Harry responded. "I - came to see if you were all right?"

"Concerned? Very ministering-Gryffindor of you." There was no resentment in Malfoy's tone, but there didn't seem to be any desire to tell Harry all his woes either. Harry noticed the letter crumpled up in one hand.

"I hope Professor Snape will be here," Malfoy said suddenly.

Snape wasn't there - a lot. Of course, they all knew what he was doing - *spying* - and every time he went, they all knew there was a chance he might not return.

To think that there would come a day when Lupin would be filling in for Snape in Potions, and Harry would regret it.

"I thought you liked Professor Lupin."

"I don't mind him," Malfoy answered. "But I prefer Professor Snape."

That was true, of course. Malfoy was always slightly more tense while Snape was away. Actively liking Snape - Harry wouldn't have thought it could be done.

For some reason, this short exchange seemed to relax Malfoy a little. He leaned further forward, his chest pressing against his knees, and said abruptly:

"My father was the one who wanted a child."

Harry had absolutely no idea what to say to this.

"Yeah?"

Malfoy glanced down at the creased paper in his hand. The curve of his lower lip made him look like a discontent, ignored child.

"He used to spend time with me. Now he's gone, she feels she has to take an interest."

"What did your mum say in the letter?"

It was odd, somehow, to say 'mum' to Malfoy. Malfoy might well have had a father and mother, but never a mum and dad.

Of course, Harry couldn't exactly picture Lucius Malfoy taking his son out for a ball game. Maybe a shrunken Muggle-head game.

"She wants to see me. She says we'll have a day out in Hogsmeade." There was no trace of emotion in his voice, but Harry could sense something underneath the unmoved exterior. Harry thought how natural it would be now to cross over to the table where Malfoy sat, and place a hand on his shoulder or something. But Malfoy was not the kind of person who could be touched casually.

"Of course she wants to see you," Harry said.

"Oh, yes. It's the proper thing for a mother to want. She always does the proper thing."

"I'm, ah - I'm sure she loves you."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and looked at Harry in surprise, and Harry felt as if he had utterly misinterpreted the situation.

"Love," Malfoy repeated, with a soft incredulous chuckle. "You are an infant, aren't you, Potter?"

Harry frowned.

"She might feel a certain affection for me," Malfoy said after a pause. "I just don't know her very well. Whenever she takes me on outings I bring a friend with me so we can all play at being polite, and pretend to know each other."

Harry looked at Malfoy's face, which was calm and shadowed, trying to understand. *Are you unhappy or not?*

The odd thing was that he thought Malfoy was trying to be straightforward.

"I don't blame her for not being interested," Malfoy told him. "And I wouldn't tell this to just anybody, so if you tell Granger or Weasley I'll grind their bones to make your poisoned bread."

"Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed, stung. "I wouldn't tell anyone!"

Malfoy shrugged.

"Well, I didn't think you would." Harry smiled slightly, and Malfoy continued. "After all, you're Harry Potter. Believer in truth and justice, and the very soul of honour."

*You're Harry Potter.*

Harry stopped smiling.

"I'm sorry if my basic morals offend you, Malfoy."

Malfoy grinned his rather wicked grin.

"Nah, I don't really mind. It's novel." He paused. "Not that it's not a bit *pathetic*, Potter."

"Oh, of course." Harry ducked his head to hide a reciprocal grin. "Hey - um, do you want to be partners? In Potions?"

"Do I want to induce heart failure in my favourite teacher? Be serious, Potter. In any case, Goyle would blow up the dungeon without me." But he was smiling. "If you feel like inducing heart failure in that ex-gamekeeper, we'll see."

Care of Magical Creatures was after break.

Harry gave him another quick smile and a nod of assent as Snape entered the classroom. Snape caught it and looked scandalised, as if Harry had been slipping drugs to his favourite. Harry looked at Malfoy's guarded pleasure at seeing Snape there, and was able to regard even Snape without resentment.

He was Malfoy's partner studying salamanders in Care of Magical Creatures. Of course, the animal turned vicious and Malfoy basely abandoned him, fleeing and locking himself in the hut.

"Typical Slytherin," Harry said, just as he would have said at any time in the past six years. But he was laughing, and so was Malfoy.

"Clothes?" Harry asked blankly.

He and Malfoy were beside the lake, staring out at the wide expanse of water. In spite of Malfoy's often-voiced objections to the cold, they always seemed to meet there.

"Yes, Potter. One uses them for covering in winter, decency in the summer and in your case to commit dire crimes against fashion."

Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Dire's a bit strong..."

Malfoy shook his head vehemently.

"No, it's not strong enough. I mean, your robes are all right, it's fairly hard to go wrong with robes, but the Muggle clothes? I thought you were brought up among that lot."

Harry turned towards the lake, wincing as the wind blew directly in his face. The wince covered his expression as he replied:

"I was. That's the problem."

Malfoy, who was sitting on a rock, stretched out his legs and studied them instead of Harry. This, Harry began to realise, was his form of tact.

"Right, I remember. You were forced into the clothes of your cousin, who has his own orbit of gravity. But you have money, don't you? You've bought a few clothes for yourself?"

"Sure," Harry agreed uneasily.

"Then you're to blame. Let me see, the clothes you actually bought would be the slightly better-fitting but brown and utterly drab things you sport occasionally?"

"Look, I don't know how we got onto the subject of fashion - They're just *sensible*, all right? I mean, clothes aren't that important."

Malfoy's eyebrows shot up into his hair.

"Don't you want to look good?" he inquired, in the scandalised tone of one who will simply not comprehend the situation if the answer is no.

*Well, Harry was about to reply, it would be a bit shallow to care about clothes when there's a war going on, wouldn't it? Besides, I'm the Boy Who Lived, I have to fulfill expectations, I can't be sodding well vain, can I...?*

Then he remembered that this was Malfoy, and Malfoy might chuck something at him. He also remembered the acute anxiety he used to feel about Dudley's cast-offs - that bobble jumper! - that dyed-grey uniform he never had to wear - how he used to passionately wish to be like the other children.

"Of course I do," he said slowly. "But... I don't know..."

He looked over at Malfoy, who was wearing a grey T-shirt and jeans with an air usually associated with velvet and lace.

"You... know about Muggle clothes, don't you?" he said.

"Well, I'm certainly not going to wander around looking like you, you monstrous fashion victim."

"Yeah, but... Why do you even wear them?"

Malfoy tilted his head to one side, and paused thoughtfully before he replied.

"It's a - statement. Slytherins don't join the Young Order. Slytherins don't wear Muggle clothes. And I don't do as I'm expected." He narrowed his eyes. "And I certainly don't wear brown corduroy. You make me *ill*, Potter."

"What clothes do you think I should buy?" Harry asked helplessly. Malfoy turned around and gave him an appraising look.

Harry averted his eyes. Malfoy had a terribly unsettling way of looking at people. He was completely unembarrassed about doing it, and had the attitude of one checking off items on a list.

"Hmm," he said finally, and got up. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"Not to rob a shop, you twit. We're going to clear out your wardrobe first, and then we'll restock it next time we're in Hogsmeade. Some very nice Muggle clothes shops have opened there."

Malfoy turned around and started walking.

Malfoy had a tendency to act on impulse. Harry had thought of mentioning that this was a Gryffindor trait, but he didn't fancy the idea of an all-out fist-fight.

"Wait," Harry called out. "Won't you have to - I mean, to come into the Gryffindor common room... you'll have to hear the password, right?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Um."

There was a pause. Harry looked wretched. Malfoy looked mildly amused.

"You think I'll sneak up and write graffiti on the common room walls?"

"Something like that..." Harry admitted. "Except a bit more evil."

Malfoy shrugged. "Can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind. Let's see." He paused. "The Slytherin password is Vici."



Harry smiled. "Wizard Wheezes."

"So very like the Gryffindors," Malfoy said, rolling his eyes. "No imagination. Did it occur to you, Potter, that I could quite easily make up a password? Or indeed that I could exchange passwords, commit my evil deeds, and trust to your Gryffindor honour not to retaliate?"

Well, it was occurring to him *now*.

"Er."

"I didn't, as it happens," Malfoy informed him severely. "But I could have. You really shouldn't go around trusting people like me."

"Why, because they might toss out half my clothes?"

"Oh, shut up and get moving."

\* \* \*

Slytherins were sly. Slytherins were nasty.

Harry knew all that.

What people had forgotten to mention was that Slytherins had a decided talent for histrionics. Malfoy was making yet another horrible face as he rummaged through Harry's wardrobe. Harry was sitting on his bed, mildly entertained.

"Oh, ugh, Potter, do you take your glasses off when you go shopping? I can't believe I'm *touching* this, this is disgusting!"

Nobody could look quite as fastidious as Malfoy. He picked up the clothes gingerly, as if bad fashion sense might be catching.

"Hmm. This goes in the Just About Bearable Pile, this goes in the Toss Them Out Pile, and this goes in the Burn Them, For I Cannot Live In a World Where They Exist Pile." Malfoy flung the clothes about in a haphazard manner, but when the third shirt was still in mid-air he turned around and pointed his wand.

"*Incendio!*"

Ashes floated lazily down to the ground.

"Malfoy! You can't burn my clothes!"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"Watch me."

Harry was watching. Somewhat helplessly. He was also snickering a bit, but he told himself that that was because he'd had the presence of mind to hide his favourite pyjamas. Malfoy was making

some very disturbing snarling noises as he discovered the worst of Dudley's cast-offs.

"Nobody's that huge," he said finally. "You've got to be joking."

"I wish I was."

"I've come to accept that not everyone can have my svelte figure, but this is outrageous. Surely there is some sort of society -"

"To help him diet? There is, but -"

"Well, no." Malfoy frowned at the vast trousers. "I was thinking more in terms of a mercy killing."

"*Malfoy!*"

"Amazing, the amount of scandalised righteousness you can infuse into one word. Oh. Oh, that's *vile*."

Malfoy had discovered the shameful pile of Dudley's bobble sweaters.

"*Incendio! Incendio! Incendio!*"

"Malfoy, stop burning things!"

Malfoy smiled a placid, angelic smile as the ashes fell all around him. Harry was unable to stop laughing.

Ron Weasley opened the door, gave Malfoy a horrified look and immediately slammed out again.

There was a small pause.

"A shared dormitory always causes these kind of problems," Malfoy remarked. "I mean, how do you people deal with it when you bring home - hang on a second, Gryffindors don't have love lives. Never mind."

"We do have love lives! Ron and Hermione -"

"Potter, stop! That's a very nasty image."

"I'm sure our love lives are more interesting than Crabbe and Goyle's -"

"Potter, that image isn't any better!"

"I - what - *Malfoy!*"

Malfoy abandoned Harry's alarmingly empty closet and sank onto the bed, leaning against the bedstead.

"Again with the scandalised righteousness, Potter," he said lazily. "Hmm. This dealing with the closet of a fashion disaster is tiring work. Maybe I'll go tuck myself up in my nice quiet prefect's

bedroom."

He leaned against the bedstead, half-shutting his eyes. His hair looked very pale against the deep red of the hangings.

"Prefects don't get special bedrooms," Harry pointed out.

"Maybe not in *your* house. Ha. Ha."

"Professor McGonagall says that prefects getting special privileges isn't fair."

"Both Professor McGonagall and the concept of *fair* do not count in my house." Malfoy smirked, though the effect was somewhat spoiled because the rest of his face remained relaxed and almost amiable. "Slytherin rules. And when it doesn't, it kills the competitors and usurps the throne. I have a very nice private room, thank you very much. Feel free to drop by and salivate with envy anytime."

Harry got up from the bed and eyed the tiny pile of clothes he was supposed to wear with a certain amount of dismay.

"Malfoy, are there seven items of clothing here?"

Malfoy's eyes opened.

"There are that many? I knew I was being lax!"

\* \* \*

"It was horrible, Hermione," Ron said darkly.

Hermione was sitting with him by the fire in the common room. He had just dropped on the sofa and buried his face in the cushions. She stretched out, relaxed, happy from hours of quiet reading and ever so slightly mystified.

"What was?" she asked indulgently, stroking his soft red hair.

"Malfoy!" Ron spat the word. "In our dormitory! Doing things to Harry's *clothes*!"

*Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* fell off Hermione's lap.

"What! What was Harry doing?"

"I don't know," Ron answered in muffled and morose tones. "He was just there on the bed. He seemed quite happy about the whole thing."

"I... oh, Ron!"

"I know. This is all going too far."

"Well, I should just about say so!"

At this juncture, Harry and Malfoy came walking down the stairs. Harry's voice was clear and amused. Malfoy's voice was lower, but then again, those sly Slytherin tones sounded as if he was murmuring lewd things when he was reading out Potions ingredients.

Harry glanced over at Malfoy when he saw them, less a glance of guilt than a glance of concern.

*Right, Hermione thought. Harry was afraid that the big bad Gryffindors would bully Malfoy. When Malfoy was apparently ripping clothes off Harry upstairs!*

"Hi, guys," he said awkwardly.

"What were you doing with him?" Hermione demanded, too agitated to bother with further preliminaries.

"He was helping me clear out my wardrobe," Harry answered, puzzled.

"Oh."

*Oh. Oh, that's what it was. All right, I can breathe now.*

Malfoy leaned back against the stone wall and curled his upper lip at them. Hermione glared daggers back.

Harry looked concerned. "Ron, you almost ready for Quidditch practise?"

Ron sat up, despite the horrible fact that Malfoy was in the process of poisoning Gryffindor air with his presence.

Of course, Hermione reflected, mention of Quidditch practise might bring Ron back from the grave.

Malfoy's cool voice cut through the silence.

"Oh yes," he said thoughtfully. "Quidditch practise. I'm going to be late."

If Ron had been a dog, his hackles would have risen.

"You're not going to be *playing*," he snapped. "We booked the pitch."

Harry, thankfully, gave Malfoy a reproving look.

"Ron's right," he told Malfoy. "Remember. Bookings can't be changed. We settled that last year."

'Settled it' was such an amicable term, Hermione thought. Harry and Malfoy had had to be physically restrained from killing each other when Malfoy rubbed out the Gryffindor booking for the fifth time and Dumbledore was forced to step in.

Looking at Harry and Malfoy standing companionably side by side, she really missed the homicidal days.

"I don't mean practise on the *pitch*," Malfoy said dismissively. "Catch you later, Potter."

He sneered at Hermione and Ron as he strode out.

Harry looked after him, clearly intrigued by Malfoy's last statement. Ron began to rail at Harry before the door had even shut behind him.

Hermione bent down and picked up her book.

\* \* \*

Harry knew that he had only been given the captainship because he was Harry Potter. Traditionally it was given to someone of wizarding family, who had been familiar with Quidditch since childhood and could formulate plans based on remembered games and strategies discussed at home. But of course, exceptions were always made for Harry Potter. Ron could always be trusted for an encyclopaedic knowledge of every game that the Chudley Cannons had ever played, though, and just now he was detailing one of their Keeper's fabled tricks to the attentive new Keeper, Natalie McDonald.

Harry stood at the side, smiling politely as their voices washed over them.

*Ron should've been captain.*

"I hope Ron's not frightening Natalie," Dean Thomas said behind him. Harry turned slightly. Dean was smiling at him, the quiet friendly smile Harry and all Dean's roommates were familiar with.

Dean had always been easy to talk to. Harry relaxed a fraction.

"Why should he frighten Natalie?"

"He frightens me," Dean said with a mock shudder. "All that talk of innumerable past matches makes my vision blur. Of course... I've never been terribly into Quidditch."

That was true, of course. Dean had always remained only moderately enthusiastic about Quidditch, though he had great technical ability, and had kept faithful to his soccer and his art.

"Then why'd you join the team?"

Dean looked slightly embarrassed. "Well - I wanted to spend more time with Ginny." Harry glanced over at Ginny's red hair. She was talking volubly about the Chudley Cannons, her voice loud and cheerful as usual.

Harry had never understood the brief match-up of Ginny and the withdrawn Dean.

"I'm sorry that didn't work out... Bad luck."

Now Dean was with Parvati, of course, so that was all right. He was so nice - Harry hadn't understood why Ginny had broken up with him. Ginny looked around now to find their eyes on her. She blushed.

"Well, things could be worse," Dean said philosophically. "I could be one of the poor fools on the Slytherin team."

Harry shot him a questioning glance.

"Malfoy runs that lot like a manic drill sergeant," Dean explained. "Surely you've noticed."

What Harry noticed was the lack of rancour with which Dean pronounced Malfoy's name. Dean had always been quiet, but he saw a good deal.

"I haven't got anything against Malfoy," Dean said. "I hardly know him, but he's never bothered me. I hear you two are friends now?"

"Well. Yeah."

"He's an interesting person," Dean remarked with a shrug. "Terrifying, but unique."

"Terri--"

At this moment, Malfoy appeared to prove Dean's point. He was running along the fields surrounding the Quidditch pitch, in hot pursuit of Crabbe and Goyle. His hair was blowing wildly in every direction, his eyes were shining madly and he was carrying a heavy bag. His two Beaters were lumbering as fast as their legs would carry them while he pelted them ferociously with shot-put balls.

"You're never going to get *anywhere* if you're afraid of being hurt by Bludgers! Get back here! Stand and be smacked around like men!"

Neither Crabbe nor Goyle were that stupid. They kept running, howling occasionally as Malfoy got in lucky hits.

"*And power-hungry Slytherin loved those of great ambition,*" Dean quoted, but he was grinning. "Malfoy's determined to wipe the pitch with Ravenclaw again. Like I said, terrifying."

Malfoy realised his bag was empty at about the same time he drew level with Harry and Dean. Crabbe and Goyle, not realising, pounded onwards.

"Imbeciles!" Malfoy yelled after them.

He glanced over at Harry and Dean, and nodded perfunctorily. He looked exhausted, wiping sweaty blond locks out of his eyes, but he turned and stalked off with the same energy as ever.

Harry grinned at Dean. "But like you said, unique."

He went over to Ron and Natalie.

"Hey, could we have a little less talking and a bit more Quidditch here? Get up in the air!"

Dean smiled. "Yes, captain."

\* \* \*

The next Monday at Potions class Harry came early to talk to Malfoy again. Malfoy had been busy

with his fairly spectacular win against Ravenclaw that weekend, and Harry had been spending time with Ron and Hermione. He hadn't seen him alone in a few days, and... he'd been surprised to find that, well, he sort of missed him.

"Congratulations on the win," he said. "I didn't get the chance to wish you luck before the match."

Malfoy lifted his chin. He had shown no sign that he had missed Harry, but he was here early, wasn't he?

Harry was learning to understand Malfoy's ways.

"Slytherins don't need luck," he said. "We have tactics."

"Yeah, and your tactics consist of breaking every rule in the book."

"There are seven hundred ways of committing a foul in Quidditch," Malfoy informed him loftily. "I couldn't be bothered to learn them all."

"You're impossible, Malfoy, has anyone ever told you that?"

Malfoy's face softened slightly. "My father used to tell me that all the time." He paused, then added abruptly: "I can't do anything tonight."

Harry's first emotion was one of gratification. Malfoy had never bothered to tell him something like that before. Showing up usually seemed to be a matter of whim. He was also, of course, disappointed.

"Oh... Why not?"

"Mad passionate tryst. You know how it is."

Harry's fierce blush had only just started when Malfoy raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"Honestly, Potter, you gullible idiot. I'm damn flattered you think I've got the time to be picking up pretty young things. If you hadn't noticed, you've been keeping me busy recently."

Harry felt more relaxed.

"So the famous Malfoy Charm which can pick up girls in the space of two minutes has lost its efficiency?"

"Never doubt the charm, Potter. It's still in operation, but I don't have two minutes to spare from Astronomy homework."

"Well, if you're already going to be at the Astronomy Tower you probably just have to open a cupboard and step into a clinch."

Malfoy waved a quill at him.

"Now you're thinking like a Slytherin. But unfortunately, I'm not going to the Astronomy Tower. I

need to be on open stretches of land where I can fill out the wider scope of my project. And unless I want to start rendez-vousing with cows..."

Malfoy shrugged. Harry leaned against his desk thoughtfully.

"Sounds like you're going to have a pretty dull time of it," he commented.

"Yeah, well."

"... I could come with you, if you want?"

Malfoy glanced up, his eyes extremely grey. It was a colour that seemed to give away nothing.

"You don't do Astronomy," he said. "Another sterling example of your stupidity, Potter, because it is a really great class. Don't tell me your life is so pathetic you want to go around lying around in boring fields for the fun of it?"

Harry looked down at the wood grain of the desk.

"Hermione and Ron are having a private get-together. Tonight's shaping up to be so pathetic I might as well. Besides, I thought you could use the company."

He tilted his head back to give Malfoy a lopsided smile.

"Since you're getting rid of me in order to have more time to pick up young things anyway..." Malfoy's lip quirked. "Did I say that? Oh, fine, you can tag along. Now run away, little Gryffindor, before the angry Potions master bites you."

Harry looked over, noticed that Snape was present and scowling, and fled to his seat.

\* \* \*

Harry lay on the blanket, feeling strangely calm.

There was something wonderful about the sky - it reminded him of the happiness he felt while playing Quidditch. Even now, when it was black and empty, he looked at it and saw a vast playground. And the field was quiet, and the darkness sheltering, and nobody expected anything of him.

He glanced over at Malfoy, whom he saw in profile against the night, pressing the Omnioculars to his eyes. Occasionally he bent down to his parchment and made some notes with his quill, flicking his hair out of his eyes and giving Harry a casual smile as he did so. Malfoy certainly didn't give Harry the impression that he expected something from him, not even his company. Malfoy was such a self-contained creature; he'd been able to do without proper friends for years - if you didn't count Crabbe and Goyle. Harry reflected that it probably made very little difference to Malfoy whether he was with him or not. It bothered him slightly.

It was such a novel feeling for him - for Harry Potter - to wish someone were paying him more attention.



Harry smiled again, his head resting on his joined palms as he looked up into the sky.

"What are you smiling about, Potter?" Malfoy asked absently, jotting down another note.

"Oh... nothing. I was just feeling - content."

Content. That was the word.

"In a freezing field in the dead of night? Has anyone ever told you that you have low expectations of life?"

Harry reached over and punched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Ah. I see. Contentment comes from the fact you're able to beat the poor helpless Slytherin around. You know, sadism is not the way to live."

"I thought for Slytherins it was the *only* way to live."

"Ah," said Malfoy, not bothering to deny it. "But you're not a Slytherin."

Harry propped himself up on one elbow.

"I almost was."

Malfoy dropped his Omnioculars. "*What?*"

Harry felt a small irrational spark of triumph that he had Malfoy's attention now.

"The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," he admitted, and then quietly, hoping Malfoy would not be offended, "I told it no."

Malfoy didn't even notice his attempt at tact.

"You," he marvelled. "Harry Potter, epitome of all things Gryffindor. Almost thrown in the snake pit." He laughed suddenly, a wickedly appealing laugh. "Now wouldn't *that* have been something!"

Harry leaned back again, the stars glittering in front of his eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "I suppose it would."

"Oh, the multiple ways in which I would have been able to make your life a misery," Malfoy mourned. "We would've been sharing a bedroom for five years. I could have driven you out of your mind."

Harry closed his eyes, the night air playing on his face. The only noise was the familiar sound of Malfoy's voice and the scratching of his quill.

"Hmm. So you don't think we would have become friends sooner?"

"Are we friends now?"

Harry looked up, blinking as if against sudden hurtful light, into Malfoy's face. Malfoy's gaze was not spiteful but mildly inquiring, and Harry felt a rush of intense relief.

"I know," Malfoy said, his voice as precise and passionless as a piece of his homework, "you asked me to be friends, and I said yes. But are you my friend?"

Harry half sat up, not sure how to phrase it, wanting to say something special. Finally, all he could think of to say was a forceful: "Yes."

He waited for a response with a certain tenseness.

"Oh. Good," Malfoy replied, tilting his face up to the stars and then finishing his chart with a flourish.

Harry waited, feeling rather strange, for Malfoy to - give him a proper answer, to reciprocate with some words indicating emotion.

This was such an odd friendship, so unlike the comfortable familiar camaraderie with Ron and Hermione, and the undemanding companionship of Seamus and Dean. This was something very new, new enough for tension and uncertainty, and yet it was... intense. It meant more to him than Seamus or Dean, and it - it had the capacity to hurt him without the security that Ron and Hermione offered.

And now he was lying here with his nerves stretched painfully taut, waiting for something that Malfoy seemed to have no intention of offering.

He felt an obscure desire to hit back.

"Of course, then I would never have been friends with Ron and Hermione," he said, using their names with deliberately stressed affection.

"Yes, that would have been a tragedy," Malfoy said.

"I don't know why you hate them so much," Harry said.

Malfoy was putting away his books and didn't look at Harry as he replied, his profile indicating no emotion besides a certain abstractedness,

"I don't hate them. But you know how I feel about - all right, the Muggleborn. And as for that pack of Weasleys..."

His lip curled.

"My father told me all about them."

"The Weasleys are wonderful people," Harry said angrily, sitting up. Malfoy's face was quite close to his now, as Malfoy knelt by his schoolbag, and there was no reciprocating anger in his eyes. Rather, he looked quite matter-of-fact.

"His father attacked mine in a bookshop. I don't care if they were enemies, there's no excuse for

that kind of behaviour. And his children are no different. Those Weasley twins used to hiss at children who'd just been put in Slytherin. People call me prejudiced, but I don't stoop as low as that. And as for your pet Weasley - he's just like his brothers. He doesn't like me because of my family, and I don't like him because of his. That's the way things are - though the Weasleys needn't be such bloody savages about it."

"That's not t--"

*I've heard of his family. My dad... says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side.*

Harry remembered Ron's slight snigger when he heard this Malfoy boy was called Draco. He'd felt licensed to be unpleasant because of who Malfoy was.

That was one good thing about not having parents. Harry hadn't inherited their grudges or their opinions.

"Ron's a good person," Harry said tiredly, lying back and looking at the stars again. "You shouldn't judge anybody just because of what family they're from."

*The whole family's rotten.*

"Tell him that," Malfoy sneered.

"I will," Harry answered. "And I'll keep telling you, too."

Malfoy pushed aside his schoolbag and stretched out on the blanket.

"Oh, don't nag me, Potter. Or else I'll set my minions on you."

"Huh." Harry laughed. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Naturally. Harry Potter's not afraid of *anything*," Malfoy said mockingly.

"Shut up!"

"Fearless Potter. You're the only one in the school who doesn't seem to have those moments of blood-freezing terror."

"Why should my blood freeze?"

"The Boy Who Was Totally Oblivious. For a year people disappeared in the outside world, and Hogwarts was safe. And now students are vanishing under Dumbledore's nose, and our school is no safer than this field, and we all know that someone inside has to be helping him. Are you never scared?"

"I haven't caught you trembling with your head under the bedclothes."

"That's because I have nerves of steel," Malfoy announced grandiosely. "Potter! You bastard, do you have a pillow?"

"I'm using my cloak. See, I wore a cloak. And a jumper. Because it's February, and it's cold, and I'm not an idiot."

"How dare you call me an idiot? You'll be hearing from my lawyers in the morning." Malfoy villainously tried to steal the folded cloak, but he only succeeded in getting an edge of it.

"Fine," he said with bad grace. "Push over a bit, Potter." Harry felt a lick of blond hair tickle his ear, and moved to give Malfoy more room. The sky was calm, and Malfoy's breathing was level and reassuring beside him.

"Do you get scared?" Harry asked eventually.

"Hm? Of course I do, Potter, I'm not a bloody valiant Gryffindor. Remember when your stupid Patronus came right at me at that Quidditch match in third year? That was terrifying. It went right for me."

Harry laughed softly. Right - Malfoy, Goyle and Flint in Dementors' robes.

"I... didn't realise it went straight for you."

"Well, it did."

"In a way it's a left-handed compliment, Malfoy," Harry informed him. "Even in those robes, I recognised you as the adversary."

Malfoy's voice was wry.

"If being charged down by ghost stags means respect, colour me unworthy."

"Oh, don't whine."

Of course, asking Draco not to complain would be a lot like asking the sky to turn yellow, and...

Draco.

Harry realised he'd thought the name quite naturally. A few weeks ago, it would have been - strange. An almost absurd concept. And now, well - his name *was* Draco, wasn't it? It - was what he thought of when he looked at him. It was natural.

Not that Harry was going to call him by it or anything.

"I don't whine!" A small pause. "It's cold," Draco complained. "We should go inside."

"Hmmm." It was peaceful in the field. "In a minute."

\* \* \*

Harry woke up cold and stiff next morning. He yawned, squinting against the light, turned over and found himself nose to nose with Draco.

He bit his tongue and rolled away hastily, then sat upright. His clothes were soggy with dew.

"Malfoy, wake up! We slept here all night!"

Draco made a small grumbling sound and turned his face into Harry's cloak. He was curled up fast asleep with his hair in his face and his eyes scrunched up. He looked utterly absurd.

"Malfoy!"

Harry seized a shoulder and shook urgently.

"Leave me alone," Draco said in a muffled voice.

"Malfoy, wake *up*!"

Draco opened his eyes a slit. Then they snapped all the way open.

"Potter, what - oh. Oh, no. Oh, tell me I didn't sleep in a field. Oh, how completely *plebeian*."

"Yes, that's what's worrying me," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Whether this will affect my social standing. Everyone will be worried sick."

"Not my housemates," Draco answered promptly. "They'll just assume I was sleeping with somebody. Ugh, my clothes feel horrible - Potter, have I mentioned that I loathe you recently?"

Harry rose and began to brush off his jeans. He offered a hand to help Malfoy up. Draco, still lying prone, leaned back on his elbows and gave Harry a sour look.

"I *despise* you."

"Of course you do, Malfoy."

Draco took his hand and watched Harry fold up the blanket without offering to help.

"You can carry my bag," he ordered sulkily.

"The hell I will," Harry returned calmly.

Draco picked up his bag. "I hate you. I *abhor* you. I -"

"Detest's a good word," Harry offered.

"Thank you, Potter. I detest you with the fire of a thousand suns."

"Oh, be quiet and come have breakfast."

\* \* \*

It took a certain amount of persuasion to get Draco to breakfast. He seemed fixed on the idea of getting to a hairbrush and a mirror.

"Don't be vain, Malfoy. You're not skipping. You skip too much as it is."

"You're not my nanny, Potter. I can skip if I like."

"I'll carry your bag."

Pause.

"How far?"

So when Harry went into the Great Hall, he was carrying Draco's bag on top of everything else. Draco abandoned him at the door, flung himself onto a chair at the Slytherin table and stridently demanded coffee.

Just in case anybody wasn't already looking.

Ron and Hermione greeted him with equal parts hysterical relief and reproach. Apparently, Ron had thought he was with a girl. Hermione wouldn't say what she had thought. Both of them were appalled by the facts.

"In a *field*, Harry, the danger -"

"With *Malfoy*, Harry, ugh -"

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table, where a similar interrogation was going on. Draco seemed to be refusing to answer any questions, and he had his face hidden against Pansy's shoulder. Pansy was looking down at his head with an almost maternal solicitude. Blaise Zabini put his hand on Draco's shoulder.

Hermione reached over and touched Harry's arm. He blinked at her, startled.

"I won't yell at you, Harry - you look cross and exhausted. But you've got to be more careful."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you..." Harry said. "And I'm not cross!"

\* \* \*

That Friday, Draco didn't appear.

It bothered Harry. Since Monday, Draco had seemed to understand that he should give Harry an excuse if he wasn't coming. It bothered Harry even more that he himself had turned up loyally every day for weeks.

And... being bothered bothered him. Because, damn it, he did want to see Draco, and surely it was all right to admit that.

They were *friends*. He'd said the words, and now he meant them.

And Draco had given him the Slytherin password, and said he could drop by anytime. Harry was disgusted to find he was actually bargaining with himself for the pleasure of seeing Draco.

*I won't use the password, but I can knock and ask if he's there. That wouldn't be an invasion of privacy. And if he's not doing anything important, he'll come out. Maybe he even wants me to come. He likes to test people. He likes to test me.*

Yes, he thought he would go to the Slytherin rooms.

Harry glanced around in vague surprise as he realised he was nearly at the Hogwarts entrance already.

\* \* \*

Harry knew there was something strange happening as soon as the Slytherin door opened. There was an unusual amount of fuss and noise and the girl who opened the door was in lowcut dress robes. Harry politely averted his eyes from the breasts on display, and asked if he could see Malfoy. It was another indication that something was up when the girl simply blinked and wandered away.

*Were her eyes dilated? Somebody should watch these Slytherins.*

Was that Blaise Zabini in leather?

This kind of thing was just not on.

Oh, good, there was Draco.

Harry blinked.

Draco propped one wrist against the doorframe, leaning his weight against it and looking at Harry inquiringly.

He was wearing black jeans and a close-fitting shirt the colour of silver. His hair looked soft and bright, as if he'd spent hours on it.

"Um," said Harry. "Hi."

"Hi," said Draco, looking marginally amused. "Just in the neighbourhood, were you? I promise, no ritual sacrifice of virgins is afoot."

"Is there something going on?"

Draco looked a little startled.

"Just the usual outing to the club. You know, beneath the Three Broomsticks. All the older Slytherins go together, every month. I thought you knew."

"No..."

"Oh, well." Draco shrugged. "I'd ask you to join us, but I have horrible memories of your dancing. Besides, they'd eat you alive."

"Oh - sure. Have a good time."

"That's the plan. See you, Potter."

"Er - goodbye."

Harry felt oddly desolate once the door shut in his face.

\* \* \*

"Oh, right, the Slytherins' little orgies," Hermione said primly. "Using the excuse of solidarity to get drunk and feel each other up."

Apparently everybody knew but Harry.

Typical.

"Well, Harry, don't mope about it," Hermione said. "You can use tonight to get a start on your NEWTs revision."

Ron was sitting at a table, looking hunted, and Hermione was drawing out a colour-coded chart. Ginny was peering over Ron's shoulder with the happy look of someone whose NEWTs were a year and more away.

Ron mouthed 'Run! Save yourself!' when Hermione wasn't looking.

"Thrilling," Harry said morosely, and then sharply, "I'm not *moping*."

Hermione looked as if she would have liked to challenge this claim, but she pursed her lips and maintained a tactful silence.

"It's nice to have you here," said Ginny in muted tones, dropping her pen and going scarlet as she spoke.

"Thanks, Ginny," Harry said, touched. Ginny went scarlet again.

"At least sit away from the fire," Hermione urged. "You've been sitting beside it for hours. You must be roasting."

"We could go out and have a few laps of the Quidditch pitch," Ron suggested hopefully.

"Ron, that Herbology homework is already overdue," Hermione said, fixing him with a menacing eye. "You're doing it if I have to tie you to the chair."

"Very kinky, Granger. Who knew you had hidden depths?"

The easy, drawling voice brought Harry's head up with a jerk.

Draco was leaning against the open Gryffindor entrance. His hair was a little mussed and his face a little flushed, but he was still dressed up and his expression was as cool as ever.

"Malfoy," Harry said, and was startled himself to hear the undisguised pleasure in his tone. Draco



inclined his head.

"It was dull at the party," he explained. "I was bored. I came to see if you still wanted to do something."

Harry couldn't help smiling.

"Sure - of course. I'm coming now."

\* \* \*

Draco flatly refused to go outside in the clothes he was wearing.

"I'd catch a chill," he informed Harry reproachfully. "It's a miracle I didn't die from that little field expedition. I'm fragile, you know."

Harry remembered this so-called fragile boy hurling shot-put balls at people and maintained a tactful silence.

"No," decided. "We can go to my room. There won't be many Slytherins around for hours."

So they did. And Harry was outraged.

"This place is really *nice*! You mean to tell me all Slytherin prefects get these?" It was nice. All decorated in Slytherin green, of course, with a desk, and an actual fireplace, and - "You have two wardrobes! That's ridiculous!"

Draco scowled. "I *know*. I've told Snape, I can't be expected to live without three, but will he listen? The man has a heart of stone."

Harry threw himself into the soft armchair opposite Draco, and gave him a long incredulous look.

"You don't need three wardrobes. *Nobody* needs three wardrobes."

Draco made a face at him. "Oh, what would you know, you sartorial disaster?"

"I know that thanks to you, I no longer need even one wardrobe."

"Stop harping on that, Potter." Draco stretched. "I said I'd take you to Hogsmeade and tell you what to buy, and I will."

"You're not *telling* me what to buy."

Draco pushed out his lower lip. "Fine."

"But we could go to Hogsmeade tomorrow, if you like." Harry's voice was quite casual. Draco looked suddenly colder, his features arrested in their gradual relaxation.

"I can't. I'm meeting my mother for our little get-together."

"Oh."

Harry swallowed, trying to fight the urge to ask *Are you all right*, which Draco wouldn't appreciate, and fighting down his own disappointment.

Which was when Draco, as seemed to be his wont, threw off his calculations completely.

"You can come with us, if you like," Draco said casually.

Harry hesitated. He recalled a woman with a rather haughty expression, and the fact that this woman was Lucius Malfoy's widow. He was extremely doubtful about meeting Narcissa Malfoy again.

But on the other hand, he had nothing else to do... and a day without Draco seemed extraordinarily unappealing.

"All right, then," he agreed cautiously.

Draco gave him a brief flashing smile, and then leaned back, the fire playing on his hair, and suggested a card game.

That was how Harry came to be trailing awkwardly in Draco's wake as Draco strode over to meet the woman waiting in Hogsmeade square.

She was smaller than Harry had remembered.

"Hello, mother," Draco said. "This is the friend I said I was bringing."

Narcissa Malfoy looked over at Harry, and blinked.

Then she said blankly, "That's Harry Potter."

"Full marks for observation, mother," Draco observed calmly.

Narcissa smiled and held out her hand to Harry, who took it feeling rather stunned.

"Does that mean I'm not going to receive my next installment of *Why I Hate That Sod Potter*, Volume IV, Part VII? What a shame. I found it gripping."

Narcissa was not much like her son, who resembled his father so closely. Her hair was golden, several shades darker, and her eyes were a cool blue. Her skin was lightly tanned. Yet she had a certain refined delicacy about her features that made her look like him when she spoke or moved, and her slow rich smile was very much his.

Harry saw what Draco had meant about his mother. Her eyes were a little chill, and her manner with Draco - gracious but slightly distant - was just the same as her manner with Harry. Still...

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said, wondering if he meant it.

"Pleasure's all mine," Narcissa replied drily. "You seem capable of forming coherent sentences, which is more than I can say for poor little Vincent and Gregory."

"Mother!"

Clearly, this was a favourite topic of Mrs. Malfoy's.

"Draco has sorry taste in friends," she continued. "Present company excepted, of course. That Pansy child always looked at me as if I was the disreputable girlfriend her son had brought home, and I think that Blaise boy was trying to seduce at least one of us."

Harry was coming to realise that Malfoy's flair for shocking conversation was also inherited.

"Well, boys," Narcissa said, "where do you want to go? I am entirely at your disposal."

Draco's eyes narrowed in a calculating manner. Harry took an alarmed step backwards.

"We can't appear in public with him looking like that," Draco announced.

\* \* \*

Robe Wardrobe had been an extremely exclusive clothing store for years, tailored to meet the needs of every wizard needing a tailor. Nevertheless, Harry noticed that the attendants fluttered around the Malfoys with especial anxiety as they entered the shop. Draco took this with bored indifference, as if it was clearly his due. Narcissa smiled discreetly and sailed onwards.

Harry wished he had his invisibility cloak when Draco dived for the racks of clothing and began to talk in a loud, imperious voice.

"Pretty poor selection, of course. Oh no, that would make you look even *more* hideous. Take that yellow away from me and never let my eyes behold it again."

Narcissa gave Harry that calm, gracious-hostess smile.

"Draco's always been interested in clothes. It rather worried me when he was younger."

Harry tried to exchange pleasantries with her. "And it stopped worrying you when he started pulling girls' pigtails in the school yard?"

Narcissa looked thoughtful.

"I don't recall Draco ever pulling girls' pigtails. He did knock people unconscious with his bucket and spade, though. He was never one to do things by halves."

"I was a charming child," Draco put in. "A delight to meet. So polite. So precocious. And of course, so very pretty." He shoved a pile of clothes at Harry. "Try those on for a start."

"His tutors kept resigning," Narcissa murmured, more in the tones of one speaking about a child she had heard about than one she had given birth to. She indicated the changing cubicles to Harry. "They said he was an overbearing little monster. And he bit, too."

Harry walked hesitatingly into the cubicle. For a start, he wasn't used to getting changed in cubicles. What's more, it was off-putting to have Draco throwing things in constantly. It was like

being caught in a rain of clothes. And the clothes...

"Malfoy, these jeans are *not my size*."

"Of course they are," Draco called back blithely. "It's the ones you're wearing that aren't."

"Malfoy, none of these clothes are my size!"

"Potter, trust me."

"I will not!"

"Potter, don't you want all the girls to fancy you?"

"I - what -" Harry stopped. "Will they?"

"Well, no." Draco's voice was pragmatic. "But we can't Polyjuice you into me for any length of time, so this will have to do."

At length, the rain of clothes and the sounds of Draco carelessly insulting the merchandise and the staff of the shop ceased. Harry was left with the difficulty of getting into the stupid clothes.

"Potter, can't you even dress yourself?" Draco shouted. "Get a move on, or I'm coming in there to help you."

Harry got dressed faster than he would have thought humanly possible. Then he came out, unsure about the entire thing.

"Very nice, Harry," Narcissa complimented him.

Draco drew his brows together.

"Barely adequate, Potter. Next!"

He made Harry try on every item of clothing he'd thrown in. And then, to crown the indignity, he made him buy them all.

\* \* \*

Narcissa and Harry were walking on the Hogsmeade pier by the lake as the sun set. Harry felt exhausted, laden down by bags... and rather happy. Draco was nowhere in sight.

"I presume this odd camaraderie developed from the incident at the Triwizard Tournament?" inquired Narcissa abruptly.

She had all Draco's tact, as well.

"Er. Yes," Harry answered.

"Mother, don't start interrogating him," Draco drawled, appearing out of nowhere with a blood-

flavoured lollipop.

"Where did you get that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Researching."

"Researching what?"

Draco's smile was bright. "The phrase 'easy as taking candy from a baby'."

"Draco!"

"Malfoy!"

"Calm yourselves," Draco told them dismissively, waving a hand towards the sweets stand at the bottom of the pier. "I said that for dramatic effect. Hey, I have an idea."

"Harry, you seem a sweet, well-spoken boy," Narcissa remarked. "You really shouldn't associate with people like my son."

Draco circled them, still smiling, then leaned back against the pier railing.

"You two could get married," he suggested. "Then you could club together in your efforts at raising me like a decent human being. Come on, Potter, you're a hero and all, you *like* hopeless tasks."

"Not tasks *that* hopeless, I don't."

Narcissa and Draco laughed.

"I think the house elves got most of the brunt of raising you," Narcissa commented lightly. The smile slipped from Draco's face.

"Yes," he said distantly. "I remember."

He boosted himself up onto the railing, and began to attempt walking down to the bottom. Narcissa stood looking after her son. For the first time, Harry noticed how cold her blue eyes were.

"I was never a maternal woman," she said. "I could never be very interested in children."

Harry was silent, unsure of what he could offer in return.

"What interest I had, Lucius discouraged. He didn't want his son growing up weak." Narcissa's clear voice was untouched by emotion. "It would have been all right, if Draco had been like either of us. But Draco has always been a little... fierce. He feels too much, and he isn't any good at concealing what he feels."

Harry personally thought that Draco was quite talented at being enigmatic. Still, he recalled Lucius Malfoy's cold voice, the first time he had heard it, advising his son that it was not wise to appear other than fond of Harry Potter. Draco had never paid a blind bit of attention to that. He recognised too the difference between Narcissa and Draco's smiles. There was a shade of warmth behind

Draco's, a passion that this woman did not possess.

Considering his environment, perhaps Draco had grown up rather demonstrative.

"Lucius always tried to repress that," Narcissa mused, "which made him worse, naturally. You'll have noticed that Draco isn't really receptive to moulding."

Harry murmured something more polite than 'That's glaringly obvious'.

"And now - Lucius is dead, and we are both left without him, and Draco thinks that... he, well. He loved him," she concluded. "And I let him love him. It's easier that way."

Harry looked over at Draco.

"He loves you," he said impulsively. "I could tell."

Narcissa's wry expression reminded him forcibly of another face.

"Poor Harry," she said lightly. "Anxious mothers burdening you with their woes. This can hardly be fun for you."

"I don't mind," mumbled Harry.

"It's cold up here on this rail," Draco yelled down at them. "When's dinner?"

He wore that imperious air again, the air Harry had always presumed came from always getting what he wanted. Now he thought that perhaps Draco could only get what he wanted if he acted like he didn't care.

"When would you like it, Draco?" asked his mother.

"Immediately!" Draco paused to consider. "And hot chocolate."

Harry shook his head of doubts, replacing them with that amused incredulity which always followed him when he was with Draco.

Narcissa laid her hand on Harry's arm.

"I'm glad you're Draco's friend," she said. "He wanted it so much."

Harry was looking up at Draco, who was pushing back hair so fine it tangled and untangled itself in the wind. He saw Narcissa Malfoy's delicate build in the slimness of his wrists, and the structure of his face and throat.

He also saw a curiously indomitable look in eyes that refracted to silver light beneath the pale sky.

"Sorry?" Harry asked her, a little distracted. "What was that?"

"Never mind," said Narcissa.

# Chapter Seven: Straight Talking

*If you want me all you have to do is ask a thousand questions  
Could you put a name to someone else's sigh?  
Could you put a face to someone else's eyes?  
Is it someone that you'd maybe recognise?  
But it all fades into morning when you open your eyes.*

Draco stalked under the fresh green leaves of the trees around Hagrid's paddocks, looking distinctly put out.

"The end of March," he snarled. "Bringing the beginning of April. Heraldng spring and sunshine, which deliver in their turn sweet summer skies."

He pronounced each 's' as if it had personally affronted him.

Harry suppressed a smile.

"And that bothers you because...?"

"I hate summer," Draco said, narrowing his eyes and enunciating the word as if summer would be in very serious trouble when he got his hands on it.

"All right," Harry answered indulgently, looking up at the pale sunshine and then back at Draco. "Tell me why."

"The sun, of course," Draco replied. "Everybody else with their rotten tans. I find it unacceptable that I can't get one. I've done everything I could think of. I suppose *you* tan?"

Harry blinked as Draco eyed him accusingly. "Well - a bit."

Draco snorted in an aggrieved manner.

"Of course. Fine! I don't care. I'm not bitter," he informed Harry bitterly. "I'm just an offputting off-white year in, year out. That's great."

The corner of his lip curled and he kicked rather maliciously at the moss. Harry suppressed another smile. Draco could be such a sulky brat at times and yet, somehow, Harry was coming not only to accept it but find it oddly endearing.

It had never occurred to Harry that Draco's pale skin might bother him. It was - just part of Draco, wasn't it?

Harry glanced over at Draco, whose shirt collar had slipped down a fraction to expose the edge of one collarbone. The colour of his skin made his bones seem sharper, as if they might pierce through the delicate flesh. There was something almost fragile about his skin, something which coupled with his hair might have made him seem childlike if not for the cold, sharp intelligence of his eyes.

Nobody had skin quite like Draco.

"- revolting," he concluded in a disgusted tone.

Harry blinked again. "Oh - look, no. I mean, you're - er - you know, quite good-looking." He avoided looking at Draco. Draco gave him a scandalised glare.

"You four-eyed git! I'm bloody gorgeous," he said, folding his arms. "Quite good-looking, indeed! I've never been so insulted in my life."

Harry sighed. "Never mind. Perhaps this summer you'll tan - or freckle, or something."

Draco looked even more outraged. "Freckle! That's not funny, Potter."

"Er. Sorry."

"I should say you are," Draco muttered. "Quite good-looking. Freckle. A desecration of my aristocratically fair skin. Some day, Potter, a girl is going to slap you in the face."

"You keep making me all these promises, but you never deliver," Harry said jokingly. "You promised me attention if I bought these stupid clothes, and they've had absolutely no effect."

"Sure. Ginny Weasley just happened to feel like dumping porridge in her lap."

"I... that had nothing to do with me!"

Draco dipped his head and concealed a smirk, which was the closest he could come, Harry thought, to sparing him from mockery.

"Well, Potter. This eventual girl will be getting someone with no fashion sense or tact - but I'm not saying she won't be quite lucky." He tossed his head. "Not as lucky as the person who gets *me*, of course."

"Oh, of course."

Draco bit the side of his lip thoughtfully.

"Actually, I consider that it's an honour too great not to be divided. Perhaps I could be shared among a select group."

Harry couldn't help laughing. It was a nice day, the sun was shining, and in a minute Draco was going to make faces at Hagrid's latest monstrosities. Harry leaned back against the fence, shut his eyes and smiled again.

The scream ripped through the air.

And before his mind registered what he had heard, before his eyes even came open, his instinct made him fast enough to grasp Draco's arm just as Draco set off for the school at a dead run.



They burst into the Great Hall and into total uproar.

Harry looked around frantically at the turmoil of panicked faces he did not recognise and tried to make sense of words that were nothing but screams and... It was all just a sea of noise and ugliness and fear, but he still had a grip on Draco's arm.

That felt - safe, like Draco's swift glance back at him as if he too needed reassurance. He had hardly realised this when Hermione's tear-stained face appeared before him, and he felt terrified concern and a fleeting pang of dismay, because he would have to go to her... and he really did not want to let go.

Hermione leaned in to him as Draco stepped away, and he lost him. He watched Draco's blond head disappear into the crowd of Slytherins even as the Gryffindors surrounded him. He saw Ron's open scared face, Neville with tears rolling down his cheeks, Ginny's vivid red head pressed briefly against Dean's shoulder, and he *knew*, he knew with cold creeping horror before Hermione spoke.

"There were twelve students taken," she whispered, her voice faltering. "All at once, Harry, people from each house, and... Seamus is gone. He's just - he's -"

She was wringing her hands and crying, Hermione who was always so brave, Hermione who was never helpless. Harry grasped her hand and she clutched back desperately for a second. Then she turned her face into Ron's chest and they were wrapped around each other, his shaking fingers in her hair. She still kept hold of Harry's hand. Harry leaned against them both a little, half closing his eyes, pretending... He didn't know. That they were warm, together and equally all in all to each other, as they were when they were very young and had magical adventures, and nothing could really hurt them.

Seamus. His dorm mate, his friend. Seamus who still kept the shamrock mascots from the Quidditch World Cup and had a secret but often-discussed crush on Padma Patil. *Seamus*.

*No, stop thinking about it!*

"Wh-who else?"

Ron's face was sick and pale. He couldn't seem to say.

Harry looked towards Dean, who was always calm, but Ginny was still leaning against him and his girlfriend Parvati was looking desolate. He seemed occupied.

Eventually, it was Hermione who spoke once more, her voice ragged and muffled in Ron's robes. Hermione was always brave enough to take charge in a crisis, even if she was trembling and on the point of breaking down.

"I - I don't know. Younger students mostly... Orla Quirke, and B-Blaise Zabini's little brother, and - some first years. I didn't know their names, I -" Her voice became a cry. "I didn't know..."

"Hermione, it's -" Harry began.

Ron, who was never demonstrative, kissed her hair and held her close.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he said, tucking her head under his chin. "It's all right."

Blaise Zabini's little brother... Harry couldn't help looking over at the Slytherins. Draco was kneeling down, a position Harry had never seen him in before. His face was white and determined, and he was talking to a first year.

Harry watched his mouth shape the words 'You are not afraid', an almost brutal order, but Draco seemed so sure, and now the first year looked more sure too.

Harry kept watching, not certain why the sight touched him so.

Then Draco allowed himself to lean closer towards Zabini.

Harry tried to see the expression on Zabini's face, but his head was bowed.

"Oh, Harry," whispered Ginny, "what will we do?"

Harry took her hand and squeezed, and she drew gratefully closer to him. Poor sweet Ginny. He could still be almost a hero for her - or at least a friend.

"I don't know," he said, noticing her wet eyes. "But don't cry, Ginny. Please don't." She held fast to his side, clinging to his arm.

Harry watched Draco's hair brush Zabini's sleeve.

And then the sounds of distress and despair stilled around them, because Dumbledore had stood up and everyone was staring at him.

Their headmaster was older now and frail, but it was not he himself so much as their *belief* in him that helped.

*The only wizard that You-Know-Who ever feared.*

Hermione and Ginny were both blinking back their tears.

Professor Dumbledore still had a very powerful kind of magic.

"We are at war," he said simply. "In war horrors are inevitable. My consolation is that I believe you will all suffer courageously. Those who have been taken, I believe we will recover. Those who remain, I know will continue to fight."

There were faces glowing in desperate hope across the room.

"I know that I can count on you all to be brave. Professor Lupin will discuss further precautions at the Young Order meetings, but the most important thing for you all now is simply to face danger, and to keep the conviction that we are fighting for the right reasons and we will not be defeated."

There was an easing of tension around Harry, and a growing conviction in all the faces he looked into.

The Slytherins, Harry noticed, were looking at Dumbledore with respect but without that shining faith. He had never been to them what he was to the rest of the school. Draco was standing up now, resolute and blond and a little like a knight in shining armour, if you didn't look at his eyes. Slytherins were crowding around him. His hand was on Blaise Zabini's arm. They kept near to him as they moved out of the hall, and Harry thought, *where's Snape? They need somebody - Draco needs somebody...*

He would have liked to speak with him again for a moment, but Draco was with the Slytherins now. He was theirs.

So Harry put on a brave face and put a brotherly arm around Ginny, and went with them all to Gryffindor Tower. They all crowded together in the common room because nobody could face the empty beds and besides, there was safety in numbers.

And Harry told himself that he belonged with them, and it was enough, and he was comforted.

\* \* \*

Hermione and Ron ended up sleeping curled together on the couch in the common room, holding each other tight against the pain. It was late when Harry climbed the stairs helping up Neville and Dean, weary and scared.

"Good night, Harry," Ginny said as they went.

"Night." He wondered what Draco was doing right now.

The trip to his bed was fast, terribly fast. He tried not to look at Seamus' bed, tried not to see the others avoiding it and pretended every motion they made was not sharp and terrified. Harry tried not to think about being alone, and how people were taken sometimes when they slept. He tried to summon up the sunlight from earlier, and the laughter. It didn't work. He was twisting among thoughts of who could be taken next, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Dean... and amid the nightmares and the longing he fell asleep and...

He was swimming in the lake at night. He felt peculiarly heavy in the water, as if he might sink at any moment.

That would mean drowning, wouldn't it? He felt strangely at peace with that idea. Hermione drifted by in one of the boats Hagrid took the first years in, a lantern beside her shining on her book.

He called out to her, and she said, "Harry, I'm very busy. I have to fight a war. Could you please be quiet?"

When the next boat went by, he saw Ron, absorbed in diagrams of Quidditch strategy. He yelled his name, but Ron lifted his head and said, "I'm sorry, Harry, but after I'm done with these I have to spend a little time with Hermione."

He was getting heavier and heavier.

"Sherbet lemon."

Harry twisted around to see Draco in the water.

"Wh-what did you say?"

Draco laughed, a sound like the light trembling on the lake. He swam backwards, his skin gleaming wet and pale.

"Who do you trust?"

Harry reached out for him then, and woke up.

The night was close around him, and his bed was colder than the lake. Dean and Neville were sleeping, he could hear them, and he needed to be away from the absence of Seamus' faint snores.

He wanted to go talk to Draco, but it was the middle of the night and he had to be asleep; and besides, wandering the corridors at this time... Harry got up and sat by the window, watching the pale dawn as the sun rose.

"Awake, Harry?" Dean asked quietly.

"I... yeah. I had an odd dream."

He could talk to Draco at breakfast.

"What was it about?"

Harry frowned. "I - don't remember."

\* \* \*

Draco wasn't at breakfast, and they had no classes with the Slytherins that day. At lunch he was surrounded by people; at dinner Harry was occupied with all the Gryffindors discussing Dean and Parvati's split that morning and wondering if it had anything to do with Ginny Weasley, and Draco had booked the Quidditch pitch afterwards.

For some reason, Harry watched the Quidditch practise from the tower window, but he didn't see Draco properly until the meeting of the Young Order.

Draco was leaning back in his chair, his face very pale. There were faint shadows under his eyes, and his hair was ever so slightly out of place. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all.

*This is outrageous. Someone should be looking after the Slytherins. He's going to be ill.*

Pansy was clinging to one of his hands, which he permitted with a regal air. Blaise Zabini was pressed close to his side. All the Slytherins were clustering about him, closer than ever. Harry understood why with Lupin's opening words.

"Professor Snape is away, attempting to gather information which will help explain the recent attack. Professor Black and I will be taking his place."

Harry wondered vaguely whether they were desperate enough to let Sirius teach the Slytherins again. That had been forbidden by Dumbledore since the Great Points War of sixth year, when Sirius and Snape had begun a vicious cycle of point removal and Gryffindor and Slytherin had both ended up with negative points. As Harry recalled, there had also been a pile-up outside Dumbledore's office when everybody stopped screaming and finally leaped at each other. Harry remembered trying to crack Draco's head open against the flagstones when Dumbledore came out.

Draco had always liked Snape, and he clearly already knew Snape was gone. A few Slytherin girls looked on the point of tears.

Draco was looking at Lupin, and he seemed calm and absorbed. Harry didn't think he looked too distraught.

"New safety regulations are in place," Lupin continued. "First to third years are absolutely forbidden to leave their common rooms without a teacher. Moreover, a prefect will be on duty at all times to enforce this. Nobody is to leave the school building except as part of a class, and Quidditch practise will be supervised by Madam Hooch. Nobody is to wander alone for any reason whatsoever. This includes the Young Councillors - Harry Potter, I saw you walking the school alone yesterday. Don't let it happen again."

Harry saw the concerned look in Lupin's eyes, and felt wretched for worrying him. *But I was going to meet Draco. If we can't go alone to meet each other, and we can't go outside, when am I ever going to see him?*

"I realise many of you must be in pain," Lupin said softly. "But all of Professor Snape's information so far tells us that the people we have lost are not dead. You-Know-Who has been displaying a great amount of interest in the *Captus* charm."

It was Ginny who shyly raised her hand and asked what that was.

Lupin, who always encouraged discussion, asked if any of the other students felt competent to explain it, and the force of Hermione's hand shooting up almost levitated her out of her chair.

But it was Draco who spoke without being called on, his voice lazy and almost distracted.

"It's a new form of an ancient spell," he elucidated slowly. Harry watched his long, pale fingers play idly with a quill. "Back in the old days, when wizards were more powerful and there were more of us - we could create a whole world, trapped in a tiny sphere, and trap real people inside it. Enter it ourselves and have the world as our realm, and the people as our slaves."

He did not seem at all repelled by the idea. Rather, he looked intrigued and just a little like a drawing of those ancient wizards in Professor Binns' books, with pureblood lines and refined cruelty.

Ron muttered something like, "Typical of *you* to know."

"So does your girlfriend, Weasley," snapped Draco. "The magic to create whole worlds has been lost, but it's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans You-Know-Who can keep in his pocket, that Dementors can patrol and

nobody can ever escape from. The advantage to him is that he has a chance to torture our people for information, and to convert them, maybe use the purebloods for arranged breeding later. The advantage to us is that - perhaps we can get them back."

Ron's voice was slightly louder now. "Odd that you should know so much about Dark Magic, Malfoy."

Draco leaned back in his chair. "Know your enemy, Weasley."

"Because of course your family has always been so opposed to the Dark Arts," Ron shot back. "Did your Daddy teach you -"

"Ron, don't!" Harry exclaimed.

*"Shut your mouth about my father."*

The harsh crack of Draco's voice made Pansy reach out to him - he held her off with an imperious gesture. Harry carefully did not meet Ron's shocked gaze.

"I think we can refrain from personal attacks, gentlemen." Lupin's voice was calm, but instantly quelling. "Well explained, Mr. Malfoy, thank you. Does anybody have any questions?"

Blaise Zabini's voice was sharp, almost an accusation.

"It's true that the Dark Lord is being helped by someone inside Hogwarts. Isn't it?"

*Draco's been talking to him.*

But it made sense, as it had when Draco told Harry. It was something they all knew, though most people didn't speak of it except in half-formed whispers.

Lupin looked back at Zabini, his gaze level. Harry knew that Lupin wouldn't lie to one of his students.

"Yes - I believe it is. We have no idea who it could be, though. I can only urge you all to be discreet and watch for any signs that somebody is communicating with the other side."

All the students watching each other with fear and distrust. That could so easily lead to paranoia. And perhaps that was Voldemort's plan.

Harry was appalled to find himself considering the faces around the table, searching for a flicker of guilt.

"Thank you. All the prefects can escort the others back to their common rooms now. The Young Council needs to discuss further safety measures."

Harry smiled at Ginny as she got up, because she looked so white and scared, as if she really hadn't realised what Lupin said was true. She smiled back, though her smile was shaky. Harry considered squeezing her hand, but he was distracted by Pansy tentatively pecking Draco on the cheek. Draco let her do it, Pansy's lips grazing against the soft white line of his cheekbone, and Harry thought, *but he doesn't like people to touch him, he doesn't want her to do that...*

Then she swept off, flanked by her Slytherin girls and by Crabbe and Goyle, leaving Blaise and Draco. Harry noticed that Blaise moved his chair closer to Draco's after they had gone.

"All right," Lupin said with quiet intensity, as soon as the door closed on the last non-Council member. "The situation is grave. We all have to act in this emergency, and this is one of the things we must do. Here are maps of Hogwarts, with danger spots which could be escape routes marked, and also enchanted to show the whereabouts of everyone in school."

The wartime version of the Marauder's Map, courtesy of Messrs. Moony and Padfoot.

"The teachers need help guarding these danger spots at night, so with Mr. Boot's help I've made up a schedule for you..."

Lupin was passing out maps and schedules, and Harry took his automatically, reaching for a quill to write his name on the top, and listening to Lupin reading out names.

"And on Tuesday night Padma Patil and Professor Sinistra will guard the statue of the oneeyed witch -" A list of names, and Harry was reading it and Lupin was reading it out loud and "- and Hannah Abbott guarding -"

"Hey!" Harry said. His voice was much too loud, absolutely inappropriate for this time of practical planning and he simply did not care. "What am I doing?"

Lupin's eyes were half-shut as if he was sealing himself off from Harry's pain. Hermione wouldn't meet his eyes. Draco did, but his gaze was utterly noncommittal.

"Why isn't my name on the list?"

"Well. Harry. We all thought it would be wisest to keep you from harm. Nobody doubts that you want to be useful -"

Harry's laugh was jagged, and if it hadn't been for the flicker in Draco's watching eyes Harry would have doubted that it came from him.

"You just don't think that I could be useful. You think you need to protect me."

It was a simple word, *protect*, a word that was meant to be good but was strangling and merciless.

*I don't want your pity. I don't want any of this. And I'm not putting up with any more.*

"No, Harry, be reasonable -"

"If I can't be like all the other Councillors then why was I put on the stupid Council? We're supposed to help protect the rest of the school, we're not supposed to be helpless and looked after and - *don't touch me* -"

Hermione snatched her hand back as if Harry had bitten it.

"Harry, you have to understand that you are You-Know-Who's target -"

"We're *all* Voldemort's target!" Harry shouted, pronouncing the name viciously. "This is a war! I don't want to be safe while everyone else is in danger, I don't want everybody to feel sorry for me, I don't want to be weak and *maybe I don't want to be Harry Potter.*"

And the secret was out, the pretence ruined, everybody was hurt and Harry just no longer gave a damn.

"Harry -"

"Shut up! I'm not a weak little orphan, you don't need to shelter me or to try and make me feel better. I'm a member of the Council, and if I can't be treated like everyone else then - screw the Council. Screw the Triwizard Tournament. And screw you all."

And at last there was a flicker of some feeling in Draco's gaze; it even seemed like he was going to say something, but just then Harry looked away and stormed out of the Council room.

\* \* \*

Harry leaned his head back against the wall, and told himself that he was not going to cry. He was still furiously angry, a knot of heat burning in his chest, but the bleakness was beginning to wash over him. He was so tired of all this.

He had blown up a few times before; comparatively minor incidents, but they provided him with a script for this occasion. After waiting a suitable time, Hermione would come looking for him. Then she would lead him back to Gryffindor Tower, where everybody would treat him with that horrible sympathy.

And he'd accept it. He couldn't let them down. He was Harry Potter, poor pitiful victim, brave boy hero.

Harry clenched his teeth until his whole jaw ached.

He could visualise it all now. Hermione's light step down the hall in half an hour, her gentle knock, her tact, not being angry because everyone felt sorry for Harry...

There came a knock that was probably denting the door.

"Potter! Let me in, or I will break down the door and beat your thick head in with the pieces!"

Draco. Nobody else could sound quite so aristocratic and pissed off at the same time.

"What are you doing here?"

"*Alohomora!*" The door went flying open. Draco stood in the doorway, looking around with an unimpressed air. "Flitwick really doesn't secure the Charms classroom properly."

"You could have waited for me to open it," Harry snapped.

"Malfoys are known for their patience." Draco smirked. "That is, people point us out, say we suffer from a severe lack of it and tell stories about my uncle, a waiting room and a bear."



It suddenly dawned on Harry what Draco was doing here.

He was here to offer sympathy. He was Harry's friend, and he'd seen he was upset, and he'd felt sorry for him. And now he was out to comfort him and coax him back.

*Oh, Draco. I thought you were different!*

"Now," Draco said briskly. "While I'm here, I want to know what the hell that witless little display of self-pity was about."

Harry blinked.

Okay. Still very different.

And kind of insulting.

"I wasn't being -"

Draco tilted his head. "Maybe I don't want to be Harry Potter," he quoted in falsetto tones. "Maybe Neville Longbottom doesn't want to be Neville Longbottom. I'd say the odds are pretty good he doesn't. I'm sure a lot of people are feeling sorry for themselves these days, but one thing they're not doing is disrupting bloody important Council meetings."

Harry's head jerked up. "It wasn't just about the Council meeting!"

How dare Draco act as if Harry had been in the wrong? How dare he demand that Harry defend himself?

"Oh, you're right there," sneered Draco. "Half the time you're moping around the place putting everybody off their food. It's bloody ridiculous. I suggest you snap out of it."

Harry leaped up.

"I suggest you don't stick your nose into things you don't understand!" He realised his fists were clenched. Draco glanced down at Harry's fists, and a corner of his mouth curled.

"Enlighten me." He smirked. "Or hit me, Potter. Whichever you'd prefer. Knowledge is power, and power is fun, but a bit of rough and tumble never goes amiss."

"Oh, shove off and stop being such a bastard!"

He wasn't going to hit him. He wasn't.

"I can prove my legitimacy, Potter. Back twelve generations, if I have to."

Well. Maybe just once.

Harry stepped in close enough so Draco tilted his head back. Harry tried to keep his voice cold and level.

"Stop laughing at me! You don't know what it's like."

"What what's like?"

Draco's voice sounded almost bored, and it was infuriating, and so Harry took a deep breath and told him everything.

"What it's like to have the whole school pitying you! What it's like to have everyone know you failed and someone died! What it's like to be the poor fragile orphan who nobody trusts with anything, who everybody protects, who everybody *coddles*. You've seen it. You know. Everybody knows. The way - I was made Quidditch captain, and Triwizard Tournament champion, and the way everybody always tries to make me *feel better* and yet nobody will let me do anything because they know I'm useless! I hate it - it's unbearable and it's - it's -"

Harry stopped, panting for breath. *I said it*, he thought, dazed. *I said it - and now Draco can see...*

Draco's eyes were wide.

"Crap," he said.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Why are you talking such total crap, Potter?" Draco demanded. "Were you dropped on your head as a child repeatedly?"

"Malfoy, if you're going to make fun of how I feel -"

"Of course I'm going to make fun of how you feel. That's what Malfoys *do*." Draco looked down his nose at Harry. "I'm also going to ask why you decided to spew sentimental idiocy into my ear. Quite frankly, I feel violated. You failed and someone died, in-bloody-deed. So you couldn't stand up to the Dark Lord and a ring of Death Eaters, all by yourself at the age of fourteen. Yes, you certainly let everyone down there. If only Longbottom had been in your place, he would have saved Diggory by heroically soiling himself."

"It's not funny!"

Though it did sound strangely more convincing than *Don't blame yourself, Harry. There was nothing you could have done*.

Draco was raging on.

"Why were you made Quidditch captain, for the love of... You're right, Potter, it could only be sympathy run mad. They really *should* have given the captainship to the whiz kid of the team, the youngest player in a century - oh, hang on just a minute, they did, didn't they! Next minute you'll tell me people are letting you win matches when you've won almost every one you remained conscious for since first year. Do you even listen to yourself when you whine? Get a *grip!*"

Draco looked thoroughly exasperated, and a bit like he would have enjoyed hitting Harry with a chair. Draco could not have been nastier, considering these were someone's honest feelings; he was

just being the callous and selfish git Harry had always wanted to pummel into unconsciousness and...

Draco had a *point*. This was *great*.

"Everybody coddles you, indeed. What else can you expect, if you go around pouting about your Great Big Emotional Mess all the time? These are Gryffindors, Potter, the useless dogooders, if you don't recall. Of course they're going to be nice to you. I doubt their whole lives revolve around protecting and nurturing you, unless you count the smitten Weasley and that creepy Creevey kid. And people say *I'm* vain. I ask you." Draco exhaled sharply. "This school is full of people who couldn't give a damn about Harry Potter and his pathetic little crises. Poor fragile orphan. Get over yourself, Potter, students are disappearing all over the place and nobody has time to care about you or your precious par-"

"*Watch it*, Malfoy."

Harry stepped in so furiously close that he almost felt the movement of eyelashes against his face when Draco blinked.

"Get bent, Potter." But he didn't finish his sentence. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. Demolishing your pretty little castle of delusions. They're protecting you because you're so cute and feeble. Am I right?"

Harry certainly wouldn't have phrased it like that, but - "Yeah..."

"Of course. It all makes sense now. They couldn't possibly be afraid for you for a legitimate reason. Since practically everyone in school has foiled the Dark Lord's evil plans for world domination at least once. Lupin can't have thought this one out logically and decided to not to have Harry Potter as a guard and tempt the forces of darkness to swoop in bent on murder."

Harry blinked. He hadn't actually considered it that way.

"Is that what you believe?"

"Actually, no," Draco answered. "You-Know-Who hates you, we all know that, and I think if there was any possibility he could get you, he'd have nabbed you already. I think you're one of the safest people in school. But I can certainly see Lupin's point, and I don't think that anyone believes you need to have your little hand held as you walk through the corridors."

It was at that moment of tremulous relief, with the floating thought that maybe, just maybe, Draco could be right... that Harry realised he was wrong.

"There's the Triwizard Tournament," he said, lifting his chin. "It was made with practically the same tasks, just to make me feel better and get closure. Explain *that*."

Draco stared at him as if in disbelief.

"You are so lucky you weren't put in Slytherin," he informed Harry. "If I'd had to listen to this kind of babble for six years, I'd have hauled off and murdered you with a broomstick."

"Oh, you have a different idea?"

Draco pushed Harry back an inch so he could lean forward.

"Oddly enough, I do. And my idea is much more plausible, which is less odd since yours is the stupidest I ever heard. People do not hold international tournaments to make moody schoolchildren feel better. People hold tournaments to make the entire wizarding *world* feel better. Don't you realise that Beauxbatons has been shut down, and that they had to take their third champion from the last pathetic remains of a wizard school in France? Do you honestly think you're worth all the bother?"

Harry would have answered *no*, but all he seemed able to do was stare at Draco with hope gathering in the pit of his stomach.

"Please, Potter," said Draco in his most disdainful tones. "They arranged this to put a bit of heart into the wizarding world. It was a very simple campaign move so that they'd have something other than disappearances to put in the paper. And sorry, but I don't think they're going to waste their time changing the tasks too much. We're in the middle of a war, and besides - I'm sure everyone would be happy if you won. You are Harry Potter, after all. It would be nice for the papers. But I certainly don't think it was arranged for your benefit."

Draco surveyed him, almost as if he were despairing that anyone could be so stupid. Harry was almost gasping.

Then he slammed Draco up against a wall.

"If you're trying to make me feel better, I'll never forgive you," he swore.

Draco shoved him back.

"I don't try to make people feel better," he replied distantly. "And I don't lie for any purpose other than to serve myself. So why don't you quit it with the amateur dramatics, Potter, and tell me why."

He smoothed down his robes and walked over to Flitwick's low desk, leaning against it with no suggestion that his height in any way discommoded him.

Harry looked after him.

"Why what?" he asked.

Draco smiled, a needle-bright and flashing smile. "If this is what you believed people thought about you for years - if that's what makes you look like a wet week sometimes - then why did you let people think it? You're not the deceitful type. What were you hiding?"

Harry sat down on the floor. Hard.

"Malfoy, don't -"

He drew his knees up, hid his face against them, and maybe he was a child after all, and Draco

could be remorseless.

Draco walked over to him, and Harry heard him sit in front of him. Harry looked up and met his intense gaze.

"You can tell *me*," he said.

"I just let them believe what they wanted, all right?" Harry snapped. "There's nothing wrong with that. If they wanted to think I was some kind of martyred innocent, that was better -"

"What are you?" Draco threw the words at him, fast and cold and hard. Emotion bit sharply inside Harry.

"I'm - oh, damn it!"

He remembered his hatred of his parents' murderer, and the look on Ron and Hermione's innocent horrified faces.

*Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?*

The blinding hatred he had felt for Voldemort just hearing about Neville's parents, and then after Cedric... and knowing that nobody else could ever know what the boy hero was thinking, knowing that he wasn't really innocent like them and knowing now - that he had to tell somebody. Draco.

"I hate Voldemort," Harry said thickly, with venom loading his tongue. "I hate him. I loathe him, more than any of the others can imagine, I want to kill him, I'd *love* to kill him... and I'm not supposed to feel like that!"

He was leaning forward, just his knees between himself and Draco, and Draco didn't hesitate for a second.

"I do," he said steadily. "I hate him too. It doesn't mean that you have to hate yourself."

And that cold bleak bitterness ran through Draco's voice, that murderous fury, and Harry thrilled to it and knew it, and there wasn't that automatic recoil he had expected. It was nothing like he expected.

He lowered his head to his knees again, taking a deep helpless breath.

Draco's touch was between his shoulder-blades, brief and light.

"Is that all you've been torturing yourself about?" he demanded. "Just that you want revenge and you don't think the others would understand? It's perfectly natural, it's perfectly normal, and they might understand. Even if they don't, it's all right to be different from them and -" Draco paused. "Potter - are you crying?"

Harry lifted his face indignantly. "No!"

Draco looked distinctly relieved. "Oh. Well. Good. I was about to go running for Granger. Is that it, then?"

He'd hidden it all so well, like a guilty secret, because he wasn't supposed to have that sick anger thrumming through him. Like the secret of being almost sorted into Slytherin, which he'd never told Ron or Hermione. But he'd told Draco, who was Slytherin and who understood pain and hatred and absolutely lethal rage.

He'd told Draco.

"Pretty much," Harry answered. He felt utterly drained.

He could feel Draco leaning forward to peer into his face, feel the weight against Harry's legs, and he felt almost bereft when the weight was removed. Draco seemed satisfied with what he had seen.

"You're a bit of an idiot, Potter," he observed without any real rancour. Harry leaned back.

"Maybe so," he said tiredly. "I can't imagine why you agreed to be my friend."

"Obviously, there's the amusement value," Draco pointed out. He paused, and Harry saw he had that bright vacillating light behind his eyes that meant he was thinking. "And because of - how you feel about You-Know-Who," he said at length, with his eyes focused on Harry. "Because you can do it too."

The ferocity of Draco's gaze answered Harry before he asked his question.

"Do what?"

"Live." Draco threw up his hands. "I mean really live. I don't mean to exist with or without a purpose, I mean to *enjoy* existing. I mean - I don't have to explain it. You know it. What else do you feel when you're flying?"

Harry remembered with a sudden vivid power the feeling the first time he had been on a broom. That utter joy - *this was easy, this was wonderful*.

"Yes, exactly," Draco said, still looking at him fiercely. "That's it. That's the way it can all be. I know that. That's how I live - that's how you can live. And they can't, none of them, not even your oh-so-special friends and that's why they can't be on my level or yours. Because they can't live with the same fury."

Fury. The word seemed oddly appropriate to Harry, simply because anyone else would have found it inappropriate.

He understood. Draco didn't waste moments, Draco threw himself into them. Draco's enmity towards him had been wholehearted because Draco knew no other way to be. Draco was utterly appalling or utterly amusing, but he was utterly something, because there was always passion there.

Passion. It was about passion. And that was why he and Draco, even when they were enemies, had been on the same level.

"They aren't capable of it," Draco continued.

"Don't," said Harry. "I love Ron and Hermione."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Yes, well, that's your problem, isn't it? The fact that you loved them made you feel guilty for years. You put yourself back in the cupboard when you decided to love them."

"No, that's not true," Harry answered. "I see what you mean. I see that's why you can live like you do. But love isn't like that. The possibility of danger makes flying better. I want to love them; it makes my life better. It even made my life better being in that cupboard. Because I absolutely knew afterwards that I never wanted to be trapped again."

"I don't see it," Draco said. "I can live, can't I? And I was never trapped."

Harry thought about Draco over the years, the pure energy of him in everything he did, right or wrong. It was the whole reason Harry had hated him so much; because even though he was only another schoolboy and Harry had faced the powers of darkness, he was able to make himself an enemy who could not be ignored.

And he had done that because Harry *could* hate him so much, could wish with such passion to beat him once and for all.

On the same level, indeed.

"Weren't you?" Harry asked, but he would not bring up the name of Draco's father.

"No," Draco snapped, turning away from Harry in the same decided way he did everything.

"It would be all right to love," Harry told him quietly.

"Who?" Draco demanded.

"Anyone, like I love Ron and Hermione. It isn't the cupboard. It makes everything brighter, it's part of - really living. No man is an island, you know."

"Astute observation. No man is a Quidditch pitch either." The corner of Draco's mouth jerked down. "I don't agree with you."

He smiled suddenly, a smile of such intensity it might have seemed painfully bright to someone other than Harry.

"Anyway. That's why I agreed to all - this." He made an expansive gesture. "All right then. Are we quite done with your emotional breakdown? Sure you aren't thinking about your abusive childhood?"

He got up lightly. Harry looked up.

"Hm?"

Draco laughed. "I asked what you were thinking about."

"Oh. I was thinking about you."

Draco smiled slightly, unreadably, and offered his hand. "In that case, perhaps you can get up the

hard floor and we can get back to the meeting. I asked them to wait, I didn't know you'd take such an annoyingly long time."

Harry shook his head in disbelief, but couldn't help laughing. "I like it here. It's not like I'm going to see you again often anyway."

"Oh, really?" Draco raised an eyebrow. "You'll see me tonight. I promise. Now will you get up, you useless prat?"

Harry reached up and took his hand. "Okay."

\* \* \*

Hermione glared across the table at Blaise Zabini, who narrowed his eyes back at her. *Your little Slytherin leader isn't bringing Harry back.* She wanted to say it, wanted to snap it, but Lupin was looking at her and she remained discreetly silent. She knew that bleak look on Harry's face. Harry needed to be left alone after outbursts like this.

Of course, Malfoy hadn't given her time to tell him that. As soon as Harry had fled the room, that interfering Slytherin had knocked back his chair, Malfoy's face a mask that betrayed nothing, and gone after him.

He was no good. Hermione had always known that. And she felt almost satisfied, knowing what Harry's reaction to him was likely to be. Time this bizarre companionship was broken up, anyway. Malfoy was bad for Harry.

*Harry.* Hermione clenched her fingers around the quill. She hated that miserable look on his face, that shuttered look with the wounded eyes that wanted to be left alone and that made her want to reach out and cry, *I don't care what it is, Harry, you can tell me, you can tell me...*

In a moment she would have to go to him.

In the next moment Malfoy and Harry entered the room. Malfoy held his chin high and surveyed everybody with that magisterial air Hermione found so intensely irritating.

"Did you miss us?" he inquired airily.

Harry flashed an embarrassed smile in Hermione's general direction, and then quietly took his seat.

Hermione was not at all fooled by the shy, unassuming pose which came to Harry as second nature. She looked at the small smile tugging the corner of Harry's mouth and the unusual brightness of his eyes.

She didn't understand anything.

"No brilliant ideas while I was away? Of course not, I was away," Malfoy rambled to himself in his unbearably conceited manner. "Let's discuss the question of security, shall we?"

That brought Hermione's head up with a jerk. She might hate Malfoy, but she was aware that he was an asset to their side. He and Hermione had worked together on a couple of necessary projects,



and in between the snide comments and the frequent mirror checks, the boy could plan.

Besides, Harry rarely contributed. Hermione couldn't let the Gryffindor side down. Malfoy was standing up.

"There's a spy for You-Know-Who in Hogwarts," he said casually. "So, obviously, we have to take precautions. No one person can know everything. We have to assign different areas of investigation and protection to different sections of the Council and the Order."

"I have to be in on both healing and research," Hermione broke in, keeping her tone businesslike. "We're almost at a break-through with the preservation of phoenix tears. It could be crucial on a battlefield."

Malfoy gave a small nod. They had long ago established the boundaries of pretended respect.

"How crucial?" Harry asked. "Phoenix tears only affect physical wounds. I remember that. How much would preserved tears help if the Death Eaters relied on spells? They'd only be useful with injuries that happened along the way. Our whole healing department shouldn't be focused on that."

Hermione blinked and wondered if she had wandered into an alternate universe. Of course, Harry knew about phoenix tears from the Chamber in second year, but... it was so unlike him to speak up in a Young Council meeting.

It was so unlike him to look so - aware. Alive.

"Good point, Potter. See about it, Granger," Malfoy said coolly.

Hermione frowned to herself. Obviously, *he* didn't care.

"Now. About the question of how much we should trust Professor Lupin with," Malfoy continued.

Hermione was on her feet. "How dare you! He's the head of the Young Order. He set up this whole thing. How dare you even insinuate that we wouldn't trust him?"

Malfoy arched an eyebrow.

"I'm not. I know you Gryffindors are trusting souls. You can trust him if you like - I'm Slytherin, and we don't trust anybody. And right now, in this situation, we *can't* trust anybody absolutely. So you're damn lucky to have me."

"Professor - !"

"Miss Granger," Lupin said. "I don't want to force anybody's confidence. Mr. Malfoy is doing his best for the school. I'm willing to be equal to everyone else under suspicion - and I think he's right."

"He doesn't suspect you," Harry said, speaking up again.

Malfoy's gaze flickered briefly.

"No," he admitted, more quietly. "I don't. But I could be wrong. It has been known to happen, once

or twice. Now, how about having Terry Boot on the research division? Sit *down*, Granger."

Hermione sat down heavily, and looked over for her habitual *those-frustrating-Slytherins* exchange of glances with Harry.

But Harry was looking at Malfoy, glowing with pride.

\* \* \*

Draco had said he'd see him tonight.

A few hours later, as he was going down the stairs to the common room, Harry doubted this. It wasn't that he didn't *trust* Draco, but it was quite possible that Draco had over-rated his own abilities...

Harry was actually wondering if he could put on the Invisibility Cloak, pretend he was going to the bathroom and sneak down to the dungeons. There was the small matter of Ron and Hermione possibly being sceptical about hours-long stays in the bathroom, and the Slytherins might be a little alarmed by invisible presences opening their door, but...

And then he stopped on the step, because Draco was in their common room. He was leaning against the wall drawling lazily to Parvati Patil, who was looking rather charmed. Harry supposed that Parvati *was* very pretty.

"Malfoy," Harry said.

Draco turned and smiled. "Potter. Crabbe and Goyle dropped me off here, and I require someone to walk me back. You wouldn't desert an innocent in need, would you?"

Harry grinned. "I'm not sure I'd classify you as an innocent, Malfoy, but I suppose I have to accompany you. You nuisance."

Draco stepped back from Parvati, raising his eyebrows.

"Then I suppose my overdeveloped sense of hospitality will oblige me to entertain you in my room. What a trial. Always a pleasure, Parvati."

Draco favoured her with his most enchanting smile and Parvati smiled back. Her hair was long and shiny and she was very popular and she had huge dark eyes. She had only just broken up with Dean. It was hardly decent.

Draco was already wandering off towards the door. Parvati stepped up on the step, still smiling and shaking her head.

"That Draco Malfoy," she said in amused undertones. "Shameless."

"Sorry?"

"Potter, get a move on, I don't plan to live here. Some people here are honest and true, and that kind of thing is catching."

Harry rolled his eyes and took his time walking over to where Draco stood with the martyred air of one who has been kept waiting by ill-mannered boors.

This lasted for all of the two seconds it took to leave the Gryffindor rooms, at which point Draco started a conversation with every appearance of complete good humour.

"I'll say this, you Gryffindors do have a very high standard of female beauty," he remarked airily. "Some of the things Hufflepuff churns out are simply tragic. But your girls are almost without exception attractive. There's Parvati, and she's stunning, and your fan Ginny Weasley is rather cute too."

"What about Hermione?" Harry asked accusingly.

Draco laughed.

"Oh, I don't like the girl, but I have to admit she's very attractive."

"Malfoy, you can't say things like that. What about Ron?"

"No, he's not attractive at all."

Draco made a slight face. Harry forbade himself to laugh. After a bit he said casually, "So, Parvati. Dean split up with her the other day, you know."

He left the sentence hanging. Draco turned to him, one corner of his mouth lifted.

"You think I'm actually interested in the Patil girl? Please. An innocent Gryffindor." He pulled a lock of Harry's hair. "I have *standards*, you know."

Harry couldn't help laughing then.

"My mistake."

"It's always your mistake, Potter. So tell me. Is there any chance you can play poker?"

Harry sighed dramatically. "So that's the way it's going to be. No more adventures, just cards with you in your room. I'll probably be bored to tears."

He doubted that Draco knew how to be boring.

Draco was busy assuming his superior air, which involved him shaking his hair back and regarding the world at large dismissively.

"Don't be absurd, Potter," Draco said. "You have an Invisibility Cloak, don't you? And according to my calculations, you and your companions are completely safe. We can go out tomorrow. Meanwhile, I'll teach you to play poker. A teenage boy unable to gamble illicitly, I call it tragic..."

He broke off.

"Well, what are you laughing at, Potter? And what are you staring at? Don't you know that's rude?"

"It's..." Harry shook his head. It was blithe rulebreaking, illicit plans, and laughing about summer, and this intense and morally questionable force invading his life and feeling *so much better* and - loving it. Loving it.

"It's nothing. Let's go to your room."

# Chapter Eight: Calming Storms

*If you want my sympathy  
Just open your heart to me  
And I'll be whatever you ever need*

Harry was half asleep under a tree, taking refuge from the blazing sun. The whole week had been a signal from approaching summer, a heat wave that made everyone remove as many clothes as possible and hide in the shade. One or two classes had been held outside, and Hermione had been coaxing Ron into fetching her cold drinks from the kitchen all week.

It had begun with that evening of cards in Draco's room, and had gone on in that soothing vein all week. The heat had relaxed everyone a little, and Harry just felt... more at ease recently.

He didn't analyse it. He just shut his eyes and basked, and thought about how funny it was to see Draco glaring at everyone's tans as if they had mortally offended him. Right on cue, Draco hurled himself to the ground beside him.

"Potter," he said. "You lazy sod, have you been lying here all morning?"

"Hmm. More or less," Harry answered. "Ron and Hermione were here a while ago, but they wandered off."

"Snogging behind the broom shed," Draco said promptly. "Believe me, I just came in from Quidditch practice. Oh, my eyes. I was already tired; I did not need to see that."

Harry glanced over at Draco, who was lying on his back with one arm flung over his eyes. He thought it was typical that Draco had thrown himself into a graceful attitude.

"You must be tired," he observed dryly. "Your hair's a mess."

"I hate you, Potter," Draco informed him. "Have I made that clear recently? I just really don't like you at all. You are so one to talk. One day I'm going to lose it, seize your head and brush your hair properly."

"Hmm. Looking forward to it."

He glanced over and saw that Draco really was tired. His breathing was slightly accelerated and the collar of his Quidditch robes was open. Even his neck was flushed.

"Quidditch practice tough?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Draco answered innocently. "It was great. We're going to crush you in the final."

The whole school took for granted that the Quidditch final would be between Slytherin and Gryffindor. That was how it usually was, and Gryffindor had won for the last two years. Draco never let this inconvenient detail faze him in the slightest.

It was so like Draco to refuse to acknowledge defeat. The team was composed of his court, and so it was a one-man show. Draco never, Harry reflected, let slip the smallest suggestion that he could not run it all, and run it superbly. Draco's problem was that he couldn't imagine being anything but totally self-sufficient.

"You wish," Harry returned. Draco made a face at him.

The leaves above them cast a shifting pattern of light and shadows on the ground. Harry squinted up at the blurred green and gold. It was such a calm day, there wasn't even a breeze, and he thought he could be quite happy relaxing here with Draco for a few hours. He hadn't seen Draco last night, as Draco'd been on guard duty. Which was probably another reason he was so tired, not that Draco would ever admit it.

Draco shifted on the ground. "I wish I had a cool drink," he grumbled. "I wish I was at home. We have *proper* house elves there." He propped himself up on an elbow. "I don't suppose you'd consider...?"

That gave Harry an idea.

"Get up," he said.

"Potter!" Draco wailed. "The whole point of you fetching the drink is that I won't have to move. That's the beauty of it."

Harry folded his arms and looked implacable.

"Oh, come on, Potter! I'm on my back. I'm all sweaty. Don't make me beg."

"Don't make me carry you."

Draco gave Harry a slit-eyed and evil glare. He remained prone for a moment, and then sat up grumpily.

"Will there be drinks?"

"I promise."

"Oh, all right."

\* \* \*

The kitchens made Draco laugh.

"I'm *below stairs*," he said, rather gleefully. "Look, it's an oven. More drinks, slaves."

Hermione would have fainted if she'd heard him ordering the house elves around. Harry himself winced at it. But he noticed that the house elves were giving Draco approving looks as they hurried to do his bidding, as if finally someone who acted *properly* had arrived. Harry hid a smile.

Draco was sitting cross-legged on a table, with several empty glasses and an assortment of strange

foodstuffs around him.

Harry leaned against the table.

"I had no idea the blood-flavoured lollipops were just the tip of the iceberg."

"I will not pander to your plebeian expectations," Draco said loftily. "People used to eat stuffed dormice. I think I can eat icing sugar without it causing all this ill-bred commentary."

He ate another spoonful and took another swig of pumpkin juice to prove his point. At some stage Harry was going to mention that the icing sugar had left a light dusting on Draco's sticky mouth.

"So, Potter, feeling stressed?"

"Er, no," Harry said, distracted. "Why?"

Draco waved his spoon. "The third task being moved back to May, of course. It's April now. Pressure getting to you yet? Going to crack, Potter? Going to lose it?"

"Yeah, I'm a nervous wreck. Pass the pumpkin juice."

Draco hugged it protectively to his chest. "There's no need to drown your sorrows, Potter. Drink is never the answer."

It was lucky Draco was so tired. Harry went for the juice and tried to pry it out of his hands, ignoring Draco's small sound of protest and pushing him backwards. It only took a brief struggle, and then Draco was on his back on the table and Harry had the pumpkin juice. Draco blinked up at him reproachfully.

"You great Gryffindor *bully*." He made no effort to sit up, but simply looked up at the lamps, which drizzled soft light onto his eyes and hair. "I hope you get eaten by a monster in the maze."

Harry wondered whether Draco was actually concerned about him. It was hard to tell. He liked to think so, though, and he tried to be reassuring.

"I'm not too worried."

"Yeah? Got your eyes firmly set on the glory?" Draco finally sat up and pushed Harry back, his eyes gleaming. "I know how much you love having your name in the paper, Potter. Imagine the finish line -"

"There is no finish line -"

"Don't bother me with inconsequential details. The finish line, the cheering crowds, the swooning women." Draco affected a voice alarmingly like Ginny's. "Harry Potter, we luuurve you!"

"Shut up, Malfoy." Harry really wasn't laughing.

Draco clasped his hands to his heart. "But all I want is an autograph, a lock of your hair, to have your love child -"

"Do you know how annoying you are?" Still definitely not laughing. Draco gave up and leaned back on his elbows, flashing him a smug smile.

"You don't think I'm annoying. You think I'm great."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "How do you figure that?"

"The second task, idiot. I was the one who woke up with a mouthful of filthy water and a nice little guarantee of what you thought of me." Draco fished for the marmalade, which Harry really hoped he wasn't planning to eat with icing sugar. There would be even more on his mouth then. "So you claim it's not glory you want. What would you like?"

Harry studied him.

"I'd quite like a guarantee myself," he said.

Draco gave him a startled glance, and in the pause Harry looked at his watch.

"We're going to be late," he added in sudden alarm.

"What for?" Draco asked, distracted.

"The thing in Hogsmeade I wanted us to do. I told you about it yesterday."

"You forgot to mention what precisely it was."

"It doesn't matter. It's fun, I promise. Let's go."

"To Hogsmeade? In my *Quidditch* robes? Looking like *this*?" Draco looked scandalised. "Surely you jest."

"Come on, Malfoy."

Draco raised his eyes to heaven. "Oh, give me twenty minutes." He slid easily off the table and made his way toward the door. "One more thing, Potter. If the Gryffindor idea of fun is cleaning out bed pans in St Mungo's, I'm shutting you up in a cell and going home."

All right, so Harry did laugh then. But by that time Draco was out the door, so it didn't count. Harry looked helplessly at the utter mess Draco had made of the table.

"Look, can I help -"

"Harry Potter is not to think of doing work for a house elf," Winky said in horror, hurrying forward. She and a team of elves began to clear the table at lightning speed. Harry looked around, thinking vaguely that he could while away the time saying hello to Dobby. To his surprise Dobby was standing in a corner, and his face remained troubled when Harry greeted him.

"Dobby is thinking that was Master Draco," he stated in noncommittal tones. Harry had forgotten Dobby must have known Draco.



"Yeah," he said cautiously. "Why didn't you come and say hello?"

Dobby didn't answer him directly. All he said was, "He is looking just like his father."

And suddenly Harry didn't feel like talking to Dobby anymore.

"You're wrong," he informed him coldly. "He's nothing like his father."

Dobby said nothing.

\* \* \*

Harry ended up waiting for Draco at the bottom of the Hogwarts steps. Draco came sauntering down them after half an hour, wearing his white jumper and giving Harry a disarming smile as he came.

*You see, Harry thought to an absent Dobby. He's not like his father. He'd never be like him.*

"Let's go," Harry said.

He saw that Draco wasn't the only one who had remembered about the third task being bumped up when a couple of reporters came hurrying up to them as they went into Hogsmeade.

"Harry, would you like to share -"

"Harry, could you tell us -"

"No thank you," Harry said tiredly. "I'm just here for an outing with my friend. Excuse us."

Their eyes lit on Draco, and after a whispered conversation in which Harry distinctly heard the words 'Friend?' and '*Lucius Malfoy's* son?' they turned their assault upon Draco.

"Mr Malfoy! Can you tell us about the second task -"

"We'd be prepared to offer gold -"

Draco tilted his head at Harry, smiling wickedly.

"How much, exactly?" he inquired.

"Malfoy!" Harry said in horror, and dragged him away.

Draco sulked as Harry led him off. "I was planning to make up a very amusing story," he complained. "It would have electrified the wizarding world. How would you have felt about having an illicit affair with a teacher?"

"Malfoy, you are a very bad person," Harry informed him severely.

Draco laughed. "Is there a chance I can have a blood-flavoured lollipop before we do whatever it is you want to do?"

"No," Harry said sternly. "The cruiser will go any minute now."

Draco stopped laughing.

Despite the fact he was squinting against the sun, despite Draco's always fair skin, Harry could see quite clearly that he had gone pale.

"The cruiser?" he repeated.

\* \* \*

The great lake that stretched to the forest, Hogwarts, and Hogsmeade had only been used for necessary transportation - and of course, the first years' terrifying arrival - for centuries. Until someone had realised that the wizard tourists who flocked to the last non-Muggle settlement in Britain would lap up something like this.

The cruiser, like all magical boats, was powered by a simple spell. It had extra enchantments on it so nobody had to steer and, no matter what the weather, it was always a smooth voyage. Taking a cruise was still a popular tourist activity, and most Hogwarts students had gone at least once.

Harry hadn't been since he'd gone with Ron and Hermione in fifth year. He'd thought it might be nice to go with Draco.

Now the look on Draco's face was fast convincing him otherwise.

"You know, we don't have to go," he said, hurrying after Draco. Draco was striding towards the dock, his mouth set in a thin painful line.

"I want to go," he answered, his voice hard. "Why wouldn't I want to go? I'm not afraid of a damned boat. Irrational fear is the worst kind, my father used to say. It means you're a stupid coward."

"That's - nice, Malfoy, but -"

"Potter. You wanted to go and we're going, and that's the end of it. And now could you please talk about something else!"

Harry was sure he caught an almost desperate glint in Draco's eyes. He felt wretched.

"I thought it might be fun to go together," he muttered, in apology.

Draco was clearly trying to calm down, though his smile did not come without effort. "We went together once before," he commented.

If finding out with horror that Draco was aboard after the ship had launched counted as going together. Harry recalled standing on the deck trying politely to ignore the passionate fifteen-year-old embraces of Ron and Hermione, who had paired up earlier that very week. He had turned away, trying to look at anything but that, and had seen yet another couple. Draco Malfoy had disengaged himself slightly from Pansy, who then started work on his neck, and Harry had recognised him at the same time as Draco's eyes lit on him and his upper lip curled slightly in distaste. A couple of minutes later, Draco had strolled by with Pansy clinging to his side and made a loud comment

speculating on how Ron could have afforded the fare. Ron hadn't heard. Harry, left out, miserable, and bloody furious, had leaped at him. The ensuing ferocious tussle on the planks of the deck had only been halted by the furious ferryman threatening to feed them to the giant squid.

Harry smiled. "I'd forgotten."

It was funny how things worked out.

Draco hadn't been bothered by the boat then. He had looked relaxed and happy, actually, in the brief instant before he spotted Harry. Harry supposed he'd been happy to be with Pansy. They had gone out for six months of fifth year, and stayed friends afterwards. Draco had never been with anyone else for half as long.

Harry suppressed a sudden impulse to ask about Pansy. Draco didn't look in the mood to discuss past romances. He was clearly nerving himself to perform some sort of ordeal as Harry got the tickets. Harry wished he'd never suggested this whole stupid thing. Draco's lips were drained of colour.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course I'm sure," Draco said sharply. "I'm *fine*."

He stormed up the ramp. Harry noticed that he didn't let himself look at the water until he was safely on deck.

Once he did, he gripped the rail so tightly that his knuckles went white.

"Malfoy, are you all right?"

"Yes!" It was almost a shout.

Harry rested his hands against the rail, standing beside Draco and trying to offer some sort of comfort. Little beads of perspiration were standing out on Draco's forehead. The boat jerked into motion. Draco grabbed Harry's wrist in a death grip. As the boat moved, Harry's wrist felt like it was going to be broken in a vice. Draco's face was white as bone, and he didn't seem to notice that he was grasping so tight. His whole body shuddered as the boat drifted out onto the lake.

Then the boat rocked, just the tiniest bit, and Draco's nerve broke.

His body convulsed over the rail, and his face was ashen when he looked up.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Draco said between his teeth. Harry supported him as he made for the bathroom, wincing every time the boat jerked. And he remembered with a painful clarity holding Draco up at the time of the second task, because he was unable to support his own weight.

He should have thought about that. But things had been - different then. He had regarded the whole business of helping Draco Malfoy as an unpleasant necessity.

He hadn't been concerned.

Halfway there, Draco stopped and gripped the rails around the deck again. He swallowed several

times and then spoke, his voice strained with the effort to keep it even.

"I don't - I *won't* be sick. Just - get me off the boat, Potter."

"But the boat's -"

"*Please!*"

Harry looked at Draco's face.

"Okay," he said, trying to be gentle. "Fine. Just - hold on a minute there. I promise, I'll take care of it."

Draco managed a nod. Harry whirled on the ferryman.

"Bring us back," he said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Look, I can't -" The man stopped. "Hey! You're Harry Potter."

Harry tried to put a lid on that familiar exasperation. He needed to get Draco off this boat, it didn't matter what the hell his name was, it wasn't like it could help...

He paused as an idea struck. Clearly, he'd been spending too much time with Draco.

"Yes, that's right," he said slowly. "I'm Harry Potter. And it's *very urgent* that my friend and I get off this boat."

\* \* \*

"You did that very well," Draco said in a tired voice. "Maybe you could have made a Slytherin after all."

"Thrill me, why don't you."

Draco only just managed a smile. They were sitting on the porch of one of the little shops around Hogsmeade, which was thankfully closed for lunchtime. Draco was hugging his knees, apparently too sick and miserable to care about appearances.

He must be feeling *really* bad.

"I hate those things," Draco said, vehemently and at last. "I hate the bloody spells. They make the boat move out onto the waters and it's as bad as being *in* the water because anyone can counteract that simple spell, and then you're helpless."

There was a pause. Harry looked over at Draco and tried to come up with something to say. Draco added darkly, "I can't stand being helpless."

Harry felt the impulse to - oh, reach out and clasp Draco's hand, or something. But Harry was no good at that sort of gesture, and in any case Draco never seemed to welcome them.

"It'll be all right," he said instead. Which was a stupid thing to say. Draco glanced briefly up at him, a gleam of awareness through his eyelashes, and then his eyes seemed to focus on something else. He seemed suddenly and utterly unaware of Harry. Oddly, the fact that he spoke to him reinforced this impression.

"My father liked to go out yachting on the lake."

"You have a yacht?"

Even when Draco was in this condition, he could act superior.

"We're Malfoys. We also owned the lake." His gaze was still intent on the middle distance. "He used to take my mother and me out on the lake in the holidays. He'd - go over Quidditch strategies or school marks with me. It was - fun."

It didn't sound like fun to Harry. Still, it wasn't like Draco had been raised lovingly. Perhaps Lucius Malfoy taking an interest in Draco had been the closest thing Draco had experienced to affection.

"It was fifth year - in the Christmas holidays." Draco said it with difficulty. "Mother was sick and she couldn't come. So it was just me and my father. And the - the boat stopped moving." Draco looked unusually small there on the porch. Without that invincibly self-assured air, he seemed very young. "And then there was a storm. The sky was black and the water all around us was wild but the boat never moved and... My father told me not to be frightened."

Harry had known Lucius Malfoy well enough to be sure that this had been a command and not reassurance offered from father to son. He could see the magical storm closing around the doomed boat, the sky bruised above them, the younger Draco frantic on the deck, and that cold order ringing out.

The strained edge to Draco's voice made him sound as though he might have liked to cry if he were someone else, in a different world.

"There were words and someone was there and... the boat just broke apart. I was holding onto a plank and screaming but I still heard - I still heard it." He swallowed painfully. "The Killing Curse. I heard it and I saw the light through the storm, and..."

Draco obviously couldn't continue. He just kept his eyes fixed on that private vision, kept his face still as he struggled to maintain Malfoy composure.

*And I wasn't even sorry for him, Harry thought. I didn't ask how it happened. I didn't care. And he saw it all, saw a father he loved being murdered and -*

He would have done anything, just then, to make it right. He had the sudden fierce impulse to... oh, *grab* Draco, hold onto him as if he could make things okay by holding on tight enough, burrow his head into his shoulder and frame some sort of apology against his neck. But he hadn't the first idea of how to go about doing something like that, and he knew Draco would be appalled anyway.

Instead, he reached out and touched Draco's hair lightly.

Draco didn't pull sharply away as Harry had thought he might. He just sat there, blind to the real world, and kept talking in a relentless rush, as if he had been thinking about this for two years and absolutely had to let it spill out now.

"My father was killed by You-Know-Who. And people say he supported him, and I think he did at first, because he didn't like the Muggleborn, but he must have seen You-Know-Who was mad and going too far. My father always wanted wizards to be respected, but I knew him. He would have drawn the line at massacre, at innocent children getting snatched and families being destroyed. He must have turned against You-Know-Who. I mean, people don't kill their followers. It makes sense."

*Normal, sane people don't kill their followers, no,* Harry thought. *But targeting children, murdering the Muggleborn and planning world domination - why should we expect Voldemort's actions to make sense?*

He didn't speak the words aloud. He just brushed Draco's hair gently under his hand, trying to think of what he could say.

*Did you know your father, Draco?*

Harry had known Lucius Malfoy. The man who would have 'drawn the line at massacre' had given a child a book that was meant to kill dozens of innocent students, and had stood around Harry himself in a circle of Death Eaters and laughed as Harry faced Voldemort. The first time Harry had heard the Killing Curse uttered against a human being had been in a graveyard where Lucius Malfoy had appeared and offered his loyalty to the one who had spoken it.

But Draco, who could usually see so clearly, obviously couldn't bear to face facts about his father. He couldn't know anything about this.

And Harry couldn't bear to tell him. What if it had been Harry's father who had died, a father who had lived long enough for Harry to love him? Harry would have wanted to believe the best about his father, too.

Besides - Draco had told him all this trusting him.

What could he possibly say?

"Oh, *Draco...*" It was a low cry of pain.

Draco smiled faintly, and Harry realised it was the first time he had ever called him Draco. There was no displeasure in the smile, so Harry thought he could keep on doing it.

"I'm so sorry," said Harry, which he considered an extremely pathetic thing to say. Draco had stopped shivering like a wounded animal, though, so Harry realised he must not be doing so badly.

He wouldn't have minded sitting there with Draco for a while more, but he could see the shopkeeper coming down the road to open up and giving the two loiterers a stern glance.

"Should we go back?" Draco asked wearily.

"Actually," Harry said, "I'm quite hungry."

The corner of Draco's mouth lifted. "Bring me near food and I'll kill you."

Harry laughed. "Well, I thought I might buy a sandwich and we could go down to the lake -"

"Are you completely *crazy*, Potter?"

"You could throw stones at the lake and taunt it because it can't get you now."

Draco made a face at him, but seemed to consider it.

"Yes," he decided eventually. "I think I'd like that."

Draco leaned forward on his knees for another moment, as if he was preparing to bear a load. And Harry only knew that he wanted to carry it for him, and he felt a pang because telling him was the closest Draco would ever come to leaning on him.

Zabini and Pansy Parkinson walked by, and gave Harry and Draco an odd look. Harry realised that he was still stroking Draco's hair. Draco pretended not to notice them. Harry hadn't had his practice with deceit.

"Do they - do they know?"

Draco folded his arms defensively across his chest. "They know my father died. I - no, I haven't told them anything more."

Really, it was wrong to feel pleased about something while Draco was still clearly upset.

"I used to argue with him all the time," Draco said softly. "He was just trying to help me be the best I could be, and I was proud of him, but I resented him and I didn't - I never liked criticism."

Harry remembered again what Lucius Malfoy had actually been like.

Draco wanted to remember it this way. Love always distorted memories of the dead, Harry thought, always prevented any kind of accurate judgment and left you mourning for a fantasy. And those who loved you couldn't take the dream away, and in the end an accurate judgment would be cruelty.

Draco looked so tired and woebegone in that instant that Harry said, suppressing an ignoble feeling of disappointment, "You're not to do anything tonight. You need to get some sleep. You're going straight to bed when we get home."

Draco sneered, that mock sneer which Harry often took as a smile these days. "Ooh, yes, *Mother*."

"Shut up and come get a sandwich with me, Draco."

He glanced over at Draco to see if it was still all right to call him that. He didn't appear to have noticed.

"Will you tuck me up in bed and tell me a story?" Draco inquired. Draco was laughing up at Harry by

now, and Harry felt both reassured and regretful about the return of that confident mocking look.

He sighed and offered a hand to help Draco up.

\* \* \*

"Can *Flying with the Cannons* really be that fascinating the thirty-second time, Harry?" Hermione teased.

"Hmm?" Harry looked up. "Well, it's a very good book."

Actually, he had loaned it to Draco last week and that brat had returned it filled with withering scribbles in the margins. Harry had been flicking through them and smiling at his unmitigated nerve.

Not that he'd *lied*. It *was* a very good book.

Hermione smiled at him affectionately, her dark eyes gleaming in the firelight. Her own book was resting open in her lap, and Harry thought Hermione was relaxing, because it wasn't a textbook.

Harry looked around at the common room, feeling affection for them all sweep over him. Things had been slightly better lately. Despite the terrifying situation, everyone was being strong, and just now, they looked happy.

Dean was laughing quietly with Ginny as he amused her by imitating Professor Snape's handwriting in a love letter addressed to Sirius. Ron was drawing a Divination chart that had been due in last week. Lavender and Parvati were making turbans in an ill-fated attempt to look more like Professor Trelawney, and Neville appeared to be trying to mate Trevor and an uninterested lady toad.

Then Ron said, in a voice that tried and failed to be entirely joking, "It's good to have you back here. What with you always running around with bloody Malfoy, I was starting to forget what you look like."

Of course it was no big deal. Harry knew that Ron disliked Draco, and it was fair enough considering Draco despised Ron, and it wasn't something Harry wanted to get into... But Harry suddenly and vividly recalled Draco's distraught face earlier, and felt that same pang of protectiveness.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk like that about Draco," he snapped.

Across the room, Ginny stopped laughing. Hermione glanced up from her book, looking troubled.

Ron's eyebrows drew together.

"*Who?*" he said.

"You know his name," Harry said, making an attempt to soften his voice that was not all that successful.

"Oh, I'm so sorry if I said anything that might offend your new best friend," Ron said, bristling. "Since we all know how polite and gentlemanly *he* is."



"I know he sometimes acts like an idiot," Harry returned, his voice even, "but I still don't want to hear you insult him."

The Ron of a few years ago might have thrown something at Harry's head. This Ron took a few deep breaths, and said something that Harry thought was much worse.

"Look, it worries us, all right? We *care* about you, you stupid git. And I don't want to see you getting too friendly with someone we can't trust."

Of course Harry cared about Ron too, and he was almost softened and he almost replied gently, but there was - that instinct to shield Draco again, and *almost* was not enough to stop him.

"What do you mean, someone we can't trust?"

"What do you think I mean?" Ron spat. "If there's a spy in Hogwarts turning over children to the Dark Lord, who else could it be but Draco Malfoy?"

There was sudden ferment all around them.

Younger Gryffindors began to whisper excitedly. Ginny made a small sound of distress, staring over at Harry's face. Dean and Hermione both said something quiet and sensible and totally disregarded. Parvati stood up and announced loudly that nobody should make that kind of accusation. Neville made a clumsy effort to defuse the situation by wailing something about spoiling the toads' mood.

Harry heard, with an odd distinctness, Lavender leaning over and telling Neville softly, "I think they're both boys. It's not going to work."

Harry also felt, with strange detached fury, all the blood drain out of his face. His voice was low, but extremely cold.

"How *dare* you."

Ron's face was flushed but resolute. "It's only common sense, Harry," he said angrily. "Think about -"

"I don't want to hear it!" Harry yelled. Silence fell around the common room, and he breathed in and forced his voice down. "You can bloody well take that back."

Ron clearly had no intention of doing so.

"It *has* to be someone in the Council," he argued. "Surely even you must suspect -"

Harry glared at him.

"Apart from Hermione - I'd suspect anyone else in the Council first."

He stepped back, feeling blindly for the door.

"I don't feel like seeing you again tonight," he said, instead of hitting him.

"Where are you going?" Ron demanded furiously.

"Dammit, Ron," he said, turning away. "Where do you *think* I'm going?"

\* \* \*

Harry stormed out of the Gryffindor rooms without another word. Ron's voice kept ringing in his ears and that protective instinct was screaming inside him and Draco was in bed and he'd have to brave the other Slytherins but he had to, absolutely had to see him right now...

And he walked and he walked and then - he met Draco, emerging from the dungeons.

He just stood there, feeling a wash of unexpected relief, and Draco's eyes opened wide as he saw him. Startled and silvery and making him smile.

"Hi there."

Draco looked as if he was searching for something witty to say, but obviously he had been caught off guard. Finally he rolled his eyes and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Hey."

"No socialising with the Slytherins tonight, then?" Harry inquired.

"But of course. Be my guest, run off and seduce Pansy. I fear I can't accompany you, I'm somewhat *persona non grata* down there just now."

Harry opted for staying where he was.

"I, um, had a bit of a fight with Ron," he said. "I don't think any of the Gryffindors want me back there."

"In that case, go and die in a corner somewhere. I'm off to socialise with dear old Weasley and Granger, since I presume I still retain the status of a prince among them."

"The Prince of Darkness, maybe."

Draco grinned. "Royal personage of the year, in my opinion."

Harry began to walk down the steps, and Draco fell into step with him.

"So, do they all hate you now? Going to burn you? Going to force you to join the Hufflepuffs because burning is too merciful an end?"

"Yes, Draco. Yes they are," Harry said. "And then everything will be all right in the morning."

He wasn't repeating any of that madness to Draco. Besides - just now, back with him, it felt like things might be all right in the morning. He could forgive Ron, who didn't know him, couldn't, or he would never have said anything so stupid.

"The morning? If you are under the bizarre delusion, Potter, that I'm wandering draughty corridors with you until morning, you're going to be severely disappointed."

"OK then. How about the Potions classroom?"

Draco just smiled.

"The rumours are all lies," he said.

Harry blinked. "What?"

"All the stories about you, Potter. Poor wee orphan with the fragile humility going on, weeping about how nobody loves him. You expect me to hang about in vile dungeon classrooms for the sake of keeping you company. Do you realise I was raised in the lap of luxury? What an ego."

"Draco. You *live* in the dungeons, you have absolutely no right to talk about anyone else's ego and I'm sure it wouldn't do you any harm to be briefly in the lap of - oh, something other than luxury."

Draco's name still tasted unfamiliar in his mouth.

"I *like* luxury," Draco protested. "Luxury and I are on very close terms."

He followed Harry all the same, and when the door to the classroom defeated Harry Draco leaned down and whispered something to the lock.

"Password," he explained as the door swung open. "Professor Snape gave it to me when I was giving Goyle Potions tutorials."

"So that's how he passed," Harry mused, wandering in. The room seemed much less sinister when a class was not about to happen. "You must be an amazing tutor."

Draco walked in and slid easily onto Snape's desk, pulling up his legs and resting his chin on his knees. Now Harry was never going to be able to see Snape making up a Potion on that desk without visualising a grinning blond boy there instead.

"I have many talents."

"I'm sure you think so." Harry leaned against the wall by the desk, watching as Draco lifted an eyebrow in mock outrage.

"You'd be amazed at all the things I can do." He paused. "Was this fight with Weasley about me?"

Harry paused in turn.

"Maybe," he replied at last. "Why were you wandering around there when I told you to go to bed?"

Draco smiled brightly. "Looking for someone to go to bed with." When Harry just kept looking at him, he sighed and gave in. "I had a fight with Blaise."

Harry gave him a crooked grin, and let himself slide down to sit on the floor.

"Was the fight with Zabini about me?"

Draco sighed again, somewhat more dramatically, and got off Snape's desk to sit beside him, hands clasped around his knees.

"Maybe."

Harry glanced down at Draco's knees, at one of his hands pale and startling against the black material of his jeans.

"Draco -" Even when he was upset and distracted, there was a certain charm in being allowed to say that. He reached over and pulled Draco's hand to him by the wrist. Draco watched, his face expressionless, and let him do it.

Harry turned over Draco's hand in both of his, examining the knuckles.

"Draco. You hit him?"

There was a slight curl to Draco's mouth, not quite a smile or a sneer. "Yeah. I did."

Harry was faintly appalled. "What did he say?"

"Nothing that you need to hear," Draco answered, his voice serious for once. "Nothing that was true."

Harry looked thoughtfully at Draco's hand. "Did he hit you back?"

A small snort. "Not likely."

"That's - good." Draco's hand didn't appear terribly damaged. "I suppose you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Harry could have cared less about any of Blaise Zabini's stupid insults. What mattered - the *only* thing that mattered - about that kind of insult was Draco's reaction to them.

"Potter." Draco's voice was amused. "Am I ever getting my hand back?"

Harry's fingers were darker against Draco's skin. "I don't know." He mused. "I kind of like it."

Draco laughed. "That may be, but I need it for all sorts of things. I think I'm going to insist on having it returned, even if a hook would look dashing."

Harry opened his fingers, and Draco removed his hand.

"I think we can assume that our friends said the same kind of thing about each other," Harry said.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "If so, I am *shocked* at young Weasley."

Harry laughed. "You're such a brat."

"I'm a Slytherin," Draco answered carelessly. "We are brats. We also use language I really wouldn't expect from Weasley."

"He doesn't like you," Harry told him.

Draco looked faintly concerned. "I'm... really messing things up for you, aren't I, Potter?"

"What do you m--"

"It would be all right to give up on it, you know. Sometimes things are just too much trouble," Draco continued lightly.

"No! I mean - we're friends. I don't care about anything else. I think it's worth it - and you don't cause me any more trouble than I cause you." Harry almost despised himself for betraying wretchedness so unmistakably. "Is - is that it? Do you want to give up?"

Draco looked at him musingly, and Harry thought he was considering it. He tried not to look concerned.

"Nah," Draco said eventually. "I think I'll keep you around."

Harry's smile would not be kept back. Draco returned it, just a little, his smile faint and teasing.

"I wouldn't have given up on it no matter what," Harry told him. "I won't. I - I mean... oh, *you know*, Draco."

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, I know everything. No thanks to you, of course, since you are the most inarticulate person I have ever had the pleasure of meeting." The corner of his mouth lifted. "Well. Now that's settled."

The easing of tension in Draco's body was what made Harry aware it had existed. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes, and Harry wondered for a moment who else was allowed to see Draco Malfoy with his guard down, whether it was to be distraught or relieved or perhaps simply tired. He hoped there wasn't anyone.

"Hey. Potter." Draco nudged him. "What are you thinking about?"

Draco's shoulder was warm and solid against his. It was a comforting touch, reassuring, because this wasn't like the absolute knowledge that Ron would always be there. Most things with Draco were uncertain and different...

But he was *here*, wasn't he, and that had to mean something.

He turned towards Draco, whose profile gave away nothing, and gave him a small teasing smile.

"Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

Draco glanced over at him, his face so close Harry could see the small flicker of warmth in his eyes before it became a smile back.

"I've been thinking about your love life."

Harry stared and Draco laughed briefly at his expression.

"Er. What?"

"Well. Ginny Weasley isn't really suitable. I think we can do a little better than a Gryffindor for you. We should find a nice Slytherin girl," Draco suggested brightly. Harry rolled his eyes pointedly at Draco, who resolutely failed to see this.

"Pansy would be nice, but I'm not sure you like her, and besides - she hates your marrow." He paused, considering. "How about Morag?"

"I don't know her," Harry answered, and *I don't care if I never do* was pretty much implicit.

"You could get to know her. Come on, Potter, what are you going to do with all your Friday nights?"

"I could be with you."

"You're going to have to be really nice to me if you're planning on killing my social life."

Which, Harry noticed, wasn't the same as *no*.

"I think I'll pass up Morag, all the same."

Draco yawned, half-heartedly trying to hide it behind his cupped hand.

"Fine. You don't know what you're missing, though."

He looked away from Harry, and yawned again.

Harry blinked.

"You're exhausted."

There were shadows under Draco's eyes and a tiny tug of strain about his mouth. This was ridiculous. He should be in *bed*.

"Just a bit." Draco yawned for the third time and lay on the stones of the dungeon floor, his movements languid, using his elbows to stretch out full length. "Don't let me go to sleep here," he ordered. "No more sleeping places without proper pillows for me. It's uncomfortable, and I don't think I could stand the shame."

Harry stretched out on the stone beside him. "Stop being a prat," he said. "It's not shameful to be tired just like everyone else. And you need to get some rest."

Draco frowned slightly. "Don't *fuss*, Harry," he mumbled sleepily. Draco's breathing deepened and slowed.

Harry glanced over at him. *He called me Harry*, he thought, a little startled.

And then he smiled.

# Chapter Nine: The Onlooker Sees Most of the Game

*This is your new thing now  
And it makes the whole world spin  
It's as least as old as sin  
But not quite  
This is your new thing now  
And now you're turning grinning  
But maybe no one's listening  
And you might lose it all my darling, yes you might*

The creak of the dungeon door opening made Harry wake with a jump, sitting up and automatically moving in front of Draco, and glancing around wildly until he saw Professor Lupin at the door, vaguely startled and with first years behind him.

The jump woke Draco, whose dishevelled head lifted slightly from the floor. Lupin's eyes widened as they met Draco's over Harry's knee.

"Harry. Draco," he said. "Er - what a surprise."

Draco looked at the first years behind Lupin, who were gazing at them with great interest, and immediately went into a silent laughing fit.

He was *such* a help.

"Um, we were, um, going over our Potions practical, and we fell asleep..."

Well, it didn't count as lying if Lupin clearly didn't believe a word Harry said. Harry made a vague gesture towards Draco, who had happened to catch Lupin's expression just as Harry made his fumbling explanation, and who was now paralysed with laughter.

"Well, I was escorting the students in here early to get set up," Lupin said, still seeming unsure how to react. "If you hurry, you can get breakfast."

"Aren't points going to be taken off?" one of the first years whispered.

"You don't take points off *Harry Potter*," said a scandalised friend. Harry almost choked. He looked over at Draco, who was practically crying with mirth.

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said quickly, seizing Draco and pulling him bodily upright. Harry propelled him out of the door, and Lupin watched them go. Harry couldn't quite read his expression.

A little way down the corridor, Draco had to lean against the wall.

"His *face*!" he exclaimed weakly. "*Your* face... I'm sorry, I need a minute..."



Harry folded his arms and gave him five minutes, giving him a forbearing look.

"Yes, very amusing," he said tolerantly. "Come on. Breakfast."

Draco sobered up instantly. "Not without a hairbrush."

"This hair fixation isn't healthy, Draco. You need to eat more."

"Oh good, so I can be unkempt *and* overweight?" Draco demanded. "You're a sadist, Potter. I require a mirror."

He turned and tried to examine himself in the glass of a door. Harry, just behind him, glanced over Draco's shoulder at Draco's reflection.

The reflection seemed even paler than Draco really was. He looked only half awake, his mouth still soft with sleep and his eyes hooded and hazy.

"Hideous," Draco said, and scowled at it horribly.

"Hm?" Harry blinked. "You're being stupid. Which isn't exactly a rare occurrence, I might add. Come on. I refuse to let you miss breakfast again."

"*Let me?*" Draco echoed, with a voice that would have been baleful if he hadn't yawned as he was speaking. "How do you propose to *stop* me?"

Harry yawned too and rested his forehead against Draco's shoulder. Draco relaxed fractionally and Harry laid his hands flat against Draco's back and shoved him firmly down the corridor.

"Like this, mastermind. Breakfast. Now."

Draco complained half-heartedly all the way there. Harry just kept shoving at strategic intervals.

Where Pansy Parkinson and Ron were standing.

"- any more than you do, Weasley, you red-haired oaf," Pansy was yelling this when she caught sight of Draco and hurled herself at him. "Draco!" She reached up to touch Draco's hair and Draco caught her wrist gently. She gestured instead. "You... It's not brushed."

The accusing look she shot Harry made him think for a wild moment that she was about to demand, *What have you done with my child?*

She began busily dragging him into the Great Hall, asking in a loud voice what he wanted to eat. Harry held on to Draco for an instant. She turned and gave him a venomous glare, and he stared coldly back and let go.

Ron glowered as he came in too.

"I need a cup of coffee," Draco said grouchily. "Get off, Pansy."

He glanced over at the Slytherin table, met Blaise Zabini's narrow-eyed glare and turned very

deliberately around to face Harry.

"See you tonight, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sure. Great."

Draco strolled off. Ron's face looked like he had bitten into a lemon.

"Where were you?" he hissed.

"It's none of your business," Harry told him coldly.

Ron breathed out hard through his nose and folded his arms. "Listen, I... Hermione and I had a talk. It was - I shouldn't accuse anybody without proof."

Harry relaxed a little.

"You don't know him, Ron."

And he knew things were okay between them again, even if Ron made a face and muttered, "Do *you*?" as they went to their seats at the Gryffindor table.

*Hermione and I had a talk*, Ron had said, but Hermione's face gave away nothing as she offered Harry some toast.

He wondered what she thought about all that was going on.

\* \* \*

Hermione had no idea what to do about this appalling state of affairs.

This was upsetting.

Hermione was used to having ideas, to being reasonable, to understanding. She felt Ron was better equipped for the part of the perplexed one.

But now...

She was curled up on a chair in front of the fire in the Gryffindor classroom as the evening wore into night, thinking about Harry.

She very seldom had to wonder about Harry. A friend could tell whatever they wanted to know from one glance at his face.

Hermione considered Harry's face. It was one of the faces she loved best in the world, a face she had watched so often that she was fondest of its flaws.

In many ways, it was still a child's face. It was thin and pale, the bone structure so delicate it almost seemed triangular. It was such an open face, reflecting everything he thought. Hermione smiled slightly as she remembered how Harry had acted around Cho Chang back in fourth year, how

he had blushed and cast sidelong glances and become utterly tongue-tied around her.

He wasn't anything like Ron, who stared openly or pulled pigtails. Harry was the shy, adoring type.

Hermione's smile faded as she recalled the look Harry had worn most often since fourth year.

Oh, Harry. He thought he hid things so well, when everyone could read the bleak misery on his face. Even though Hermione could see how much he hated all this oppressive sympathy, she could not stop trying to reach out to him, because she couldn't stop feeling desperately anxious about him. Hermione had seen Harry's eyes go flat and cold as the surface of those round glasses he insisted on keeping. Every time she saw that look, her heart broke. She never wanted to see it again.

She had been so pleased he was happy. But now...

Hermione was seeing things she didn't want to see now, too.

She saw the glances between him and Malfoy in the corridors, private and exclusive as a touch. She saw how they seemed to fall instinctively into step. She remembered Harry's crackling black hatred, erupting in fights that sent other students hurtling down the corridors away from them, and she saw where that energy put into that hatred had gone.

She saw little things, like Harry and Malfoy in Care of Magical Creatures sharing one book, the accidental lingering brush of hands, the sitting closer than was necessary. She saw Harry's look at Malfoy when they forgot to stroke the book and it bit Malfoy, and he was making a laughing, histrionic production about it - and she thought, that's not *normal*...

Just then, Harry came in. Hermione cast a glance over at his flushed face and windblown hair. He smiled and dashed up the stairs.

That was one endearing quality of his pale skin - it too showed every emotion. Harry couldn't hide anything from Hermione, even if she was trying her hardest not to see.

She realised, as she gazed into the fire, that she was trying to work out if Harry was attractive or not.

She loved him like a brother, and thus had never given much thought to the matter. But now she had to look up and think of Harry in a different context than she had ever thought of him before. In the light of recent events, she felt she should give the matter some consideration.

Harry walked in again, dressed in his pyjamas, and hopped into the chair beside her.

Hermione decided that he was quite appealing. He looked better than usual in his new clothes and his eyes were flashing with enthusiasm... but no, he wasn't conventionally attractive.

By now they had established a kind of routine.

Harry would come in at some near-unearthly hour and sit beside her, fixing her with that eager gaze. After a while, Hermione would surrender and ask him how his day had been. It was worth it to see his face glow.

Then he would launch into a thrilled description of whatever amazing adventure he had had that evening, liberally sprinkling the narrative with such staple phrases as 'then Draco said...'

His smile throughout the whole story was simple and delighted.

He had been doing this for some time. At first, Hermione had only been relieved that he had cast off that awful depression. Then she had begun to think this friendship was too intense to be healthy. Then...

It was better than the days when Malfoy did not show up. This happened about twice a week, and whatever Hermione's opinion of Malfoy, she absolutely hated to see Harry droop by the fire all evening. All he would do was forlornly reject offers of chess or Exploding Snap. It was a liability, being that transparent. It made you far too vulnerable.

"So, Harry, what did you do today?" Hermione inquired with a resigned smile.

Harry straightened up in his chair, looking gleeful, and promptly told her.

It was a long, involved tale. It seemed Malfoy had thought it would be extremely funny to try and magic a carpet to fly, and it had ended up dumping them into a tree.

Apparently savage floor-coverings were very much Harry's cup of tea. He seemed to have had a good time.

Hermione noticed that Harry looked small when he was sitting down, and taller than he really was when he was standing up. Oddly enough, his slight build seemed to account for both effects.

It also accounted for his grace, which was of a strange kind. At first sight, he appeared awkward, and then you realised he had the same agility as a fledgling. At first or second sight, you were always touched by the sheer lack of calculation in his every movement.

He was a child in his spontaneity, too.

The only times when he was adult came when he was in the throes of some grave emotion, and then he was wiser and more adult than anyone she knew.

She loved him. She really loved him, serious, reckless, utterly vulnerable Harry, a friend who was closer than a brother.

"That sounds like fun," she said, indulging him.

Harry's face shone. "It was," he agreed. "And then Draco said -"

"Hey Harry, Hermione." Ron was at the foot of the stairs. "It's bedtime."

Harry got up willingly, flashing Hermione that shy I'll-give-you-two-alone-time smile. Harry was never more obvious than when he was trying to be subtle.

Oh, but he didn't have that isolated, desolate look on his face when he left them anymore.

She didn't know. She couldn't decide what would be best.

"You're looking thoughtful, sweetheart."

Hermione looked up at Ron's slightly concerned face. It was a face of broad features and freckles, not very appealing to a casual observer. But somehow, she had come to love it dearly.

For no reason whatsoever, except that she could not help herself.

She got up and slipped her arms around his neck, dismissing worries about Harry from her mind.

Everything was so difficult and so terrifying these days. This was just one more thing to worry about, just one more threat to someone she loved.

Hermione buried her face in Ron's shoulder and tried not to think about anything for a while.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Hermione's worries had returned.

Sometimes she thought that Ron was right, and she did think too much.

It was one of those dainty grey mornings, like something traced on a teacup. Fragments of cloud lingered on the skyline, which still wore pale echoes of the sunrise. The landscape seemed more subdued than usual.

The morning air had a bite to it as they hurried towards Hagrid's hut for Care of Magical Creatures.

Ron and Hermione were hand in hand, snuggled together for warmth. Hermione offered her other hand to Harry, but just then they saw that the Slytherins were a short way in front of them, bearing down on Hagrid's hut in a body.

Harry smiled that irrepressible youthful smile and waved her hand away.

"Nah," he said.

He didn't even pause before walking onward; he didn't feign a casual approach.

Moving subtly as a snake among his fellow Slytherins, Malfoy fell to the back of his group. That was his only acknowledgement of Harry's existence, until Harry drew near him, when he gave a cool nod.

Harry's grin was wholehearted and artless.

God, but they were different.

Hermione squinted at them, trying her hand at analysis again. This was difficult because she had a Greek chorus in her head that was prone to chanting 'Bastard!' whenever Malfoy was present.

All she could do was look at them together, and think of all the details she had noticed in Harry last

night, and then put the two images side by side.

A study in black and white.

Malfoy was pale, of course. In that he was like Harry. But Harry's skin was clear parchment where his emotions could be written plainly.

Emotion could not penetrate Malfoy's skin - assuming he had ever had any emotions, that was. Even intense physical exertion made him pink rather than red.

There was nothing endearing about his poise. It was a chilly thing, that ability to be relaxed and graceful at all times.

Perfection in anyone you dislike is an extremely annoying trait.

He was the antithesis to Harry, whom she loved so dearly and with such protectiveness.

She glared at the blond head turned slightly to Harry's messy dark one. It seemed to be a deliberate contrast with Harry's hair.

*Bastard!* said her Greek chorus. *Even his hair seems to have a malicious purpose of its own.*

Then Hermione saw his face as he glanced over at Harry, and a new thought occurred to her.

His face, too, was utterly unlike Harry's. It was made for concealment rather than openness, thoughts rather than feelings. It was a narrow face, with ascetic features, a mouth made to curl, a pointed chin and eyes that glittered like frost.

And yes, Hermione had to admit - it was handsome.

But there was something uncalculated about his faint expression of amusement just now... It made her wonder.

Could Malfoy not know?

Obviously, some people didn't know. The Slytherins apparently didn't know, since there had been a lack of bloodthirsty mobs out to get Harry lately. The Gryffindors were clueless for the most part.

Ron didn't know, because he would have gone absolutely insane.

Still - there was a whisper at the Ravenclaw table, and a murmur among the Hufflepuffs, and some raised eyebrows from a couple of the staff. And there was Hermione herself, who had tried and tried to deny it, but who had been forced to accept the glaringly obvious. Enough people knew so you could say 'Everybody knows...'

Everybody knew that Harry was absolutely dizzy for Draco Malfoy.

Poor innocent Harry, of course, had no idea. Malfoy, however...

Hermione had assumed that he knew all about it - he was the quick type, the little bastard - and he

was playing Harry for some fiendish purpose of his own.

Still, that glance – well, it hadn't been friendly, but it hadn't been guarded. Malfoy had looked almost normal, and not like someone who was plotting another person's downfall.

Of course, that could be exactly his intention. *Bastard!*

Either Malfoy was quite aware of the situation, and setting up Harry for a fall, or he was blissfully unconscious of the whole mess.

Either way meant...

"What are you thinking of, Hermione?" Ron asked, sliding his arms around her as they walked together.

She turned her face into his neck for consolation, savouring uncomplicated warmth and closeness. Eventually she answered.

"Trouble," she said darkly.

\* \* \*

Trouble can be closer than you think.

Hermione realised this on the next day. It was a Saturday, and she began the morning seated opposite to Harry.

His bright Isn't-it-a-beautiful-day-to-be-alive-and-about-to-see-Draco-Malfoy smile put her right off her food.

So did his constant peering over her shoulder to the Slytherin table.

"Today's the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff Quidditch match," he declared at last, putting an egg carefully into his cup.

"I know," Hermione replied. "It's always a nice change to have you in the stands with us."

Except at the last Slytherin-Ravenclaw match, she added silently, when you had your fingers crossed for Slytherin and were so secretly delighted when Malfoy – *bastard!* – caught the Snitch.

Harry went red, the easy childlike colour staining his skin.

"Oh, well... Actually, since it's the only game when we won't be playing, Draco and I were planning to watch it together." He became confidential. "We have a bet on."

*Oh, Harry, you adorable idiot,* Hermione thought with a sudden aching pang of impatience. *Could you be more smitten?*

Could you be more stupid?

Malfoy entered the Great Hall, wearing those recently acquired weekend Muggle clothes. Harry knocked his egg out of its cup.

"Sorry," he said to Ron, who was staring at the egg in his cereal. "You know me, I'm always clumsy."

Yes, Hermione thought with heavy sarcasm. *You're our really uncoordinated star Quidditch player. Silly us.*

Harry was still gazing, starry-eyed, across the room.

Hermione didn't really know what he was making such a fuss about. Certainly, Malfoy looked slim in his Muggle jeans, and the open-necked white shirt showed a little more chest than usual, but he was still the king of Bastardshire.

He saw Harry, and he favoured him with another of those cool nods.

*Oh, isn't Malfoy emotionally invested,* Hermione thought. *Bastard!*

Harry's smile was uncomplicated and delighted.

*He doesn't even realise,* Hermione reflected as she saw Harry reach out for toast and spread it absently with raspberry jam, just as Malfoy was doing over at the Slytherin table.

Harry seemed too absorbed in watching Malfoy eat to notice what he was eating. Hermione glanced over to see Malfoy smirking and having an animated conversation with Blaise Zabini, waving his toast dramatically in the air. Then she saw the faint reflection of Malfoy's expression on Harry's face, flickering like rays of sunlight over the water. Somehow they seemed pure, filtered through his entirely different features.

*God, Harry. Do you have any idea what you're doing? Don't you remember his father was a Death Eater? Lucius Malfoy did not die for our cause. He was punished for double-dealing his precious Dark Lord. He was a cold-blooded murderous Death Eater, one of the worst of his kind. And his son is just like him, only on our side for sweet revenge, and we can't afford to trust someone like that - especially not at a time like this.*

*And you have to go and fall for the bastard.*

\* \* \*

It was at the Quidditch match when Hermione received the distinctly unwelcome revelation that disaster was hurtling towards them.

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were actually playing a very good game, and the students were all enjoying the uncertainty one got without Harry Potter, who played better than anyone, or Draco Malfoy, who cheated better than anyone.

The day seemed bright and summery, and the game went on in a leisurely fashion for most of the day, until the sun slipped under the horizon and the sky turned violet.



Hermione almost had a good time, leaning against an enthused Ron, watching the game and feeling the sun caress her bare shoulders.

Almost.

If not for the spectacle of the two boys near the Quidditch field.

They weren't in the stands. Ron would not have put up with that, and - Hermione checked the glowering faces of Pansy, Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle - the Slytherins would have torn Harry limb from limb.

Instead, they were just off the pitch, near the benches where the players kept their towels and the substitutes sat. Malfoy was leaning back on his hands, legs stretched out and ankles crossed, his face lifted up to the sky. Harry had his arms locked around his knees and his eyes fixed on the game.

Correction, his eyes *usually* fixed on the game. Hermione noticed that Harry's concentration slipped occasionally.

Such as when Malfoy waved an imaginary flag and drawled, "Go Ravenclaw." Or when Malfoy stretched languidly, or shook his head so locks of his hair flashed in the sun.

Harry's eyes slid helplessly away from the game, glanced, and looked away. He didn't even seem aware he was doing it. Hermione was aware, all right. She was also revolted.

She wondered what they were talking about, so she murmured an excuse to Ron and wandered vaguely through the stands to a place where she could spy on them unobtrusively. She knew this was unethical, but... she was desperately worried about Harry! She had to find out what Malfoy was plotting to do with him.

At the exact point when she began eavesdropping, the crowd erupted into a cheer.

Hermione decided this was Life.

Eventually, she made out a certain hateful voice.

"Ravenclaw win! You owe me five blood-flavoured lollipops."

Hermione had a terrible moment where she imagined this was a euphemism.

"Triumph while you can, Draco," said Harry's voice. Hermione burned as she heard his voice, that sweet-tempered voice a shade deeper than one would expect from such a young face, addressing Malfoy as if he were a friend. "I'm going to wipe the pitch with you next week."

"If you do, I shall regard you with the utmost loathing forevermore."

*Oh, here we go. Emotional blackmail.*

Hermione's fists clenched as she heard the sudden vibration of uncertainty in Harry's tone.

"Really? For--"

"Forevermore," Malfoy supplied. "So you'd better not speak to me for - oh, three days."

Hermione was startled to hear them both laugh, Malfoy's loathsome snicker mingling with Harry's chuckle.

"Anyway," Malfoy continued, "I'm going to win this time. You see, this whole victorious streak of yours has not been, as certain dunderheads in the audience have supposed, an offering of sympathy to your battered heart. It was actually a cunning Slytherin plan to lull you into a false sense of security. Which, being done -"

"Draco, quit your wittering. What's the time?"

The lazy, dismissive affection in Harry's tone made Hermione look over at them in a protective fury. Her eyes narrowed as they rested on Malfoy.

If ever a boy needed another slap in the face...

Then her eyes widened in alarm.

Harry had leaned in casually to get a look at Malfoy's watch, a hand steadying himself on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy had turned and angled himself towards Harry to tell him the time.

Their faces ended up inches apart.

Hermione's heart slammed to a stop with sheer dread.

Their profiles were outlined against the violet sky. She could see the pale light shimmer on Malfoy's smooth hair, could see the gradual unfocusing of Harry's green eyes.

He did not seem to be breathing. His hand was no longer gripping Malfoy's shoulder but placed there lightly, fingers curling around the tendrils of his hair. She could see the trembling of Harry's lips and lashes silhouetted, the faltering soon to be replaced with realisation...

If he moved ever so slightly, he would brush Malfoy's mouth with his own.

Malfoy's profile was aristocratic and unmoved as ever. He turned away, checking his watch again.

"It's a quarter past six."

Harry sank back, the moment of almost-realisation slipping away. His hand lingered an instant too long on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy glanced at it, those fingers just touching his hair, and Hermione prayed for some sign that Malfoy at least knew...

"My hair's getting too long again," he commented airily. "Wretched stuff."

Hermione felt arms slip around her waist, and heroically controlled a startled scream.

"There you are," Ron said behind her. "I've been looking for you." He nuzzled her neck. "So tell me, when's this trouble you were talking about going to happen?"

Hermione leaned back in his arms for security even as her mind ticked over various possibilities.

Harry and Malfoy were getting up. She saw Malfoy glance over at them, his grey eyes coolly distrustful.

Harry, of course, had eyes for no one but Malfoy.

What did that look mean? What was Malfoy going to do? Sooner or later, Harry was going to figure things out, and then...

Hermione remembered Cho Chang. Harry had been so nervous about asking her to the ball, but he had done it. A pretty, popular, older girl - someone most boys wouldn't have dared to try for.

It wasn't that Harry was confident... it was that he couldn't help blindly pursuing what he wanted. That he couldn't help wanting something with his whole heart.

It wasn't a question of what Harry would do. But Malfoy - would he simply break Harry's heart, or could he possibly have a more sinister agenda?

Hermione remembered Lucius Malfoy, and shivered.

"Don't worry about it, Ron."

*I can do that for both of us.*

\* \* \*

Hermione knew there would be something different about this meeting of the Duelling Club when they were all asked to show up in casual Muggle clothes.

Her suspicions were confirmed when they came in and the room was full of mats. And when Lupin was joined at the beginning of the class by Sirius, who was usually never allowed within a mile of the Slytherins.

Hermione noticed a certain amount of fluttering among the girls when they saw Sirius. Their newest Professor, now he was getting regular baths and meals, was really quite attractive, and the dark past and the flying motorbike didn't hurt at all.

Hermione thought that this was ridiculous. Sirius Black was almost like a *parent*. No... that wasn't true, was it? Harry would have been in a much better state if Sirius Black possessed the mindset of a parent.

He loved Harry, Hermione never doubted that. He would have died for him in a second; he was fighting this war with the determination to save Harry at any cost. He was born for dramatic gestures like revenge killings, prison breaks and impulsive adoptions.

But Sirius had not been born for day-to-day life. He didn't know how to take care of a child, how to display the consideration and affection that radiated from the steadier Professor Lupin all the time. He had been born volatile and unreliable, the boy who had nearly killed Snape, and twelve years in Azkaban had only exaggerated those qualities.

He simply wasn't Harry's father. He couldn't help it. And Harry couldn't help hurting because of it.

Hermione saw the smile exchanged between them, and reflected that Sirius had been so busy he couldn't have absorbed this situation between his godson and Draco Malfoy.

Of course, neither had Harry.

But it was only a matter of time.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as Draco Malfoy and the Slytherins arrived in the Duelling Club. So, she was alarmed to notice, did Sirius'.

\* \* \*

Harry smiled, shook his head and mouthed *You're late* as Draco came into the room.

Draco rolled his eyes at him and carried on arguing with Blaise Zabini, who seemed to think that a shiny stretch top was casual wear.

Of course, fastidious Draco was wearing entirely appropriate clothes: a faded white T-shirt and black combat trousers, which Harry noticed little Natalie MacDonald eyeing.

"You're late, Slytherins," Sirius observed, his eyes black slits.

Harry steeled himself for a gleeful mass removal of points. Draco gave Sirius a cold look.

"We had better get started, then," Lupin interposed gracefully. "Students, Professor Black has kindly agreed to show you some battle arts, in which I confess I have little skill. I believe you know very little of hand-to-hand fighting?"

Ron gave the snort of one with five older brothers, and earned himself a wry smile before Lupin continued.

"I believe it would be a useful skill to learn. It might tip the balance in a duel. Should you and your opponent happen to disarm each other at the same moment, it could be crucial to your survival. I hope you will all pay the closest attention, and try hard when you are asked to duel."

"I learned these skills at school," Sirius chipped in, smiling wickedly at Harry in particular. "You can all do it too."

Most people smiled back at him.

"Marvellous," Draco said, not quite under his breath. "The war against darkness has descended to a bar-room brawl."

Blaise Zabini snickered, Lupin wisely did not hear and Sirius' eyes narrowed again.

"I suppose I should expect that sort of remark – from Lucius Malfoy's son."

Draco lifted his chin and looked annoyingly superior as only he knew how. "That's right."

"Well, I'm sure you have all sorts of dirty tricks up your sleeve for emergencies," Sirius said darkly, "but if you don't mind, I still think there's something I can teach you."

He had turned away, pushing a hand through his black hair with unnecessary force, when the whole room heard Draco whisper not quite low enough:

"I doubt it."

Harry tried to catch Draco's eye, Sirius' eye, *somebody's*, but they were busy glaring at each other.

"Fine," Sirius said tightly. "Since you are such an expert, Mr. Malfoy, perhaps you'll volunteer your services as my assistant?"

Lupin coughed in an urgent sort of manner, and was utterly ignored.

"It would be my pleasure," Draco shot back.

Harry looked at Sirius in alarm. He knew enough not to trust Sirius' temper when Sirius was annoyed – he'd punched Professor Snape last year.

"Sure now?" Sirius asked. "I might mess up your hair."

His eyes flicked with thinly veiled contempt up at Draco's hair. Draco smiled serenely at him.

"Then I might have to kill you."

Sirius' lip curled.

"All right, class," Sirius announced. "Watch carefully, please. I assure you," he added to Pansy, who was clinging to Draco's elbow, "I won't hurt Mr. Malfoy too badly."

"I'm sure you won't," Draco returned, shaking off Pansy and walking purposefully over to the mat where Sirius stood.

Ron was mouthing devout thanks to fate. Harry was resisting the urge to carry Draco off somewhere and not let him go until he'd talked some sense into his thick head.

"You're Snape's little favourite too," Sirius observed, eyeing Draco with increasing dislike. "Everybody watch as I circle young Mr Malfoy..."

"Professor Snape is the best teacher I ever had," Draco responded austerely. "He's really an example to his colleagues."

Sirius' teeth came together with a click.

"Please be watchful, Mr Malfoy," he said. "I was in prison for quite a while. You learn a few tricks."

"Yes, I've heard about prison," Draco told him. "I bet you wrestled with young boys there too. Watch where your hands wander."

"Draco," Lupin said sternly, as breaths hissed all around the room.

Everybody knew that Professor Black wasn't exactly a conventional teacher, but this was going altogether too far. Harry clamped down fiercely on that impulse to drag Draco away.

Sirius attacked.

Even furious, Sirius would never have hurt a student. Harry saw him check himself as he lunged, moving to knock Draco's breath out and immobilise him rather than strike. And Sirius was just as quick and deft as Harry had thought.

Harry had not thought about the fact that Draco would have no such qualms, and that he was fast as a snake.

He got in a blow. Sirius staggered back.

The class held their collective breaths.

And, hair tumbling into his furious face, Sirius went for Draco, and he had his arm and Draco was glaring at him defiantly and he might just twist and Harry would have to just stand up and yell...

"Sirius!" It was Professor Lupin's warning voice. "Perhaps it would be best to pair up the students, and instruct them at a remove."

Fury blazed on Sirius' face, but he dropped Draco's arm.

"Fine," he ground out. "Harry - why don't you take him."

"Happy to," Harry answered swiftly. He jumped up and took Draco's arm, pulling him back from Sirius. "You know how incredibly stupid you can be, don't you?" he said into Draco's ear.

Draco looked aggrieved, and Sirius, giving them both an incredulous stare, looked outraged. Then he stomped off to order the other people into pairs.

"Ron and Hermione, you two together, Neville and - Millicent, why not, Neville, don't whimper... First one to get the other down for a count of five wins."

Draco looked after him, his eyes icy grey slits.

"I loathe that man," he announced loudly.

"Shut up," Harry said. "That's my godfather you're talking about."

He stepped away from Draco and they faced each other on the mat.

Students were paired up across the room. Hermione was laughing as Ron pretended to wrestle with her. Blaise Zabini was yelling at Pansy, who had him in a headlock. Harry swiped half-heartedly at Draco, and Draco side-stepped without missing a beat.

"Professor Snape told me all about what he did to him," he said, scowling and aiming a blow at Harry it took Seeker swiftness to avoid.

"That was a joke!"

Draco gave him an assessing look. "Some joke," he said finally. "I don't find attempted murder all that amusing. He bloody well knew what would happen if a werewolf got to Professor Snape. And that werewolf was his friend, as well."

Harry paused and Draco almost got him. He had never thought of Sirius' action as a betrayal of Lupin.

"Well..." he said. "He's paid if he ever did anything wrong, hasn't he? Twelve years in Azkaban more than pays for anything, if you ask me."

Draco frowned, but didn't answer. Harry pressed his advantage.

"It's not like Professor Snape hasn't made some serious mistakes in his time. He paid for them, and now it's all right. That's how life works. You do the wrong thing and you make up for it - and then people forgive you."

Draco smiled brilliantly and tried to trip Harry up.

"Yeah? And when did you ever do the wrong thing, Potter?"

"I... made you come to breakfast with messy hair."

"And you can never make up for that. Die, demonspawn, die."

Harry grinned and tried to grab Draco's arm.

"He's my godfather - I love him. Why don't you give him a chance?"

Draco pursed his lips. "I'm not sure if I believe in chances. People seldom give me them."

Harry stopped and looked at him seriously. "I - I would."

"As I recall, you did." Draco gave him a charming smile in exchange for his startled look. "But then, you're absurdly trusting."

Draco lunged at him and tackled him to the floor.

Harry ended up on his back on the mat with Draco on top of him, and Draco must have hit him rather viciously because all the breath had been knocked out of Harry. He breathed hard, dazed, letting the seconds slip by. Draco's hair and breath brushed light on his skin. Draco's hair was haloed by the light above them. He smiled teasingly into Harry's face, a smile bright and quick as a

shiver. Then he propped his elbows on Harry's chest and slid into a different position in order to get off.

"Too easy, Potter."



# Chapter Ten: The Last Test

*The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path and, whether because they were so tall and thick, or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he was underwater again.*

- Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

*Try to keep it clear  
But I'm losing it here  
To the twilight  
There's a dead end to my left  
There's a burning bush to my right  
You aren't in sight  
You aren't in sight*

Harry lay in bed, unable to sleep.

He wished he could blame this restlessness on the weather, or something, but it was a fine April night. That was, of course, the problem.

He wished Draco were here.

He'd thought that it would be all right, the third task. He knew that special precautions were being taken. He knew that Voldemort was not stupid enough to try and do something as predictable as seizing Harry during it. He knew that there was no other Hogwarts champion this year, nobody to... nobody who could...

*Kill the spare.*

Harry had seen a few dead people since then. Dementors and ogres had tried to storm Platform 9 ¾ at the end of fifth year, and a couple of parents had been killed. The students had arrived after the battle, but Harry could still remember those limp forms sprawled on the platform. He could still recall the screams of grief and fear, how Neville Longbottom had been sick, how Ginny couldn't stop shaking. He could still recall how distant those deaths had seemed, how impersonal the next tragedy could be, and the next, and the next...

But Cedric's death had been the first. Death was something that aged you so much more than the adventures other boys boasted about. It was the knowledge of an uncaring universe rather than someone else's flesh, marking the passage into what might one day be adulthood but which felt more like despair.

Harry still woke up screaming sometimes.

He'd left the curtains of his bed open, and in an attempt to distract himself from Seamus' empty bed opposite, he stared out of the window.

It was just an opening into blackness.

He would have gone to Draco, but Draco was out there in that blackness. This was his day for guarding the gates with Terry Boot. It was the most dangerous post there was, and usually teachers guarded it, but Draco and Terry had volunteered. Harry and Draco had had a shouting match about him taking it, but Draco had been determined.

Harry stopped peering out into the blank night outside the window, looked restlessly around the room and saw Draco slipping in the door.

He sat upright in bed, unable to keep back a smile despite the shock.

"Draco!"

"Shush," Draco said sternly, pausing at the threshold. "I'll get into trouble if someone finds me here, you know. Some of us aren't practised at all this creeping about o'nights."

Harry lifted an eyebrow. "You seem to be doing all right. I thought you were out guarding the gates with Terry Boot."

"The esteemed Head Boy and I were relieved of our duties at two," Draco informed him. "I sensed, clearly because I have a psychic gift of awesome proportions, that you were being a silly idiot and were going to stay awake worrying all night. The very idea of this kind of stupidity was irritating me so much I wouldn't have been able to sleep, so I came here to knock you unconscious before I went to bed."

"Oh, I see." Harry stopped his smile from spreading further with no small effort.

Draco's black cloak made his face look white in the moonlight, his hood thrown back to show his pale clean features and his hair, in which raindrops were caught.

"If Weasley wakes up, he's going to murder me," he commented in a casual manner.

"We can go to the common room," Harry decided, throwing off his covers and thanking his stars that he'd chosen not to wear the favourite old pyjamas he had hidden from Draco's campaign of destructiveness. Instead he'd worn the pyjamas Draco had selected on their shopping spree, because - well, they had reminded him of that day, and that had been some little comfort.

Not as good as this.

\* \* \*

The last embers of the fire were glowing in the common room grate, and the night was a little less intimidating and more comfortable.

Draco gave a small sigh of relief and tumbled onto the largest and most luxurious sofa. In the dim red light, he looked like a tired child.

"Was guarding duty hard?" Harry asked softly, before Draco could talk about anything else. "You know, I could -"

"No," Draco said firmly. "You may not accompany me in your damned Invisibility Cloak."

"You can't tell me what to do!"

Draco smiled faintly. "No, but Professor Lupin can - and I believe he has. There's a reason it's called a position of authority, you know. Besides, it's senseless to exhaust you too and you ought to know it." He looked patronising. "Even though sense has never been your strong point."

Harry leaned over and punched him lightly on the arm.

"Callous creature," Draco reproached him. "And here I've been up half the night serving my cause." He dropped the half-mocking tone. "Get over here, you stupid twit, and tell me all your troubles. I'm not sleeping until you do." He widened his eyes. "And I could get *ill* if I don't sleep."

In one of his more unwise moments last week, Harry had told Draco that he'd get sick if he missed more meals. Draco had been briefly outraged, and now brought up the issue of his fragile health for the purpose of getting his own way at least once an hour.

Harry pretended to scowl and pushed Draco's cloak out of the way as he sat on the sofa Draco had taken over.

"I'm sure your motives are entirely selfish."

"Always," Draco assured him. "Now talk to me, and be quick about it. Don't you know that I'm *fragile*?"

His gaze was wide awake and unwavering. Harry knew Draco; he wasn't going to let this rest.

"I don't know," he said. "I just keep thinking about the last time. About -"

"The Dark Lord?" Draco offered.

"No - Cedric." It still hurt to say his name.

He felt Draco stir against him, a faintly surprised look on his face.

"He's what bothers you most. But I thought you -" He broke off, and smiled with a trace of strain. "How like you, Potter."

"I don't know what you mean."

Draco had his head thrown back, and was studying the ceiling. "Don't you?"

"I'm not some sort of selfless hero," Harry burst out angrily. "I - of course I remember the other stuff. I was a kid, and I was scared to death, and when he performed the Cruciatus curse -"

Draco's eyes snapped back to his face.

"When he *what*?"

Harry fixed his eyes on the embers, and tried to force emotion out of his voice. He didn't want to get out of control - he didn't want to embarrass himself or Draco.

"I still - I still have the scar where Wormtail cut my arm," he said, rolling up his pyjama sleeve. "I didn't want them to remove it. It seemed - all wrong to pretend it was never made."

Draco looked at the mark in silence, eyes shimmering with dim light. He propped himself up on one elbow, reached out and touched it briefly. It was just a flicker of fingers, but it felt like a caress.

Harry turned to look at the dying fire again, and spoke in a low voice about the rising and the duel and his parents, and the final betrayal of Moody.

"Hagrid said that I would be all right," he told him.

Draco's voice was calm and quiet. "And are you?"

"Draco, how should I know? Some days I don't think so." He glanced back at Draco, who was lying back and tugging at his arm, and heard his voice soften involuntarily. "Right now maybe I am."

He sighed with exhaustion and old sorrow and relief, and stretched out beside Draco. Draco was warm and moved to his side to make more room for Harry, yawning somewhere near his ear.

"Thanks," Harry murmured. "For coming. And - well, everything."

"Oh yeah," Draco said dryly. "Everything. I was such a help when all that was actually happening, wasn't I?"

Harry opened his eyes to glance at Draco, his glasses hitting the side of Draco's face. He took them off and Draco was just a blur of sleepy child, and he couldn't see the cool gaze. He remembered distinctly what Draco had said to him on the Hogwarts Express at the end of fourth year.

"Well, now you've picked the losing side too."

"And you've started choosing your company more carefully," Draco returned, and laughed somewhat bitterly. "I spent ages coming up with exactly the kind of thing I thought might hurt you most. I didn't - I didn't really care about much else, and I didn't know you'd taken so much you'd barely notice a kid yelling at you."

"Oh, I noticed. I always noticed you." Harry paused. "You're - kind of hard to ignore."

"I know," Draco said with a trace of smugness.

"Because you're such an absolutely poisonous brat, of course."

"Of course." Draco's voice was now definitely proud. "I'm a *Slytherin*."

Harry felt the flex of Draco's jaw against his face when Draco grinned.

"Still -" he said. "I meant it. Thank you for coming tonight."

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you, Potter? I simply happened to be bored."

Draco touched him then, on his arm, on the exact spot where the scar lay beneath his sleeve. The

fact he knew exactly where it was made this second touch feel even more like a caress. He was so close to Draco he could see him without glasses, his eyes closed, his cheek pillowed against his black hood. He was obscurely delighted when Draco didn't remove his hand.

"Night, Draco."

"Oh, I'm supposed to *sleep* here now?" Draco demanded with well-feigned outrage. "Did you know I'm starting to forget what my bed looks like?"

"Night, Draco," he repeated serenely.

There was a pause. Draco still didn't take away his hand.

"Night, Harry."

\* \* \*

When Harry woke up, he was alone. He went upstairs and dressed fast, dreading waking anyone. Their obvious worry - about him, about the task - made his intestines form knots of anxiety. He wanted to get to the Hall quickly.

It was only when he was hurrying down the stairs that it occurred to him Draco wouldn't be there. It always took Draco at least three-quarters of an hour to choose his clothes and get his hair right.

Draco was waiting for him at the door of the Great Hall. He clearly hadn't changed - he had brushed his hair, but Draco would have wanted to brush his hair if he was being led out to his own execution.

"You came early." *For me.* Harry smiled.

"For coffee," Draco sniffed. "I didn't sleep at all well."

"Of course."

"You pest."

They walked into the Hall, Harry's relief enormous. If this could be so different from fourth year - perhaps it could all be different.

He was about to suggest that they take toast and go for a walk around the lake, when Draco tugged his arm and led him over to the Slytherin table.

"I'm not sitting here, Draco."

"Did I ask you to?"

Draco methodically piled two plates high and filled two cups with coffee. Then he went to what appeared to be - and in fact was - a blank stone wall at the end of the room. He slid down to the floor and leaned against it.

Draco looked up and Harry could only laugh helplessly.

"You know," he said, sitting down in a more sedate fashion, "I don't like coffee."

Draco gave him a baleful look.

"I know that. Did I ever say the coffee was for *you*?"

"There are two - ah, never mind."

"Good. And I'll have no more insane prattle about caffeine theft from you." Draco pushed the plate towards him. "Eat now. Imagine the headlines if you swooned halfway through the task."

"Oh, you eat," Harry returned. "I'm not the pale, delicate one here."

"Shut up, you horrible little Gryffindor. Now eat, and stop worrying about unimportant things like a tiny Tournament. It can *hardly* be as important as my Creative Magic project."

Draco lifted his chin. Harry smiled behind his hand.

It had been announced that the Creative Magic project would count for half of the Creative Magic N.E.W.T. exam, and Draco had promptly gone insane. One day the floor of his room had been entirely hidden by crumpled-up plans.

"I'm sure that's crucial."

Draco kicked Harry sharply on the ankle. "It *is*. What if I fail the project? Then I'm practically certain to fail the entire subject, and then - death and ruin! My mother will certainly not accept a son who is an abject academic failure. I may be forced to disown myself." He kicked him again. "And you dare to further annoy me. Will you just eat?"

\* \* \*

Ginny had been working up the nerve to wish Harry good luck all morning. It could be important. The first time Harry had kissed her last year had been when she congratulated him after a fight.

She had brushed her hair a hundred times this morning, and chosen her nicest robes. She had planned to lean over and take his hand, and talk to him at the breakfast table. He was shy - but surely that would get the message across.

When Ginny came down, though, Harry was not at the Gryffindor table. He and Draco Malfoy seemed to be sitting on the floor and kicking each other at intervals. Ginny shook her head with a little smile. It was so *sweet* to see him like this, acting like a child. Harry was usually so serious - not that anyone could blame him, considering all he'd been through.

It did put a bit of a crimp in Ginny's plan, though. She decided to stop him when he went back to the Gryffindor rooms.

She had a small panic when Harry and Malfoy appeared to be heading straight for the Quidditch pitch. Then she realised that if she ran after them, she could guarantee that no Gryffindor - like her

incredibly embarrassing brother - would hear her. So she got up swiftly and hastened after them.

"Harry!" she called after them, panting. "Harry!"

Harry didn't seem to hear her, but Malfoy turned and then Harry did too. Ginny slowed her pace, trying to regain her breath and her composure, and tidy her flying curls.

It gave her time for a brief, delighted glance at Harry.

He was looking so much better these days. *She* had always thought he was handsome, of course, but lately a few other girls had started paying close attention.

He never looked at any of them. He never dreamed they might like him; he was that modest.

He smiled, that bright clear smile of his. He looked so - so *wholesome* to her just then, and so handsome. He was wearing those wonderful new clothes, her very favourite pair of his jeans and a red shirt that clung to him and emphasised his tousled black hair.

His eyes were vivid green, sweet and simple, as he looked at her.

"Ginny."

As always the sound of him saying her name made her heart stutter inside her chest, and filled her with a warm exultant glow.

"Har-Harry. I, um. I wanted to wish you - good luck?"

Harry was looking slightly confused. "Er... thanks."

Ginny consciously registered for the first time that Malfoy was there, standing a little apart and looking more than a little amused.

He was very unlike her Harry, the ideal of what a boy should be. She had never seen him be anything but inclined to be spiteful.

But Harry had chosen him to be his friend, and so it had to be the right choice. People were acting very oddly about that, as if Harry couldn't be trusted to make the right decision.

That probably upset Harry, Ginny reflected, and she turned as sweet a smile as she could on Malfoy. He couldn't be all *that* bad.

"I'm happy you're supporting him," she said.

She was rewarded with Harry's shining affectionate glance. Malfoy just looked even more amused.

"We're all supporting you, Harry," she continued earnestly, encouraged by how pleased he looked.

"And isn't he lucky to have such a lovely and devoted supporter," Malfoy said, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips.

Ginny blushed hotly and noticed Harry's smile snap off.

"We'd better be going. Thanks, Ginny," he said, and he actually hugged her, lifting her bodily away from Malfoy.

Ginny closed her eyes and breathed him in for a moment, the clean smell of soap and the trim feel of a Quidditch player's body.

He let her go too fast.

Then he stepped away, waving awkwardly, and walked off with Malfoy. She saw Malfoy's light head bend towards his black one, and heard the clear sound of Malfoy's laugh. He was obviously teasing Harry about her.

Ginny could have hugged herself. Another boy had kissed her hand - and Harry hadn't liked it.

No, Harry hadn't liked it *at all*.

\* \* \*

"What did you do that for?"

Harry was aware that Draco was amused and Harry himself was agitated. This situation was rapidly becoming unbearable.

"I thought it would be funny," Draco said lazily. "And oh, it *is*. You're all jumpy and flushed. Decided you fancy the littlest Weasley after all?"

"No!" Harry snapped.

"So there's still a chance for Morag," Draco concluded with satisfaction.

"I still don't know who Morag is!" Harry almost shouted.

"She's been in your Potions classes for almost seven years," Draco observed disapprovingly. "Honestly, what have you been thinking of all this time?"

"I'm sorry, I was absorbed in my all-consuming hatred of you. And Snape," Harry added absently. "Look - Ginny's a nice girl, all right? I don't want her to, you know, get confused by you."

Draco laughed indulgently. "You overestimate my allure, Potter. She wouldn't notice if I began a leisurely striptease."

"*Draco!*" There were younger students filing down to get good seats for the Tournament and hearing him say these shocking things.

Draco looked positively gleeful. "Nobody could ever say that in quite the same scandalised fashion as you. Go on, say it again. I dare you."

"Dr- shut up."



"Of course, O Mighty Boy Who Lived. To hear is to obey. I solemnly swear that the virtue of the entire Weasley clan is safe from me. I offer up this tremendous sacrifice in your hon- *ow*."

"You deserved that," Harry informed him severely.

"You *hit* me," Draco said in outrage. "With your *wand*. I'm in an abusive friendship. I don't call randomly attacking people with your wand very heroic. Call that heroic? *I* don't."

Harry stopped listening as the maze came into view.

"I wish they weren't having the Task this early," he blurted. "I know they don't want it to be dark. But I wish I could go somewhere and have a bit of quiet time to think."

He was struggling to overcome the stab of panic that had come from seeing the high hedge around the Quidditch pitch. He wasn't even looking at the shadowy entrance to the maze. Draco glanced over Harry's shoulder - Harry looked into Draco's eyes and saw Hermione rushing towards them, a tiny figure framed in silver.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "I should go now."

"Don't be stupid," Harry answered. "You know I want you to stay."

Hermione, flanked by other Gryffindors, was bearing down upon them. Draco spoke crossly out of the corner of his mouth.

"I'm *not* stupid."

Hermione and the others reached him, Hermione and Ron pointedly turning their backs on Draco. Harry looked at the worried expressions around him, and then the sulky look on Draco's face. He smiled a little.

"Oh, you kind of are."

"Harry, how are you feeling?" Hermione asked him anxiously.

"I am *not*," Draco insisted in bad-tempered tones.

Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue. "Are too."

"Harry!" Hermione's fingers closed so tightly on Harry's arm that he winced. He tried to look strong and reassure her.

"I'm - all right, Hermione. I just feel a bit... fourteen again."

Pity filled Hermione's eyes. "Oh, Harry -"

"Hermione." He kept his voice quiet. "You don't really have to fuss over me. Why not trust me instead? I can handle this."

Hermione looked startled. "I - I do trust you, Harry."

"I know."

He reached forward and she slipped her arms around his neck. She hung on with the same tenacity she always had, because this was Hermione and she never gave up.

"Steady on there, Harry, getting cuddly with someone else's girlfriend," Ron said, his voice a mock threat. Harry grinned at him over Hermione's shoulder.

"Harry, this is different," Hermione assured him fiercely, combing his hair back with her fingers. "There are all these new precautions, you're safe, and - and everything will be all right."

"Besides," Ron added with a great air of bravado, "Like you said, you can handle yourself. You know a lot more spells now."

Harry cracked a smile. "Still no good at any of them."

Hermione almost strangled Harry with a last squeeze as she pulled away. "Things are different," she repeated, almost as if she was trying to convince herself.

Ron, Neville and Dean all administered slaps on the back with varying degrees of hearty masculinity. Draco lifted his eyebrow at him.

"She's right, you know. Things are different," he commented as the judges and the other contestants bore down upon them.

*I know. Last time you were off in a crowd of Slytherins, wearing a Potter Stinks badge.*

Harry waited for Draco to say something.

Draco smiled wickedly. "You're taller now."

"Oh, sod off and go put on another stupidly insulting badge, why don't you?"

Draco looked outraged. "They were not stupid! I spent hours making those."

"I'd guessed you did it," Harry told him. "You evil ringleader you."

"You wrong me, Potter. I only verbally abuse because I care."

He only had time to laugh incredulously when Lee Jordan took him by the elbow and started leading him off to join the other champions. Harry cast a lingering look over his shoulder as Professor McGonagall began to shoo his friends to the stands.

Draco was standing there among the Gryffindors, probably uncomfortable and openly disdainful. He looked quite definitely out of place. But he was there. Perhaps he'd already said enough.

He caught Harry's gaze and called, "Get a move on, Potter!"

Harry hid another smile as he met the other champions. The French boy was looking decidedly queasy. The Durmstrang girl gave him a shy smile.

"Good friend?" she inquired.

Hiding the smile became distinctly unsuccessful. "Yeah."

Then Harry realised that Lee Jordan was yelling to the crowd.

"- on eighty points, Harry Potter -

*"Tied in first place, on eighty-five points each - Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Harry Potter."*

Harry's mouth went dry. Smiling was no longer an issue.

\* \* \*

He went in first and alone. There was no one sharing the top spot with him this time, nobody to secretly resent and God, feel so guilty about later.

He thought that it would be worse than it was.

That was an immense relief. He thought that it would be fourth year all over again, but instead all he felt was sorry for that unsuspecting boy. He felt very far away from that child, with his head filled with optimistic daydreams about being rescued from the Dursleys. Well, nobody had ever rescued him from the Dursleys or Voldemort or anything else. He'd had to do that himself.

He'd been able to do it, though.

Harry walked onward, his eyes fixed on the shadowy pathway before him. He'd done it, swung the sword, held the wand, and he planned to do it again, so he could definitely do this. Harry lifted his head and looked around as he neared a fork in the maze. And he got the shock of his life.

Naturally since the last unfortunate incident, we have placed extensive safeguards...

*There are all these new precautions, you're safe, and - and everything will be all right.*

The high hedges on the outside of the maze had begun to blur as if they were water instead of leaves, transparent as wavy glass. Harry could see the people in their crowded stands, and they could see him, even though he couldn't see through the inner hedges of the maze.

*Dumbledore really wasn't taking any chances. And now please don't let me look a fool in front of the entire audience; Draco would never let me hear the end of it.*

He held his wand flat in the palm of his hand, whispered the spell and followed where it pointed.

There was a little gaggle of the media in the front row, cameras at the ready. How perfect, he didn't think. He'd been told that some younger students had cut out and kept that picture of him and Draco emerging from the lake.

Lee Jordan's whistle told Harry that the other two champions, who were tied, had entered the maze.

A heavy dragging sound made Harry's stomach clench in anticipation, as it told him he was about to meet one of the obstacles. He set his teeth and told himself he could do this. In the crowd, he saw Hermione and Ron's unmistakable heads, Hermione's bobbing because she was dancing on her tiptoes. Ron was waving one of the *Harry Potter Hogwarts Champion* signs Dean had made.

The creature rounded the corner, and Harry was hard put to it not to retch.

It was a vast Flobberworm, its slimy quivering body filling the passage. Folds of nauseating flesh, the same colour and texture as a worm's, almost hid its tiny black eyes. But unlike every other Flobberworm Harry had ever seen, it had a mouth, a gaping mouth filled with rows of teeth like a shark's, which snapped on mid-air as Harry jumped back.

Its small, menacing head weaved about, as if it was scenting its prey, and it began to move slowly towards Harry, the sound of heavy flesh dragging across the grass accompanied by a small, terrible hissing sound.

Harry seriously wondered if he could concede.

It snapped at him, and he jumped back, its teeth closing an inch from his shirt. Its head reminded Harry of snakes and for a moment he thought he should try to talk to it, but there was no way Dumbledore would have given him that advantage over the other students.

He stepped back, and back, as it moved towards him, unstoppable as a tsunami, until he stepped sideways and his back connected with the hedge.

Then he pointed his wand and shouted "*Impedimenta! Impedimenta!*"

The Flobberworm kept coming, as if its momentum could break any spell. Harry stared up into its tiny blank black eyes. Then suddenly it shuddered, and was still. All Harry had to do was nerve himself for the disgusting task ahead.

Trying not to touch the thing with his bare skin, Harry began to climb over it. The awful creature squealed and heaved, and Harry fell on his hands and knees. His jeans were covered with viscous ooze.

"Oh - yuck," Harry said, but he couldn't even stop to consider the utter gruesomeness of this experience because the Impediment Jinx wouldn't last forever, and he didn't want to be on top of the Flobberworm when it could move properly.

He went scrambling and slipping down the squishy flesh onto the blessedly dry ground, grimaced and ran as fast as he could away from that object.

Ugh, ugh, ugh, he couldn't believe he had actually touched that sickening, loathsome... *vision of beauty*.

Harry stopped dead. A Veela was undulating on the path in front of him, dancing, and the very grass around her bare feet was curving lovingly in towards her. Harry was not terribly well-versed in the ranks of feminine beauty, let alone demi-sex-goddess beauty, but even he could see that this was an exceptionally lovely specimen.

Her feet were beautiful, tracing patterns in the grass as if she were creating a magical circle around herself, a circle that did not keep people out but invited them in. Harry wanted to do something, to impress her, to perform great deeds for her, but at the same time all he wanted was to move closer and never do anything but watch her dance.

She seemed bathed in silver light, as if her fluid, hypnotic dance was being spotlighted and... there was something he really had to do, wasn't there, but... it was important that he keep watching, and maybe...

She tossed hair pale as Draco's over her shoulder.

"Stay here and keep me company," she sang out, her voice rich. "Don't think about anything else."

Thought. It was like cold water being thrown on him.

Harry blinked and stepped back. Oh, how *embarrassing*, the whole school was watching as he gaped like an idiot at the Veela.

He shut his eyes and clamped his hands over his ears, and attempted to get his back to the hedge and sidle past. Instead, he was stopped short by the feel of slender hands on his chest. Harry's eyes snapped open, staring into oceans of deepest blue.

"Excuse me... um, miss," he said, trying not to sound too scandalised. "I'm sure you have a great personality and everything, but I really have to be going."

"I'm so *lonely*," she purred, flowing up against him.

"Erk," Harry replied. "No thank you. It's, um, very kind of you to offer though," he added politely.

He side-stepped away from her, and left her standing there. She stopped dancing and stared after him.

"What are you doing afterwards...?" she called, sounding somewhat forlorn.

Harry sprinted. He hoped like anything that nobody had taken a picture.

The wand pointed him in the right direction for a few blessedly uneventful minutes. Harry almost relaxed as he ran through the maze. Surely nothing could be quite as bad as Slime Monsters and sirens of doom.

The obstacles in the maze this year seemed to be chosen for quality rather than quantity. Harry had a rather peaceful time for a bit, whispering '*Point me*' at intervals, walking onward.

The peace didn't relax him. The quiet seemed ominous, the silence a sign that something cunning was hunting him rather than that he was safe.

*Just be wary*, he thought to himself. *Just stay alert, remember what you have to do, don't let anything -*

Something hit him and knocked him to the ground, sending his wand flying.

- *surprise you.*

Harry twisted and turned under the sharp pricking of hooves in his back, trying to fling himself closer to his wand and coming face to face with... a lion. It panted, huge curved fangs close to Harry's face, and a tiny lick of blue flame surrounded one tooth.

Hooves. Lion. Fire.

Harry remembered, with that desperate clarity one gains in these situations, a page from one of Hermione's books.

A lion's head, a serpent's tail, a goat's body.

A chimera.

Harry gasped and reached out with one desperately scrabbling hand. His fingers closed around wood.

A moment later, he realised it was a branch from the translucent hedge. He yanked it off anyway, rolling again to get out from under the chimera and when that didn't work, shoving the stick into its throat and expecting any instant to get a blast of fire in the face. The monster snarled and snapped at Harry's face instead. One curved tooth scraped along Harry's cheek and he felt the sharp rush of blood. He pushed the stick deep into its throat, shoving it back, praying it wouldn't flame.

*I'm fighting an enormous monster with an almost invisible stick, he thought wildly. Call these safety precautions?*

The creature snarled and backed off a fraction, and Harry reached up to wipe the blood off his face.

His hand came off clean.

The animal lunged again and Harry rolled in the dirt, stabbed up with the stick, his mind working frantically all the time.

Bizarrely, he heard Uncle Vernon at the breakfast table a couple of years ago in his head, saying that the idea of reduced tax for the handicapped... was a *chimera*.

A fantasy. An illusion.

Harry pressed up into the chimera's throat with his stick, up and up until the monster tumbled backwards and it was in the dirt with Harry leaning over it.

"You can't hurt me," Harry panted. "You're not even real."

He almost fell forward as the creature collapsed in on itself, but he staggered up instead.

Breathing heavily, wiping his forehead against his sleeve, Harry stumbled forward into the next opening.

And it burst into flame.

Harry shouted out with alarm and, by pure chance, stepped forward instead of back.

He stood staring around, waiting for a panicked instant for the pain of burning or the smell of scorching clothes and hair, and then slowly realised that he was perfectly all right. There had been no surge of heat. There had been no real fire at all.

It had been an illusion, just like the chimera.

Harry drew in another deep breath, looked up and saw the Triwizard Cup, gleaming on a plinth not two feet away from him.

He blinked at it in amazement.

Surely it couldn't be over. The dread that had filled him all year over this Tournament, the second Task and all its consequences, the thoughts of Cedric last night and the terrified struggle with the monster just now... How could it be *over*?

Well - it was. There was the Cup, and all he had to do was take it and he would have one less thing to worry about.

He felt almost light with relief as he stretched out his hand to take it. He realised later that he didn't think of Cedric at all as his hand closed on one handle.

In the next second, Cedric's dead face was all he could think about because there came that familiar, sickening pull behind his navel, and the treacherous world was slipping from under his feet and he thought with cold terror, *It's happening again...*

\* \* \*

He was stronger and not injured this time; he was determined not to tumble to the ground when he landed, and he stayed on his feet despite being rocked by the impact. He kept hold of the Cup with one hand - *don't put it down, keep it with you, it could bring you back* - and took out his wand.

Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he wasn't in a graveyard after all. He was in his dormitory in Gryffindor tower, it was night time, and all the lights were out. There was not a sound or a sign of life in the entire room. Every bed was empty. Just like Seamus'.

Harry looked around wildly, took a step backwards from Ron's deserted bed. The creak of the floor beneath his foot was a hideously alarming noise, as if a sound had not been made in this room for years.

The silence hung heavy and oppressive as the darkness on the room, and Harry couldn't bear to look at those beds any longer.

He turned and ran out of the door, down the steps, into the common room, his heart pounding against his ribs and just praying that someone would be there to help, to *explain...*

It was cold and still in the common room as it had been upstairs.

There were the remnants of an old, old fire in the grate, and on Hermione's favourite chair lay her

book, *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*. It was opened at the page Harry knew she had been on last night – she was nearly finished, and could hardly be persuaded to put it down. She had apparently put it down now, though, and when Harry reached out to touch it the page was covered with a thick layer of dust.

He jumped back with a clutch of terror at his throat, as if he had reached out to touch someone's hand and found it cold and dead.

And he went utterly insane.

He did something he had never done before in his life without a thought, racing up the stairs to the girls' dormitory and running inside.

Nothing. Absolute quiet, and dust on a large ornamental butterfly he remembered Parvati had always loved to wear in her hair. The quick horrified breath he let out was the only noise in the world, and then he was running away from this room as well, back down to the common room and over to the Fat Lady's portrait and...

There she was, pink and plump under a layer of dust, as if a picture could die and become a ghost.

"Wh-what happened to everyone?" Harry stammered out, his voice shocking in the hushed room.

"I don't know what you mean," the Fat Lady answered. "Certainly there's a bit less coming and going of late... but..."

She paused, a faint look of distress on her face. The dust on her portrait suggested that she had not swung open for years.

"Never mind that," she said sternly. "The password, if *you* please."

"Um... Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," Harry told her.

*Let me out of here.* His throat was dry with dread.

"Quite right," said the Fat Lady. "Though really, I think it's time you all changed it..."

She swung open, her hinges screaming out loud. The scream echoed hopelessly in the darkened corridor beyond.

Harry ran out into it, hurled himself down the marble stairs and into the Entrance Hall and he was just about to run down to the Slytherin dungeons when another burst of panic exploded in his chest. He backed into a wall, leaning against it and staring up at the ceiling.

His breaths were ragged and desperate in his ears. There were cobwebs on the ceiling, and he really believed that they were all gone, because he was scared of seeing Draco's room empty too.

The horror had come home to him, and his home had been taken away from him. Even Hogwarts wasn't safe. Even Hogwarts and the people he loved had been destroyed, and he hadn't been able to protect them.



When Harry heard the sound of plate chinking against plate coming from the Great Hall, he almost shouted aloud. And he was fighting down hysterical hope and fear as he pushed open the doors.

The house elves were setting up for dinner, spreading a sumptuous feast before chairs empty and thick with dust. The smell of hot food made Harry want to be violently sick. An elf looked over at him, and gave a squeak of glee.

"One of the masters is come back!"

Immediately all the elves looked up, and fastened their hands on Harry's clothes, trying to drag him to the Gryffindor table. The feel of their thin, grasping hands through his clothes made him want to vomit more than ever.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Winky stared at him blankly with her huge, rather horrible eyes. "Our last orders was to make dinner, Harry Potter. We has been making dinner for an awfully long time. We is very glad to see you. We hopes you is hungry."

"Let me *go*!"

Harry didn't remember, afterwards, whether he kicked them out of his way. To do something like that - to be someone like that - would remind him too much of Lucius Malfoy, and he never wanted to remember him.

He was desperate to get away, even if it was only to race up the steps again and try to make his way to Dumbledore's office. He was on the second floor before the thought struck him that Dumbledore was just as certainly gone, and he was gazing into the stone gargoyle's eyes and laughing softly, hysterically, as he wondered whether Fawkes was still waiting there for the people to come back. Just like the Fat Lady. Just like the house elves.

He had not spoken a word when the gargoyle sprang aside and the staircase lowered itself down to the ground in a slow, sliding motion.

Harry was past the point of surprise, and enough past fear to only be dimly aware that he was feeling it. So it was only with a distant sort of terror that he saw a huge snake winding down the staircase, with just the same gradual glide of the moving staircase itself. He recognised Nagini at once - he had often seen her in dreams.

It wasn't until he heard the step on the stairs behind the snake that he remembered terror. He stood waiting, his wand and the Cup still dangling uselessly from his hand. The staircase met the ground.

Voldemort stood high on the stairs, that pale narrow face pitiless as Harry remembered. His red eyes narrowed as they saw Harry, and Harry was alone and all his friends were gone already, and there was nothing left to fight for.

"Now, I think," he said, "you will bow for me without any further persuasion."

Harry stared at him for a long still moment.

"Why should I?" he asked slowly. "*You bastard.*"

In that long, calm moment, Harry thought - even Time Turners don't take you into the future. It can't be night time. That dust on everything is impossible.

It's all impossible. It's like the chimera, like the fire, it's...

"You're not even real!"

Voldemort didn't disappear, but began to walk down the stairs.

*It's not enough*, Harry thought desperately. *I have to do something more, like the stick, like stepping through the flame...*

And it was, quite simply, hopeless. There was nothing he could do against Voldemort.

But he wasn't going to run away.

He stood there, trembling, as Voldemort swept down the remaining steps. He didn't flinch as he looked into that inhuman face and he raised his wand as Voldemort raised his, and Harry thought, quite distinctly, *I've failed everyone.*

Voldemort opened his mouth, and Harry tried to think of a spell to scream. And...

Then he found himself in daylight again, the illusion melting away as if he had never seen it. The cup in his hand had melted too, and the real Cup stood glimmering on its plinth before him. He reached out... and he was standing outside the maze.

He had won the Triwizard Tournament, and it was all over.

Harry stood in the light, blinking up at Dumbledore, whose face was grave. He didn't have time to ask what he should have done, or how he could have known, or what he felt he should have done - to win something more than the Tournament.

Dumbledore stood aside, and the snapping lights of the cameras and the euphoric rush of his friends towards him obscured everything else.

Ron's hands closed on his shoulders.

"Harry! You just disappeared... We were going mad. Are you all right?"

Harry blinked up at Ron, who was so pale his freckles seemed to be on fire. He remembered, vivid as those freckles, every bed in the dormitory being empty.

"I'm fine," he said slowly.

Sirius and Lupin were having an agitated conversation with Dumbledore. Hermione was trying to push her way through the crowd, her questioning voice too thin to reach Dumbledore's ears.

"Sir! Sir, was... making him disappear *really* necessary...?"

Neville's round face was bright as he looked at Harry over Ron's shoulder. His expression was distressingly reminiscent of Colin Creevey's.

"That was marvellous, Harry," he said in heartfelt tones.

"For Heaven's sake, Longbottom, you're not complimenting him on a sexual exploit."

The vicious drawl made Harry aware that something was wrong even as he turned to look at Draco, his smile fading before it had begun. Like a snake swallowing its own tail. Like a snake.

Draco was standing apart from the immediate crush around Harry, the very way he stood generating space around him. His lip was disdainfully curled and his eyes were cold.

"Congratulations, Potter," he said. "Another stunning display of reckless stupidity. Well *done*."

Then he turned and stalked off.

"What a bastard!" Ron exploded. "Don't listen to him, Harry. He's jealous - he's always been jealous of you."

Ginny's dark eyes were very wide.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry disengaged himself from Ron, staring after Draco. His mind was blank of everything except shock and the pressing need to find out what Draco thought he was doing. He was still holding the Cup, he realised absently, and pushed it in Ron's direction. Ron let go of Harry's shoulders to take it.

"Just - hold that for me a minute, would you?" Harry asked, moving past them all. He'd find Draco and he'd bring him back. It was that simple, and he didn't have attention to spare for the hands trying to detain him as he passed.

He just doggedly went after Draco, who was already away from the Quidditch pitch and accelerating over the slope beyond, out of sight. He seemed to be heading for the Forbidden Forest. He must *really* not want to be followed.

The rain began to fall, tiny near-invisible needle-points, and Harry felt small stabs of annoyance and worry with the cool pelt of rain on his face. What had he done, and why was Draco acting like this, and *damn* it, he was tired and he'd been scared out of his mind, and he'd been looking forward to - to a bit of peace, and maybe for Draco to look pleased or relieved, instead of this!

He focused on that pale head and just ran, because Draco didn't know anyone was following him and he was only stalking onward, and it was the easiest thing in the world to hurl himself forward as they entered the shelter of the trees, and grab Draco's elbow, and yank him around and *yell*.

"What the hell was all that about, Malfoy?"

Draco's face was white and narrow and implacable, and the rain on his face looked like anything but tears.

"I was congratulating you, Potter," Draco answered calmly. "Brilliant exhibition of near-suicidal idiocy. Some of your best work yet, I'd say. Who knows what heights you may achieve? Now that you've received my homage, you'd best get back to the fan club. They're probably pining away without you."

Harry glared at him. Draco stared unforgivingly back.

"Why don't you stop acting like such a prat," Harry suggested, his voice low and heated.

"Why don't you stop *being* such a prat?" Draco demanded in a cool, almost conversational and altogether contemptuous tone.

He tried to pull his sleeve out of Harry's grip, but Harry grabbed his shoulder instead. Harry saw the curl of his mouth and tried to remember what person he hated had just this expression, and then realised it was Malfoy.

The old Malfoy, *just* like him, and Harry felt a bizarre urge to hit him and the only reason he didn't was because why would the old Malfoy have cared if his idiocy had been near-suicidal?

"Why don't you stop insulting me for just one second and *tell me what I did!*" Harry exploded. "I only did what I had to do, I don't understand why you're mad, so why don't you stop all this rubbish and tell me!"

"What you did?" Draco snapped. "You were trying to fight that chimera with a stick!"

"Listen, I had to, there was nothing else and I didn't have time to think -"

"Think?" Draco's voice was thin with outrage. "Do you never think about -"

"I think about you all the time!" Harry shouted.

They stood glaring at each other in the cold glitter of rain, breathing in shallow, furious synchronisation. Draco's shoulder under Harry's hand rose and fell with his chest in sharp, fast breaths.

Draco's mouth was an uncompromising line.

"You're a reckless fool," he said flatly.

"I don't know what -"

"Look, it's got to stop, all right?" Draco snapped. "It's got to stop, all of this running around trying to be the hero and save us all, I can see you thinking about it. You can't fight monsters on your own."

"I'm not - I don't - God, Draco, is *that* what you're so worked up about?"

Draco, who seemed to find it so easy to glare, stared at the ground.

"I don't know what -"

Harry felt the sudden calm he had felt entering the maze.

"Draco. Draco, *look* at me." He didn't, and Harry jerked his chin upwards. Instantly Draco was glaring again, eyes wide at the indignity. "It's all right if you were worried about me," Harry said softly.

"What are you going on about, Potter," Draco said in a voice that lacked conviction. Only Harry's hand kept him from turning his face away.

The rain always made Draco's hair a little bit static. Harry didn't mention that it was slightly fluffy, since Draco had enough on his mind.

"It's okay to be worried," he said. "I know you're not used to it."

"Are you delusional, Potter?" Draco demanded. "I'm worried all the time. The whole school is living in terror. My Slytherins aren't safe, I don't know what I'm supposed to do to protect them -"

"And that's your problem!" Harry shouted. "You're used to protecting people by ordering them around and being stronger than everyone else. That's why you're acting like an idiot, because you're not used to seeing someone you care about in danger you can't do anything about!"

"So *what?*" Draco shouted back. "You're just the same! You're worse!"

Harry thought of everyone being gone, of the sharp feeling that he had failed them all.

"I know," he said in a subdued voice. "That's why I understand."

Draco looked up at Harry, of his own accord this time, and bit the side of his lip. Then he took Harry's hand, removing it gently from his face, and let it fall.

"I'm not going to be anything less than you, Draco," Harry said, folding his arms. "You can't order *me* around."

"Well, I'm not going to be anything less than you, Harry," Draco returned sharply. "I don't want to hear any more rubbish about me not signing up for dangerous posts."

"That's not - I was just trying to -" Harry exhaled hard. "All right. I'm sorry."

Draco nodded. "I'm sorry if I was - a bit of a prat back there. Not that you weren't being a suicidal idiot, of course. You should have stayed there nice and cosy with that Veela." He brightened. "Actually, I think she was a bit taken with you. You could -"

Harry couldn't help laughing.

"You're impossible."

Draco smiled brilliantly back, and he lifted his hand to touch Harry's face. Harry felt the cool pressure of wet fingertips drawn along his cheekbone.

He looked at Draco, and thought of the burst of panic in his chest when he couldn't stand even to go and look at his empty room.

Draco drew his hand back, and examined his fingers.

"You're filthy," he remarked. Harry caught his wrist.

"Come back," he said. "I have this whole presentation thing to sort out."

"Oh, my God!" Draco exclaimed, looking appalled. "Of course you do! There's a ceremony! There's *money*. You complete pillock, what do you mean by running all over the place like this?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco didn't even have the decency to look abashed.

"Come back," he repeated, and Draco let Harry pull him back to the Quidditch pitch.

Ginny gave Harry a bright welcoming smile as they returned. Ron gave him a distraught look, barely able to spare a sneer for Draco.

"Harry, *please* take this back," he said, pushing the Cup into Harry's free hand. "The money's supposed to be put in it, and then Fudge is supposed to give you back the Cup in this ceremony. There's a speech and everything. People kept trying to take pictures of it, I was going mental..."

To illustrate Ron's words, an army of photographers were bearing down upon them. Ron backed hastily away towards Hermione. Harry remembered that he was hurt and filthy, and wished Hagrid was nearby to hide behind.

"Oh no," he said quietly.

"They can take pictures of me if they like," Draco announced complacently. "I'm pretty."

Fudge came bustling over them, the self-confidence which had noticeably eroded since the disappearances apparently restored for this special occasion. He had the sack of money in his hands, and he beamed at Harry. Harry studied him with cool distrust. He didn't seem to notice.

"Honestly, Harry, where *did* you get to?" he inquired. "Here, take this and put it in the Cup... You'll say a few words, won't you?" he added, as Harry dropped Draco's wrist to take the money.

"Er," Harry answered, staring. "A speech?"

"I suggest you take that Veela onstage with you, and get her to take off her dress," Draco proposed. "That'll distract everyone nicely. Or you could take off your own shirt. Let's face it, these photographers are clearly desperate for every inch of you."

"Thank you, Draco," Harry said out of the corner of his mouth. "Do you have any suggestions not involving public indecency?"

"Me?" Draco said, scandalised. "Never!"

"You should be on the stage in a few minutes, Harry," Fudge told him. "Just hold onto the Cup for another second - I need to fetch the notes for *my* speech..."

He hurried off. Harry stared after him, looking desperately into the clicking cameras and the golden inside of the Cup. He was already limp with exhaustion and pain. He glanced over at Draco, made his decision, and smiled.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "Let's go."

"What?"

Harry dropped the money and seized Draco's wrist again. Draco looked shocked and reached down to scoop it up.

"Never, ever drop money to grab a person!" he admonished sternly. "You can buy people with money!"

"How about you?" Harry suggested. "Come on. I want to go."

"Certainly not me," Draco said severely. "I rate special. Where precisely do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Anywhere. Not here. With you."

Draco looked almost awed. "You mean it. You *are* crazy."

Harry smiled recklessly. It had all been an illusion, the Tournament was over, and he was damned if he was making a speech. He turned and kept hold of Draco, who laughed and came willingly with him.

"I don't believe you dragged me all the way back there to leave again."

"Oh, but that's different," Harry said confidently, as the gasps began behind them. He began to walk more rapidly up the slope. "By the way, Draco... are you free this Saturday?"

"I expect so," Draco replied cautiously. "Why?"

"I have a present for you," Harry answered, doing his best to sound careless. Draco looked delighted.

"A present? What for? Why can't I have it now? What is it? Is it shiny? Give me a clue."

Harry cast a look over his shoulder. "Draco?"

"Yes?" said Draco, whose mind was clearly occupied by the prospect of a present.

"Run, would you?"

The rain still fell lightly down on them, and laughing for some reason, they raced down the hill with

a pack of photographers in hot pursuit.



# Chapter Eleven: When It Darkens

*I looked into your eyes  
They told me plenty I already knew  
I never let myself believe that you might stray  
And I would stand by you no matter what they say  
I thought, I'll be with you until my dying day*

It was Friday morning, four days after the end of the Tournament, and Harry had just woken up with his scar burning.

It burned often these days, as Voldemort's power rose. He had learned to accept it.

He hadn't learned not to hate it.

With the worry of the Tournament over, if he looked away from Seamus' bed he could almost pretend Quidditch was all he had to worry about. Why did this pain have to come now?

"Harry."

He turned to the sound of Ron's voice, and felt a sudden, stupid flash of fear, as if Ron would see the scar and think it was the mark of a murderer.

Ron smiled, faintly, in a concerned way. Harry smiled back to show he was all right, and the smile became more genuine when he saw Ron's pyjamas.

Ron was tall enough now to wear the pyjamas Bill had worn at his age, and there was a picture of red, pouting lips on the pocket over his heart Harry always teased him about. And by some Ron law of physics, the pyjama trousers were too short - though Harry was pretty sure he and Bill were the same size.

"You okay?" Ron asked, sitting on the bed.

Harry pulled his legs up to his chest to make room for Ron, glad for the distraction.

"I - yeah. It happens often enough."

*And every time makes me think we have to crush him more and more. Makes me more determined to kill the bastard.*

"Is it worse, knowing when You-Know-Who's angry?" Ron spoke suddenly, as if he was almost afraid to say it. "I sometimes think it's - not knowing that's the worst thing. I hate mysteries. I hate everything that's -" He made a face. "Creepy."

"I don't know," Harry said wearily. "I've always had this, remember?" He paused. "I expect they're both bad."

"Yeah." Ron hauled himself further up onto the bed, knocking against the bedstead and wincing.

"D'you want to know something? It'll sound a bit mental."

Harry nodded.

"You know the awful way Neville snores? Sometimes I listen really hard for it, because it lets me know that someone's still there. Sometimes I can't sleep without it."

They both paused for a minute, and listened to the drone of Neville's snore. It was a dreadful sound, and they exchanged a small grin.

"I don't think it sounds mental," Harry said. "This is all so bad... you take comfort where you can get it."

"Yeah..." Ron squared his jaw. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that. That's why, you know."

"Why what?" Harry asked.

"Why I haven't strangled Malfoy and buried him in a shallow grave to stop you fraternising with the enemy."

"He's not the enemy," Harry said sharply.

"Obviously you don't think so, Harry. But I still hate the git. He's always been the enemy -" Ron scowled. "The smarmy, evil-minded little ponce only stops running off at the mouth to fuss over his hair. But - okay, I know for some reason you like him now." Ron grimaced as he said that, as if he wanted to wash out his mouth.

"He's not like you think," Harry said. "Well. I mean, he does fuss over his hair."

See? Ron's expression said. *Evil*.

"And sometimes he's a bit poncy. And all right, yes, he doesn't know when to stop talking. But..." Harry stopped. "I care about him," he said quietly. "I care about him a lot."

"Um. Yeah, I can see that," Ron said. "I'm not completely thick, you know. I saw you two running like escaped jailbirds from the Tournament." He shook his head. "Honestly, Harry, what did you think you were doing?"

"It almost worked," he protested.

"Harry, they caught you at the foot of the hill, and then that prat tried to tell them you were having an affair with Professor Trelawney."

"It could have worked," Harry said defensively.

"Prat," Ron repeated. "And for the record, I think you'd at least rate Professor Sinistra."

"Ron," Harry said, suppressing a grin. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, well... the point is... things *are* bad, like you said. And we all need things to make it better. If he's helping you - if you trust him - I don't want to take that away from you."

Harry stared at Ron's open face.

Ron scowled. "I still hate it, though. *And him,*" he added, just to make things clear. "You might trust him, but I don't think you should. If things were just a little better, I'd scalp him and hang his stupid hair outside the Gryffindor entrance. And if he's not as good a friend as is possible in his slimy Slytherin way, I'll still scalp him."

Harry bit back a smile. "Ron."

Ron looked at him.

"I... You're my best friend. You know that."

"I should hope so," Ron said. "Otherwise I really would have to kill Malfoy."

"Is this a private slumber party, or can anyone join in?"

Dean's dark eyes were grave and smiling at once, and Harry would never have turned him away. But he would never even have dreamed of it now, when Dean's best friend was not there.

"*Anyone* can't join in," he said. "But you're welcome."

Dean climbed onto the bed, nudging Ron to get more space. "So, what're we talking about?"

"The Tournament," Harry answered.

"Ah." Dean grinned. "That's one thing off your back now, at any rate. Though I must say that when you disappeared it gave us all a scare."

"It wasn't great for me either," Harry replied.

He didn't want to think about it, hadn't wanted to talk about it. The little he had said had made Sirius go white with fury and rush to bite Dumbledore's head off. Dumbledore had said that it was necessary and Harry would understand later.

Harry wished he understood *now*.

"Ginny was in tears," Dean continued softly.

"Hermione was going spare too," added Ron.

"I think everyone was terrified," Dean said. "You know how it is these days. Not even Hogwarts is safe. We've got this spy."

The word, *spy*, pressed the curtains in heavily around them all. Harry couldn't remember anybody ever saying it in the Gryffindor dormitories before. He saw the faces around him grow grim. They

huddled in together.

"It'll be all right," Harry told them, because someone had to say it.

"We have to find out who it is," Dean replied quietly. "We have to have at least one place where we can be safe. Then things might start to be all right."

\* \* \*

It was day now, and lunchtime.

"Come on, Harry."

"Why should I?"

"I *really* want you to."

"Maybe if you beg."

"I'm considering it."

Harry smiled. "On your knees, Malfoy."

Draco tilted his head and gave him a winning smile back. "Does that mean you will?"

"I... have to be looking at a picture of a snake," Harry temporised.

Draco rolled his eyes at him. "Pathetic excuse, Potter. I have a snake on my prefect badge. Look at it, and say something in Parseltongue this minute. I only heard it once, and I want to hear it again!"

"Don't be a brat," Harry said absently. "What would I even say?"

Draco considered. "You could say 'Draco is the supreme ruler of everything, and has perfect cheekbones'."

Harry focused on the badge pinned to Draco's chest. The snake was just a flat green outline against a silver background, but he could see the flickering forked tongue.

"Draco is a complete idiot some days, and I think he may be in love with his mirror."

The heavy hiss hung on the air.

"Hey!" Draco said.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You don't even know what I said."

"No. But I know *you*, twit." Draco indulged himself in a smirk before he continued. "And *that* was great," he told Harry appreciatively. "You should do it more often. I bet Morag would be impressed."

"Draco Malfoy, if you don't shut up about this Morag girl -"

Draco's cool glance swept around the courtyard where they were walking and keeping to the covered walkways because of the chill in the open air.

"Well. If you're not into the Slytherin action, you might like to know that your cutest stalker is still very much in evidence."

Harry looked around and saw a glimpse of bright hair.

"Do you mean Ginny?"

Draco's lip curled. "I certainly didn't mean Creevey, did I? There she is, large as life and twice as infatuated. Lucky you're not the cheating type; six vengeful older brothers would be a worrying prospect. And it's fun to be adored."

"Draco. Do you remember us talking about you not being able to look after me? That includes not being allowed to fix me up."

He was certain Ginny was just out for a walk. Yes, she'd had a bit of a crush on him ever since they were all kids, and the crush had clearly lingered enough for her to have kissed him back that time - and yes, all right, maybe she *would* like to go out with him, but he wasn't interested and she couldn't be that serious.

Draco looked injured.

"I'm just trying to help you on the road to happiness."

"I am happy just now, thanks very much."

"You could be happier," Draco persisted. "There's this tongue thing I taught Morag to do - it's a long story about a nightclub and lemons -"

"Draco!"

Draco's head snapped up. Harry had noticed he could always tell when Harry was serious.

"Just stop it, all right? I don't like to hear about that kind of thing. You're better than that."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "You're idiotic some days, Harry. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But you have to put up with me for the next hour. You promised to leave your damned project alone if I told you the full story about the Chamber of Secrets. You're mine."

Draco smiled. "Far be it from me to go back on a bargain. Though I'm still not sure about this Chamber affair."

Harry nudged him for a brief mock-indignant exchange of glances.

"Would I lie to you?"

"Would I accuse you? It's just the whole pulling a sword from a hat business. You pull *rabbits* from

hats."

"I don't think I'd have fancied trying to kill a basilisk with a rabbit."

"Oh, but I would love to see you try it. Imagine it. Imagine the photos." Draco went into a quick but energetic roleplay. "The brave hero brandishes his fluffy and whimpering pet of doom. 'Back, back, foul serpent!' Thwack! Distressed squeak. Th-"

Harry reached out and grabbed him, pulling him back into step with Harry by his sleeve.

"You're *such* a drama queen sometimes, Malfoy."

"How dare you! Nobody understands my artistic temperament."

Harry just shook his head, amused. Draco sulked for a moment, then appeared to cheer up and began to sing under his breath, probably to prove his artistic temperament. Or possibly to annoy Harry.

He was always singing this song. It was an old Weird Sisters one, and Harry recalled that Draco had always seemed fond of it.

The one time in sixth year that his dormitory mates (especially Seamus, but don't think about that) had dragged Harry down to the club in Hogsmeade, Harry had spent the night staring into his Butterbeer as every Weird Sister song played. He had loathed every one of them as he sat there, trying not to watch Ron and Hermione, or Seamus and Lavender who had been together at the time...

And he'd loathed this one most of all, because when it started the Slytherins had all spilled in from the bar in a huge rush of barely covered bodies, and really the Slytherins had never needed their own monthly club night to get drunk and be shocking en masse. Harry recalled being distinctly taken aback that not only were the girls' robes very low cut, but Zabini and - Malfoy, then - were both wearing too little. Zabini's robes seemed to be made of dragonhide and were slit down his chest, and Malfoy's had no sleeves. Harry'd thought *Typical* and scowled into his Butterbeer as half the Slytherins began enthusiastically shouting the words.

The inside of Malfoy's mouth had been painted black and shocking pink by neon light and shadows.

Harry had thought it was a terrible song.

"Nobody to dance with, Potter? How extremely unsurprising."

He'd recognised the slow, delightedly malicious voice before he looked up. Malfoy, suddenly at his elbow as if placed there by an evil fate.

Clearly drunk and sweaty from the crush, and Harry could smell the sharp mingled scents as Malfoy leaned in to look at Harry's drink and give a yelp of scornful laughter.

"*Butterbeer*? I see we're competing with Longbottom for the coveted title of Most Pathetic Student this year. Go on, Potter, you can do it. I believe in you!"

Harry had shoved him viciously back. "Get away from me, Malfoy."

He'd tried very hard to think of what terrible thing he could have done to be punished for it with Malfoy.

Harry had been saved by Zabini, of all people, walking up behind Malfoy and touching Malfoy's hip for an instant. Even back then, he'd seen that Zabini was unwarrantedly grabby.

"Aren't you dancing, Draco? This is your song."

Malfoy's alcohol-bright eyes had glittered as they left Harry's. "Of course I'm dancing," he'd replied.

Harry had left. He had no desire to be mocked any further, or to see perverted Slytherins writhing all together on the dance floor.

Oh, he'd hated the song then.

He didn't mind it so much now.

He realised he'd been humming along when Draco arched his eyebrow at him.

"You could sing too," Draco proposed.

"No thanks," Harry returned. "I don't sing, any more than I dance."

"Doesn't sing. Doesn't dance. All he can do, ladies and gentlemen, is kill monsters with bunnies."

"I don't -" Harry paused and laughed. "I can do a lot more than that."

"And speak very cool snake language," Draco added. "I'll give you that."

Harry paused and shivered. He could remember Tom Riddle, speaking the same tongue, and the thrill of disgust when Dumbledore told him: *he transferred some of his own powers to you...* He wouldn't have spoken Parseltongue again, if it had been anybody but Draco asking, and if he hadn't felt - guilty.

Because he had lured Draco out of his room under false pretences, of course. He had not told Draco the whole story of the Chamber of Secrets. He had left out the present day villain, the man who had slipped doom to an innocent girl.

He wanted to *protect* Draco, and it didn't matter anymore. So he left Lucius Malfoy's name out, and surely wanting to protect Draco was nothing to feel guilty about. He still did, though, and he shivered again.

"For God's sake, Harry, you're freezing," Draco remarked. "Why didn't you find some gloves, you great lummo?"

He gave Harry a critical look, and then reached over and knotted Harry's scarf more securely around his neck. And yes, it must be cold, because Draco's breath was oddly warm against Harry's cheek.

"Honestly, the last cold snap of the year," Draco said grouchily. "What kind of sadist organises the last cold snap of the year to happen in *May*?"

"Draco," Harry told him, "I don't think anyone organises these things."

Draco stuck out his lower lip. "It could be retribution for past misdeeds by cruel fate."

"Then you're lucky it's not snowing."

Draco made a hideous face at him, crossing his eyes under the fringe his woollen hat flattened against his forehead.

"At least I am wearing an appropriate hat and gloves," he said in tones of deep satisfaction. It was so like Draco to have a hat and gloves made to match his Slytherin scarf. It appalled him to see people compromising with any old gloves, and Harry'd noticed he took every opportunity to peacock around in them.

Harry suddenly recalled the last time it had snowed, just before Christmas. He'd been walking around with Ron and Hermione, trying to ignore them teasing each other about mistletoe, and he'd vaguely noticed Malfoy's hat and gloves in a you-vain-bastard way.

At that point Terry Boot had sidled behind Malfoy and wrestled a snowball down his neck. Malfoy had ended up sitting on the snow, looking comically outraged and trying not to laugh. Harry remembered being rather startled at his apparent lack of rancour.

He'd been glaring up at Terry Boot, and there had been snowflakes stuck in his eyelashes.

Then of course he'd leaped up to wreak snowy vengeance, and some Ravenclaws had jumped to their Head Boy's defence, and Harry had led the Gryffindors to supply the difference.

It had ended up being viciously Gryffindor/Slytherin as everything seemed to end up at Hogwarts, with Crabbe and Goyle throwing snow-covered rocks and Pansy using her knee in defence of Malfoy and in a most unladylike fashion, and leaving Ron fallen on the snow.

"Be grateful, Granger," Malfoy had panted. "If it'd been Millicent, you'd be going out with a eunuch about now." He'd smirked. "Which would be terribly amusing -"

Snape and McGonagall had eventually come striding down the snowy hill from the school to deal out detentions and pull the worst offenders apart.

"Potter, get up *this instant!* I am absolutely appalled by your behaviour - have you been *rolling* in the snow? Go upstairs and change immediately."

"Malfoy, when are you going to outgrow this puerile impulse to - what on earth happened to your mouth?"

"Potter tried to force-feed me *ice!*"

"Malfoy *started* the whole thing!" Harry snarled.



Snape prudently placed a restraining hand on Malfoy's shoulder. Malfoy was chastened enough by the presence of his favourite teacher to settle for sneering at Harry behind McGonagall's back.

Harry had glared at Malfoy, whose stupid hat was askew and whose mouth was red, and thought that he was the most hateful person in the entire world.

"Do I have something on my mouth?"

Harry blinked. "No. I was just thinking of Christmastime and, um -"

Draco threw his head back and laughed. "And you trying to stuff ice into my mouth, I remember. You vicious little bugger. I was going through a difficult emotional time around then, you know."

"Yes, well..." He remembered something Draco had said back in the lake. "We hardly did show-and-tell about our feelings, Malfoy."

Draco smiled brightly, and Harry knew he recognised the words.

Parvati and Lavender emerged from a door and, pausing only to exchange a few words with Ginny, waved and began to walk over to them.

Harry fervently wished they would go away. Between classes and homework and Young Order and Council meetings and all the new restrictions, he hardly got to see Draco these days and quite frankly, the intrusion was entirely unwelcome.

"Hi Harry," said Lavender, who was pink from the cold.

"Nice hat, Malfoy," remarked Parvati, putting a hand on her hip and lifting her eyebrow. She was very poised, and had always been good company, and Harry wanted her to leave this instant.

"I know," Draco replied with great satisfaction. "That's why Ginny Weasley is lurking over there, of course. She is hoping that I will perform a daring striptease, leaving only my hat in place. Born to be porn, that's me."

Parvati and Lavender both laughed.

"So what were you two discussing so intently before we arrived?" Parvati inquired archly.

Draco frowned. "Mainly beating reptiles with small cuddly animals, I believe."

Lavender looked rather alarmed.

Draco smiled charmingly. "And dancing. Harry here can't sing or dance. Isn't it appalling?"

Parvati smiled back. "I do recall having to lead during our first Yule Ball..."

"I was fourteen!" Harry protested.

"Of course you were," Draco said, releasing his hands. "And we cannot all be born with the natural grace of -" he waved vaguely towards Parvati, then changed his mind and pointed to himself. "-

yours truly."

"I've seen you out clubbing," Parvati commented. "I know what you think is dancing."

"So you're saying it's not natural grace so much as natural depravity," Harry suggested, automatically dodging before Draco aimed the blow.

"You have no faith in me," Draco observed disapprovingly. "Fine then. I'm picking up your gauntlet."

He pulled his right glove off with his teeth, and then pulled off the left, and tossed them over his shoulder.

"Come on then," he said, tossing his scarf over his shoulder too. "Put your money where your mouth is, Patil."

He seized her hand and pulled her out into the courtyard, ignoring her startled sound as he spun her off the walkway and into his arms. Then he bent her backwards over his arm. He looked up at Harry and flashed him a smile.

"Who says I can't dance *now*?"

Harry never had time to respond, because Padma Patil came running out of another door and towards them.

Harry remembered for a long time the Patil twins' faces in that moment, those born mirrors reflecting such different things. Parvati was flushed and smiling, innocent and excited, and Padma's face was white and drawn, her eyes huge with horror.

"Everyone come quickly," she said, all the emotion crushed out of her voice. "We need you all in the Young Order room. Now."

\* \* \*

The Order around the table weren't chatting as they usually did at the beginning of a meeting. They were staring at Lupin in a kind of hushed terror. Neville had gone ashy pale, and Harry tried to send him a reassuring smile. He was already holding one of Hermione's and one of Ginny's hands - Ginny looked as if she was about to cry.

He didn't think the smile was very convincing. Professor Lupin, who had always had a warm glance for them, was looking grave.

Everyone was drawing together around the table, in four tight clusters. The tightest cluster, and the furthest from the others, were the Slytherins. But it had always been that way.

Harry hadn't always cared that it was that way.

They waited, and finally Lupin spoke. His eyes were on the table, and his voice was low and formal.

"Miss Granger and Mr. Boot were assigned to the research division of our team," he said. "They

were looking into the old magic that Professor Dumbledore invoked in several cases to protect places." Lupin's eyes flickered momentarily to Harry. "There was an idea that a secure room could be set up in Hogwarts where students could go at an alarm, and be safe. It was progressing - very satisfactorily. And this morning, it was discovered with all the preliminary wards broken down and the plans stolen."

Lupin lifted his eyes slightly.

Hermione's grip almost broke Harry's hand.

"The spy in Hogwarts has proceeded to outright sabotage. One of our best hopes has been taken from us, and a great deal of work and magic has been wasted. We *have* to find out who knew - and I have to admit I did. Miss Granger, during difficulties with her spellwork, consulted me and I consulted several members of the staff on the matter."

Lupin paused. Harry hated the war most at these moments, when the adults he relied on looked so old and worn.

"I am content to be under suspicion," he said. A murmur of protest rose, and he held up a hand. "But I must insist that Miss Granger and Mr. Boot inform us of any other possible leaks in security. We must have a complete list of suspects."

Harry looked over at Hermione as she spoke, her eyes too large for her suddenly pinched face.

"I told Ron," she said softly. "And I told - I told Ginny. She was scared and I thought I could reassure her."

"Mr. Boot?" asked Lupin, not commenting.

Terry Boot's eyes were hidden by his reading glasses, which might have been why he was wearing them.

"I told Padma and Mandy," he said. "We - worked in a group on all of our projects. We did research on them together."

"Is that everyone?"

Slowly, Hermione and Terry both nodded.

"No," said a cold crisp voice, and every head spun to the centre of the Slytherin cluster. "I knew," Draco continued, his face untouched by emotion. "Boot told me while we were guarding the front gate. I helped him with a tricky part of the spell."

There was just a single moment of stillness. Harry looked at Draco's calm eyes.

Pandemonium broke loose.

People were jumping up, yelling, turning their heads and holding frenzied conversations with their neighbours. And almost imperceptibly, so naturally, backs were turned on the Slytherins.

"I didn't say because I knew people would think it was him," Terry Boot snapped. "And it wasn't."

"I think that's highly unlikely," returned Padma Patil, her gaze cold and fixed on Draco.

"*Unlikely?*" Ron yelled, and he was on his feet. "It was him! You only have to look at him to know it was him! He should be sent to bloody Azkaban this minute -"

Crabbe and Goyle both cracked their knuckles, but it was Pansy Parkinson who tried to dive across the table.

"I'll kill you for that, Weasley!"

"Grab her, Goyle," Draco ordered.

Pansy twisted furiously in Goyle's grip.

"I'll kill you!"

"Obviously his *girlfriend* would say that -"

"Shut your stupid mouth!"

And Hermione let go of Harry's hand and was on her feet. Her eyes were flashing and there were two dark spots of colour on her cheeks.

"Don't you dare talk to Ron that way," she said icily. "How dare Malfoy come creeping in here pretending to be on our side, casting suspicion on people like Professor Lupin. We should never have believed you at all - *any* of you."

"*Sit down, Hermione.*"

Hermione stared at him, and Harry realised through the cold, tightly coiled ball of panic and fury in his chest that he had spoken.

Hardly anybody noticed. People were too busy screaming, demanding, moving slightly to get further away from the Slytherins. Ron and Pansy were shouting obscenities at each other, and Pansy was trying to bite Goyle to get away from him. Blaise Zabini was speaking in chill tones to Padma. Crabbe was staring with heavy menace at some Hufflepuffs, who had gone dead quiet. Almost every Slytherin was vehemently attacking somebody.

But Draco was watching him thoughtfully, and Hermione's shocked eyes were fixed on his face.

"Harry, there can't be a doubt of it any more," she whispered. "Harry, this is *crazy*..."

"He didn't do it," Harry said.

Ginny was trembling violently. He didn't care.

"Silence, please," Lupin said, and Harry looked at him with a sort of desperate hope. *Fix it, tell them, Draco trusts you, tell them that - that...*

The voices died reluctantly down.

"Aren't you going to state your innocence, Mr Malfoy?" Lupin asked quietly.

Draco surveyed the Young Order with a twist to his lip that was either bitter or mocking.

"I never waste my breath."

\* \* \*

*"Finders keepers."*

Harry almost snarled the password Draco had given him at that blank, staring, infuriating stone wall, and he shoved the stone itself as he went in because it wouldn't open fast enough. The Slytherins in the common room didn't question or even sneer at him as he stormed past. He banged open the door to Draco's room, and strode inside.

Draco was lying back against the pillows on his bed, studying a book. He laid it down and then looked over at Harry.

"Oh. It's you," he said.

Two sharp steps took him to the side of the bed.

"What did you think you were *doing*?" Harry demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Draco inquired, his cool drawl more maddening than it had ever been.

Harry grabbed a fistful of Draco's robes.

"Hey!" Draco shouted, outraged. "What are -"

"Tell me," Harry said, "what you thought you were doing when you wouldn't bloody well deny it!"

Draco tore himself out of Harry's grasp and off the bed, and stood glaring at him.

"And why do you ask?" he wanted to know.

His voice was still cool, and only the faint colour in his cheeks let Harry know he was angry.

"*What?*" Harry said. Why was Draco asking him *that*? Wasn't it obvious, that he had to protect Draco, even from himself? Wasn't it clear?

Draco stood there looking at him, that faint flush still cresting the tops of his cheekbones, his eyes glittering oddly.

"Do you think I did it?"

For a moment, Harry just stared. Draco looked back, unwavering.

"Well," he said. "Do you?"

"No!" Harry almost shouted. "Of course not!"

Draco smiled unpleasantly. "How sure are you?"

"I'm sure," Harry said, his voice forceful as he could make it. "I'm absolutely sure. I *know* you."

"I could be lying."

"Draco," Harry snapped, "you're not even any good at lying!"

Draco looked insulted. "I am! I -"

"You're *useless* at it," Harry continued relentlessly. "Everybody knows when you're doing it because you have this whole thing of not bothering to deceive the lowly masses, and acting as if you think everything you're doing is brilliant. You could never pretend for one second when you didn't like me, you were even bad at faking a hurt arm. You'd be the worst spy in the history of the world!"

Draco pursed his lips and looked distinctly taken aback. "Well."

Harry allowed himself a small smile at this concession. "You see?" he said, more gently. "I know you."

Draco looked at him again, his eyes intent. "And you don't think I did it."

"I know you didn't do it."

"Absolutely."

"Yes."

"No questions asked."

"Yes."

"Nothing anyone could say would change your mind."

"Yes!" Harry snarled, taking a step towards Draco with no idea clear in his head other than possibly thumping him until he began to make sense.

Draco blinked, took a step backwards and then laughed.

"And how many people do you think have the same faith in me?"

Harry blinked in his turn. "I - I'm sure if you'd denied it, plenty of people would have -"

"Believed a Slytherin's word?" Draco asked. "Believed *my* word? Let me put it this way. Let's say this had happened six months ago. No matter what I said, would you have believed for one second that it wasn't me?"

Harry wanted to say Yes, but he remembered thinking this same boy was the Heir of Slytherin, back when they were both twelve.

There was no way he wouldn't have believed it.

"You see," Draco said. "They're going to think it was me. I'd deny it if I thought it would do any good, but it won't. And I'm not going to crawl to a bunch of censorious Ravenclaws and spineless Hufflepuffs for less than nothing."

That was so stupid, but it was so like Draco, and there was a weird kind of logic to it. And Draco mentioning the Ravenclaws...

"Why did Terry Boot have to tell you about it?" Harry mused resentfully. "He ought to have known what people would think if it came out, and you knew. He had no business to do it."

Draco looked vaguely startled. "He didn't mean anything by it," he replied. "He's my friend."

Harry remembered the Order meeting when they had discussed mediwizardry and Muggles, and how at the beginning Terry had looked across at Draco and Harry had wondered if they were friends.

Now that was answered.

"Since when?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Since the start of the year. I was surprised when he was made Head Boy. I always thought it would be you or me. I was *used* to that idea, to victory and making the Gryffindors' lives miserable for a year, or to defeat and being the most mutinous prefect you could possibly imagine."

"You are *such* a twit."

Draco shrugged. "I thought it might be that he was the neutral choice. But I wasn't sure. I was interested, so I decided to get to know him better and manoeuvred him into doing an Astronomy project together."

"You and your cunning Slytherin plans. You couldn't just have talked to him."

Draco lifted his chin. "I like to keep life interesting. And he's interesting. He's clever, and he's observant. You'd like him."

"He doesn't think you did it, either."

"Well, he has his reasons. For one thing, he probably doesn't want to have been the one to have let the secrets out to the spy."

"You're *not* the spy," Harry said. "Don't even say that."

Draco looked at him again with that sharp, intent look, as if Draco was trying to translate a text and wasn't quite sure he understood it.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I mean - are you really sure? I knew you'd say you were, but all your friends are going to think I am, and if you aren't sure you should tell me. I don't want any of your Gryffindor nobility, your sticking by me on principle, I *want to know* -"

"Draco, will you stop being stupid!"

Draco wasn't listening. His breathing was fast and the spots of colour on his cheekbones were darkening.

"I'll deny it if you want me to," he told him harshly. "I wouldn't do it for them, but I will. I didn't do it. Do you need to hear that?"

Harry saw Draco's fists were clenched. He grabbed Draco's shoulder.

"No," he said, and realised he was breathing just as fast as Draco. "No, I don't need to hear it."

And quite simply, Draco relaxed, and lapsed back into his easy drawl.

"Well then," he said, and smiled that bright slow smile. "You believe me. The Slytherins believe me. Who else matters?"

The door opened, and Zabini, Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle walked in.

"Oh my God, it's *you*," Zabini said in disgust. "Are you always around here? Do you have no house to go to?"

"We need to talk to Draco," Pansy informed Harry curtly.

"Hello," said Crabbe.

"You don't need to be rude to my guest," Draco said, but without rancour. Harry saw him looking at Pansy, and they could both see that she had been crying.

"I'll go," Harry said, going to the door.

Draco walked over to him, and spoke in a low voice.

"It's a Friday. We could go to Hogsmeade in a bit."

"Yeah?" Harry smiled. "I'd like that."

"I'll see you in two hours," Draco said. He turned to the others and spoke crisply. "Crabbe and Goyle, you go with him. None of us are supposed to be out alone, and Lupin will have seven kinds of fits if the endangered Harry Potter is allowed to stroll back and forth from the Slytherin dungeons."

Crabbe and Goyle moved towards the door without a murmur.

Harry looked back as he went out the door. Pansy was crying with a silent fury, and Draco had just put an arm around her shoulders. Zabini was biting his lips.



Crabbe and Goyle walked him back quietly, neither offering a word. But Harry paused at the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"I know he didn't do it," he said.

There was a pause. Then Crabbe grunted, "'Course he didn't do it."

They left, walking slowly. Harry watched them go.

\* \* \*

Eventually, though, he had to go inside and face them all.

Hermione looked up as he came in, her eyes flashing and one hand clasped tightly around Ron's. Ron was pale and furious-looking, his freckles like pinpoints against fluorescent light. Parvati was curled up on the chair beside their couch, her face tear-stained, but with no certainty in her eyes to support him. And beside her chair was her sister, that blue Ravenclaw scarf still around her neck, a swathe of cold blue.

Padma Patil faced Harry with eyes that were not hurt, but as coolly devastating as her voice.

"Hermione and I have been having a talk," she told him.

"How nice," Harry said coldly.

"Harry," Ron exclaimed suddenly, involuntarily, on a vibrato of sheer indignation.

"What is it, Ron?" Harry snapped. "What do you have to say? Is it going to be along the lines of not taking away someone I trust?"

"Harry, it's *different* now -" Ron began.

Harry cut him off savagely. "How?"

"It's different because now we have every reason to believe that he's the spy in our midst."

It wasn't an angry voice. Harry hated it because he knew it was a voice that would speak for the whole school, without personal feelings, without passion - but with a remorseless logic that would damn Draco utterly and completely.

It was Padma, of course.

"Why?" Harry asked, his voice tight. "Why should he be under any more suspicion than anyone else who knew?"

"Why - !" For a moment, Ron was speechless with rage, and then Hermione rested her hand on his arm, motioning to Padma to speak.

The girl who was the ideal Ravenclaw who had so naturally become a prefect and a Council member. Who was clever and pretty, and who hadn't bothered to hide the disdain in her eyes when

Ron took her to the Ball in frayed dress robes.

Harry had never actually *liked* her.

"It stands to reason, Harry," she said, and oh, Hermione was clever to let Padma talk, because Hermione couldn't have managed this dispassion with him. "He's the only Slytherin who knew, and Slytherins produce the most Dark wizards. He's Lucius Malfoy's son, and he's well known to have anti-Muggle opinions. It was always a mystery why he chose to support our side. If he's a spy, then everything makes sense."

"He *is* the spy," Ron choked out.

"Harry," Hermione said softly, "he has to be."

Harry shut his eyes briefly against the black-red rush of rage, and saw Draco with that flush on his face saying *I didn't do it. Do you need to hear that?*

"No," he snarled, to all of them. "I know him."

"Do you?" Padma inquired. "You've never seemed to have much time for him before this year. Don't you think it's odd that he suddenly decided to be friendly with you - you, Harry Potter - the same year all our secrets start slipping out? He's using you."

Harry could see realisation forming behind Ron's eyes, a black whirl concentrated into a pinpoint of pressure behind his forehead. And the end result - fury.

"I'll kill him," Ron snarled.

And Harry thought, *They're turning everything against him.*

"You won't even think about touching him," he said, his voice frozen. "None of you. I've spent time with him. You haven't. I didn't think much of him before - no. I didn't know how much I thought of him before, but now I do."

"You've *spent time* with him," Padma repeated with chilly emphasis. "So what insight have you to offer? What do you think of him now?"

Harry thought of a faint, old echo of this outrage.

Softly, he said, "I think he's brilliant."

"He's manipulating you," Hermione broke in. "It's not your fault, Harry, I know you're loyal, I know it all, but you have to think - Harry, the last traitor was... He was your dad's friend. You can't afford to trust him this blindly."

Harry realised, to his mild, detached surprise, that he was shaking. They were comparing Draco to that... to that...

"The last traitor," he ground out between his teeth, "was someone everybody trusted."

He glared at Padma Patil, because he couldn't have stood saying that to Hermione or Ron. She looked back at him with the beginnings of personal outrage in her eyes.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed.

"How dare you," Harry returned. "Coming in here - to *my* home - and insulting *my* friend. How would you feel if it was yours? I don't want to hear another word against him."

He didn't care. He wasn't staying in here. He needed to be alone; he needed to think. If someone caught him out wandering the school, he didn't care about that either. He threw a look back at them, Ron whose face was bright red, Hermione who looked furious and on the point of tears, all of the Gryffindors.

"And that goes for the rest of you, too," he added coldly, and slammed out.

\* \* \*

Ginny was quite pleased with her plan.

Obviously, Harry wasn't going to come back to the Gryffindor rooms for hours. He was furious - and no wonder, with that Padma Patil standing around like she owned the place and accusing him.

He'd saved her from the basilisk. He could be trusted with *anything*. Maybe the spy *was* Malfoy, and Harry had a plan. Maybe he was being loyal to his friend, but he could be trusted to find out the truth. Maybe the spy was someone else, and he already knew and he was working on it.

He was the only one who could save them now. And he was the boy she'd always loved, and he was in pain because nobody believed in him.

Ginny could tell him that she did. He'd be glad to hear that, to know somebody understood him.

Of course, she had no idea where he could be. So she had come up with her plan. Malfoy was under suspicion, and Harry - loyal Harry - was bound to be hurrying to his side. She just had to find Malfoy, and then she'd find Harry.

She only had to wait for a few minutes before her first objective was achieved. Malfoy and Blaise Zabini erupted from the Slytherin dungeons, obviously in the middle of a heated conversation.

She caught the name, *Harry Potter*, and lost all scruples about listening.

"It wasn't anything like that," Malfoy was saying, and Ginny was quietly terrified by the steel in his voice. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. You don't know much about innocent touches."

"About as much as you do, Draco," Blaise Zabini drawled. He was trying to sound amused, but his irritation was clear.

Ginny had never liked Malfoy, but at least with him you knew where you stood. Everyone knew Zabini was untrustworthy, with his black eyes wells of slippery shadows and his handsome face just a little too cunning to be pleasant.

"Surely I know a little more, simply by default," Malfoy said smoothly. "After all, Blaise, I'd like to think I'm slightly more fastidious than you tend to be. And I've been an extremely good boy lately."

"Yes, you have." Zabini's voice was tight. "Nothing's like it used to be."

Ginny was beginning to feel uneasy about hearing all this. She had thought Malfoy would lead her to Harry almost immediately.

You could have cut ice with Malfoy's voice. "And what precisely do you mean by that?"

"Look, Malfoy. I'm just - concerned. Especially now." Zabini's tone was suddenly crisp. "All I'm asking is - if you have some sort of plan, if you know what you're doing?"

"Oh don't worry." Malfoy was speaking more softly now, silkily, as if he was suddenly bent on reassuring Zabini, or as if someone else could hear. "I do. Hi, Harry."

Ginny's heart leaped as she saw Harry coming towards them down the corridor, smiling his sweet crooked smile.

It faltered a little when he saw Zabini, and then Malfoy angled himself beside Harry, and his face softened again.

"Blaise was just leaving," Malfoy announced, his voice like syrup, and then that icy gaze was suddenly fixed on Ginny.

She looked back in mute terror, certain that he had known she was there all along.

"Someone has to escort the gorgeous Ginny to her common room, after all."

Ginny found the look that accompanied this statement sinister, but Harry laughed. "I'm sure Blaise would be charmed."

Zabini looked sour. Malfoy's smile was bordering on the impish, and Ginny still did not find this in the least amusing.

"No need to bother," a voice said behind them. "I can take Ginny."

Ginny turned in alarm, and then rested gratefully against Dean. He stood there quietly behind her, supporting her, as Malfoy murmured:

"Well, we all know you'd *like* to..."

"Draco!" Harry nudged him reproachfully, and Malfoy subsided. Zabini's malice, of course, was unchecked. Ginny saw it flashing in his eyes as he gave Dean a long, leisurely look.

"Oh, I don't mind going to the common room with *him*," he informed them all, glancing around with a kind of spiteful glee for the looks of shock on everyone's faces. Harry was regarding him with dislike and faint bemusement. Malfoy was smiling a small, superior smile.

Dean looked back at Zabini, completely unruffled.

"Naturally you're welcome to come along with me and Ginny if you'd like."

Zabini looked discontent. "Malfoy, you're welcome to the lot of them," he sneered, and stormed off. As he pushed by Ginny and Dean, she heard him mutter, "And I hope you do have a plan."

Ginny didn't look after him as he went, or at Dean. She was too busy staring at Harry, whose brow was adorably furrowed. He reached out and touched Malfoy on the elbow.

"Should you be wandering around with just Zabini?" Harry asked him in a low voice. "I mean, he's -"

Malfoy arched an eyebrow in that particularly annoying way he had.

"I'm perfectly safe. Woe betide any Dark Lord who stole me and Blaise both. He'd be sending us back with a sympathy note within the week."

Harry grinned. "I think we'd only accept one back." He paused. "I suppose Zabini isn't so bad, considering the other choice."

Malfoy shot him a baleful look.

"You two doing okay?" inquired Dean, who had been indulging in some of that tactful deafness Ginny had always deeply appreciated when they were going out and she was chatting to one of her friends.

"I'm fine, Thomas," Malfoy replied, rolling his eyes dramatically. "It's just my idiot Gryffindor here being silly. Again."

"Well, I've got my Creative Magic project to finish," Dean said. "Be seeing you, Malfoy. Harry."

Ginny was startled to see Malfoy actually smile at something Dean had said. His smile made his whole face look brighter and younger.

From the closer attention Harry paid Malfoy then, Ginny could see he was surprised too. She took Dean's arm, held it in a loose grip and looked yearningly at Harry, hoping that he would ask her to stay. He was still looking at Malfoy when Dean started leading her down the corridor.

"What did Zabini mean?" he asked her in soft, serious tones. "About a plan?"

Ginny thought for a moment. "He was asking Malfoy before - if Malfoy knew what he was doing, if he had a plan. And Malfoy said he did have one."

She glanced up into Dean's face, troubled, and saw worry in his kind brown eyes.

"Do you think we should tell Harry?" she queried anxiously.

"No..." Dean said slowly. "No. He wouldn't believe us."

"Oh, of course. He's so trusting." Ginny leaned against Dean, taking comfort in his simple presence. "But we'll take care of him, won't we?"

Dean tucked her hand more firmly around his arm, his face still very serious for a moment. Then it lightened just a little.

"And I'll take care of you."

\* \* \*

"Come on," Draco said, once Ginny and Dean had made their much-appreciated departure. "Let's go."

They headed to the corridor with the statue of the one-eyed witch in silence. Harry was searching for a way to put all those distraught and incoherent thoughts he'd had wandering the school alone into words, and he kept being distracted from this task by glancing over at Draco. It was such a relief to have him back, his blond head gleaming pale in the dim light, here where nobody could accuse him or worry him or tell him things that would put him in danger.

"I expect the news will have travelled to Hogsmeade by now," Draco remarked as they went through the tunnel. "Let us all take a moment to curse the grapevine."

"We can go up near the Shrieking Shack," Harry offered. "There won't be anyone there."

Draco gave him a bright look as they emerged into Honeydukes' cellar.

"There could be ghosts," he pointed out. "D'you know, I still can't get Crabbe and Goyle up there?"

"Er," said Harry.

Draco stopped to buy some of his blood-flavoured lollipops, giving the sour-faced shopkeeper his most blithe and charming smile. Then they set off up the hill towards the Shrieking Shack.

Draco was still contemplating past wrongs.

"Attacking someone while in an Invisibility Cloak is not at all a noble thing to do," he mused. "Very sneaky. Very underhanded. Very *Slytherin*, actually, you bastard."

"Draco, you're a Slytherin."

"Exactly! I know what I'm talking about."

Harry couldn't repress a laugh at his sheer nerve.

"Anyway," he said, trying to sound as stern as he could, "you deserved it. You were absolutely rotten about Hagrid."

"I was, wasn't I?" Draco admitted without a shred of remorse. "But that was before I really got to know him."

Harry had been a bit alarmed by the unholy look Draco got in his eyes when he realised at one point over teatime that Hagrid would listen to the students he liked. And that Hagrid was completely insecure about his teaching prowess, and eager for suggestions.

"Before you really got to manipulate him, you mean."

Draco waved a hand dismissively. "Same thing. In any case, I deny your wild and ill-founded allegations. I'm helping. I'm being a teacher's aide."

The lessons had not become noticeably less life-threatening. They did focus on animals that could be put to actual - and usually fiendish - use, though, and Draco seemed to be in a supervisory position an awful lot. He had also developed a tendency to cackle in an unsettling manner during class.

Funny, that.

"You're being a teacher's pet with evil plans to take over the classroom."

"You're... You're trying to distract me from the main point," Draco said darkly. "The main point being the vile attack perpetrated on my person back when I was an innocent child."

"You were a *horrible* child."

"In an innocent way," Draco insisted, stepping with great care along the path to the Shack. It was so like him to even be fussy about getting mud on his boots, Harry thought, and rolled his eyes. "I almost had a heart attack, did you know that? I was a sensitive boy."

"You were a fiend sent directly from hell to torment me."

"Everybody needs a hobby," Draco sniffed. "Not to mention a matter far more important than affairs of the heart - to wit, affairs of the hair. My beautiful, beautiful hair."

"Blond hair makes people look washed out," Harry said casually. "Anyway, it's much too pale to be natural. I bet you dye it."

Draco made a strangled noise of horror. Harry bit his lip on a mad grin.

"Harry," Draco said in a dreadful voice, "that is the worst thing you've ever said to me. That's the worst thing *anyone's* ever said to me."

Draco turned his back on Harry to gesture wildly at the sky, as if to point out to it the wrongs he was suffering. Once he did, Harry bent down.

"He dares to say this to me," Draco raged dramatically at the clouds. "After he ruined my hair. Ruined it! It was encrusted with mud, it was filthy, for a while there it looked *brown*, I had to spend four hours in the shower frantically shampooing it, and he says -"

"Draco," Harry said easily, straightening up and hurling a handful of mud with absolute accuracy, "stop living in the past."

There was a moment of stillness, while the mud seeped through Draco's hair and onto his cloak. Then Draco turned slowly around, vibrating with some suppressed emotion, and fixed Harry with an icy glare.

"Potter," he declared with conviction, "you will die for this."

He bent down and seized a handful of mud as fast as a snake, but Harry had Seeker reflexes too. He dodged, and it only got him on the shoulder, and by then he was crouching on the ground.

Draco turned his face away, and the mud only caught him on the cheek. He rubbed it for a second, looking incredulous, and then side-stepped lightly to avoid another volley. He was still being careful about his boots.

He took a handful of mud and dodged again, this time closer to Harry rather than further from him, and then firmly shoved it down the back of Harry's shirt.

Harry shouted, wriggled away from him and promptly tripped over a rock and landed on his back in the mud.

Draco burst out laughing. Harry reached out, grabbed his ankle and pulled it out from under him.

Draco's yell of outrage was cut off by a combined thump and squelch.

Harry raised his head fractionally to see the fixed, appalled look on Draco's face. His hair was in a pool of mud.

Harry let his own head fall back on the mud and laughed and laughed. He closed his eyes briefly and just thought, *I trust you, no matter what.*

"Doom," Draco intoned in the background. "Anguish. Despair. Oh, my *hair*. I hate you, Harry Potter."

"Yeah yeah," Harry said, flicking some mud at him.

Draco sounded sulky. "I'm in a delicate condition today, you know."

Harry propped himself up on one elbow and stared over at Draco, whose eyes were shut - presumably so he could immerse himself completely in despair. His lashes were faint silvery gleams against his skin.

"Draco," he said softly, "They're saying that you're only my friend to get information out of me."

Draco didn't open his eyes.

"Do you believe them?" he asked evenly.

"*No!*" How many times did he have to say it? "I just... I meant to say that if it's too difficult for you - if it puts you under more suspicion -"

"Forget it." His eyes did open then, little slices of grey. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

The relief was so great he didn't even try not to smile down at him. "Aren't I? Damn."

"So close and yet so far," Draco agreed. "I don't plan to lie around here in the mud all night. Help



me up."

He stuck out an imperious hand, and then spoiled the effect by wagging it around. Harry climbed to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, regarding Draco with tolerant amusement until Draco climbed to his feet under his own steam. He gave Harry a reproachful look.

"I'd like to make it clear that I bags the prefects' bathroom," he informed him.

"I don't think so," Harry said blandly. "I believe it belongs to whoever gets there first."

Draco looked at him for a moment, absently scrubbing at the streak of mud on his neck. Then he hurled himself precipitously down the hill.

Harry followed in hot pursuit. They only paused once, to sneak into Honeydukes' cellar and through the trap door.

Then they were back to hurtling through the tunnel, and through the corridors, Draco thumping him judiciously whenever he drew close.

"Get lost, Potter," he panted. "This is *my* bathroom. I require my ice-white foam! I require -"

He stopped in his tracks, mid-thump.

Their friends were standing in the corridor, in the middle of a heated argument.

"We're searching this corridor," Pansy was saying viciously. "Go find your own."

"We were here first," Ron said belligerently.

"Oh yeah? Oh yeah? Sod off, Weasley."

"We are simply concerned -" Hermione began in a thin voice.

Blaise Zabini coughed. "Everyone? Look over there."

Every head spun around to face them. Harry stood there and tried valiantly to project an air of cleanliness.

"Draco!" Pansy said in horrified dismay. "My God, what *happened* to you?" She strode forward, pulling a handkerchief out of her robes and shooting Harry a venomous look. "What did he do?" she demanded, rubbing at Draco's cheek.

"Don't spit in that," Draco instructed her, eyeing the handkerchief with suspicion.

Hermione's voice was tight. "Harry," she said, "*please* come back with us, we were worried -"

Harry met her eyes defiantly.

"There was no need to be worried," he said. "I was with Draco."

"And now you can come back with us," Ron told him with determination.

"And you should go to the prefects' bathroom, Draco," Pansy said, dropping the handkerchief with the air of one who knows when she is defeated.

Draco smirked. "Offering to accompany me, wench?"

"After that," Zabini informed him, "we all have to talk to you."

Draco's mouth went thin.

"Fine," he snapped, and leaned in to Harry. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said, deliberately pitching his voice low enough to be discreet and clear enough so they could all hear. Then he beamed with a sudden thought. "Which is Saturday."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco had been more or less insufferable all week about this present. He'd become accustomed to hearing 'Harry, what is my present?' instead of the obviously too-common hello.

He looked at Draco standing there, unable to keep one hand from rubbing mud out of his hair, and thought again, *I trust you*.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

Draco smiled. "Looking forward to it."

# Chapter Twelve: Look Before You Leap

*I've forgiven myself for the mistakes I've made  
Now there's just one thing, the only one I want to do  
I want to feel the sun shine, shining down on me and you  
I don't want to take this life for granted like I used to do  
I want to love somebody, love somebody like you.*

Harry got up at eight on Saturday to make sure all the preparations were in order, and to collect his hamper from the kitchens. Then he made his way to the Slytherin rooms, murmuring the password and trying not to make any noise until he reached Draco's door. He knocked, and received absolutely no response from within, so he opened the door and went inside.

He felt a sudden qualm as he crossed the room to the thickly draped bed. *What if Draco... had company?*

He wouldn't. He couldn't. He would have told Harry.

With more vigour than strictly necessary, Harry yanked the drapes of the bed apart.

Draco was alone.

Of course.

He was sleeping quietly, cheek pale against the pillow, and he didn't look innocent. Not innocent the way he could look, in that shining calculated way he had when he was awake and it seemed to be to his advantage. He looked faintly troubled, as if sleep was something he had to concentrate on and get right, and he looked - unprotected. His eyelashes were bright and silver and sharp against his skin.

Then his eyes screwed up against the light.

"Harry?" he said without opening his eyes.

Harry started. "How did you know it was me?"

A gleam of grey appeared between his lashes.

"Because I don't know anybody else who is suicidal and stupid enough to wake me at this hour on a Saturday," Draco said in a bad-tempered tone. Then he stretched, lazy as a cat, and his mood seemed to improve with the gesture.

The blanket slipped further down his chest.

"Well, what are you here for?" Draco inquired at last.

Harry shook his head, distracted.

"Come on, get up," he said. "Remember, I have a surprise for you."

Draco propped himself up on one elbow, shaking his head with amused disbelief. "What are you blathering on about, Potter?"

"I said it was a surprise," Harry told him firmly. "Come on, Draco. Move. You can sleep in tomorrow."

He used Draco's name deliberately. For some reason after Draco had called him Potter he felt the urge to prove that he still could.

"I want to sleep in *now*," moaned Draco. "Bring me my surprise after lunch."

"You have to come see the surprise," Harry said, his voice stern. "Right now."

"Oh, we are bossy now we're the Triwizard Tournament champion, aren't we?"

Draco was smiling. It was amazing what one would take from Draco, simply because he was Draco.

"Fine then," he continued, making a lordly dismissive gesture. "Get lost. I'll be out in a minute."

Harry looked dubious.

"Is this an attempt to get me out and go back to sleep?"

It was also amazing how Draco could look down his nose at people while remaining prone.

"No, Harry, you total git," he explained with extreme condescension. "It's because I'm not wearing anything."

Harry felt his face burn. Draco's pale chest looked an awful lot more exposed than it had a minute ago.

"Oh - I - Sorry."

Draco laughed. "It's all right. No need to look all flustered."

*I'm not flustered!*

All right, he was slightly flustered.

Harry got out of the room quickly, and then told himself he was being stupid. He had seen his Quidditch team-mates and dormitory mates get dressed all the time, for the love of... It was no big deal. He was being a prat.

Draco appeared to think nothing of it when he emerged, rubbing his eyes. Harry was amused to see that his hair was standing up and he was wearing robes over his clothes. He was clearly tired, and Harry, who could get up early with ease, found it bizarrely endearing.

"Oh, this surprise had better be worth it."

"It's past nine, you lazy object."

Draco shuddered. "I *knew* it was some ungodly hour of the morning."

"Come on, you're keeping your surprise waiting."

Draco had not yet expressed a single word of pleasure or gratitude, and did not appear to be about to start now.

"This had better be worth it," he muttered again.

Harry pretended to cuff him. "Brat," he responded, not without affection. "Come on."

\* \* \*

Draco was still stumbling while they were going down the school steps.

"Why do we have to go to Hogsmeade the long way?" he demanded after a bit, shaking his head and trying to look more alert.

"Because Honeydukes opens at ten on Saturday, and breaking and entering is wrong," Harry explained. "I told you this, Draco."

"Wrong! Define wrong."

"The general definition is 'not right'."

"That could just as easily mean left. Do we have an objection to doing things that are left?"

"Well, try 'not considerate'. The owners sleep above the shop. We could wake them."

"So what?" Draco asked with spirit. "If I'm awake, everyone should be awake. When I'm not happy, I like to spread it around with a big spoon. Did you never wake up wanting to just *kick* people?"

"Sometimes I have that urge, yeah," Harry said with a sidelong glance. Draco made a face at him.

"Agh. You suck, Potter."

Harry raised his eyebrows. " 'You suck, Potter'? You're off your game, Draco."

"Agh," Draco said, mordantly. "What have you got in the hamper, Harry? Is it part of the present?" He brightened. "Oooh, is it? Can I see? Can I have a tiny peek?"

Harry hit Draco with the hamper.

"It's part of the present, and you can't see it yet."

"That was my *knee*," Draco informed him darkly. "I could *die*."

"How could you die because I hit you in the knee with a hamper? Is this the same special kind of logic that means you're going to die because a Hippogriff cut your arm?"

"I could have died! I could have contracted an infection, you know," Draco said. "It looked very

dirty to me. And that hamper could have had a splinter, which would give me blood poisoning, which would lead to my speedy and tragic demise, which would mean thousands of admirers weeping onto the casket containing my beautiful, pallid corpse and then stoning you."

Harry gave Draco a long look. Draco folded his arms and looked defensive.

"It could happen."

"I think I'll risk it," Harry said dryly, and tugged Draco's arm to make him come along. He was a little too nervous to enjoy anything until he knew what Draco's reaction was going to be. So they walked on in the faint morning mist, which the sun was already beginning to warm and clear away, until they reached the tiny harbour where the ferry usually landed, and Draco saw the present.

He stared in horror and said, "You *have* to be joking."

The small rowboat lay rocking slightly on the lake, ripples marking the placid surface of the water. Harry leaned down and put the hamper into it.

"No," he said. "I'm not joking, Draco."

"I am *not* going to get into that thing."

"What - do you want to be afraid and avoid it forever?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me, yes! I'm not a Gryffindor. Being afraid of things doesn't bother me."

"Doesn't it?" Harry asked.

Draco scowled at him, then looked at the boat again and went pale. Harry saw him swallow.

"Harry," he said quietly. "I *can't*."

"Draco, you don't have to. But it's enchanted so no spell can affect it. It's perfectly safe."

Draco looked at the boat again, and then looked back up at Harry. He swallowed, in a tiny painful motion. "That must have taken ages."

"I asked Hermione to point me to some books that could help." Harry smiled faintly, and was pleased to see Draco smile back. "I didn't tell her what it was for."

"Naturally." Draco glanced back at the boat doubtfully. "No spell at all?"

"I swear. But - you don't have to get in, if you don't want to."

Draco looked at the boat again, and then Harry again. He was chewing his lip a little, but his eyes were wide and clear.

"I know," he replied, and climbed gingerly into the boat.

Harry got in, trying not to rock it. By that time Draco's look had turned suspicious.

"If spells don't affect it," he said, "how precisely are we going to make the boat move?"

"How do you think?" Harry picked up the oars. "The Muggle way, idiot."

Draco looked appalled.

"Manual labour? You're *sick*."

"Take an oar, Draco."

"Me?" Draco said, and looked immediately and carefully blank. "How are you supposed to wave it? What words do you say?"

Harry looked at him in disbelief.

Finally, he said, "You're rowing on the way back," picked up both the oars and began to row steadily away from the edge.

He saw Draco's fingers clench on the sides of the boat, but didn't mention it. Instead, he said, "How's the Creative Magic project going?"

"Dreadful!" Draco answered with prompt despair. "I can't choose. I mean, who could? There's music and art and sculpture and acting and for some reason I really like the idea of poetry."

"I never really thought of you as a poetry person."

"Oh, I'm not. But if I recite one, I get to wear this poet's shirt. I like the sleeves."

"I don't think you should really be considering the sleeves." Draco shrugged. He had let go of one of the sides, but he still looked up eagerly when Harry reached the centre of the lake.

"Is that it? Can we go back now?"

"No, Draco," Harry said. "We're going to stay here for a while. Past lunchtime - that's why I got the house elves to make the hamper."

Draco looked outraged. "I won't do it and you can't make me!"

Harry smiled at him innocently. "Care to make a small wager on that?" he asked, and dropped the oars over the side.

Draco gave a keening cry of loss.

"I don't believe you *did* that! You said spells don't affect this boat, how are we going to get back? I'm not swimming back," he added flatly. "And I won't let you leave. So we'll *starve*, and you'll die first and I'll have to *eat* you, but that won't save me because, let's face it, your scrawny body wouldn't nourish a chipmunk, and then I will perish all alone."

"Draco. You trust me, right?"

"I suppose," Draco conceded grudgingly.

"We'll get back. Just relax."

Draco looked at the boat, then over at the water, and finally at Harry. He drew in a deep breath.

"All right."

"Good." Harry leaned back in the boat. "And I'm not scrawny," he added with belated indignation.

Draco cautiously began to lean on the other side.

"You are scrawny," he insisted, looking happier. "You have knobby wrists. What you should do is gain a lot of weight, and grow a moustache."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

Draco stretched, managing to look as if he was luxuriously reclining in a small boat which Harry could see he was scared of touching.

"Haven't I told you? It's my cunning plan," he said. "You know how you hate being famous and all that. What you do is, you create an *alter ego*. A normal wizard Joe, if you will. Who would ever suspect that this moustached fatty was the famous Harry Potter? You could wear sweater vests and call yourself Ignatius Trout."

"Ignatius Trout," Harry repeated flatly.

Draco smiled brightly. "I think it suits you. Besides, it's not like Harry Potter is a good name."

"I like my name!"

"Oh, no," Draco said dismissively. "It's a terrible name. Harry, for instance. To harry means to worry or harass, and to potter means to amble about. Think about the message you're sending out to the world! It sounds like you wander around harassing people."

"Well, now I see. Obviously, it should be *your* name."

"You merely speak out of sheer envy of my aristocratic name," Draco observed loftily. "Face it, Potter. Your wrists *are* knobby. And you have a *terrible* name."

The sun was coming out. Draco shrugged out of his robes, absently doing up the buttons on his shirt cuffs. He looked up as he did so, and his smile was small and gleaming.

"But I like you anyway," he added, and leaned back more comfortably.

\* \* \*

Once Draco got to the point where he seemed to be happy and lounging easily, he naturally began



complaining.

"Harrrrrrrrry."

"Yes, Draco?"

"Harrrrrrrrry."

"What is it, Draco?"

Harry had shut his eyes, enjoying the sunshine. When he opened them and looked over at Draco, Draco was peeping over the edge of the boat.

"I think the giant squid is under us," he announced darkly.

"And why does that upset you?" Harry asked indulgently, rolling his eyes and preparing for a scene.

Draco looked scandalised. "It likes to *seize innocents* in its tentacles."

"It saved Dennis Creevey from drowning. It's probably not evil."

"Oh, that's what they want you to think," Draco told them. "I think they were in cahoots. I have my suspicions of those Creeveys. Did you know the oldest one - er, Callum -"

"Colin."

"Whatever. He crept into the Slytherin locker room and took photographs and sold them! Does that sound evil to you or does it not?"

Harry frowned. "Actually, it sounds Slytherin."

"Oh, well. It turned out to be Blaise's idea." Draco flapped a hand. "Nevertheless, I think I've made my point. Evil."

"Sort of stupid, too," Harry mused. "I mean, no offence, but I can't imagine anyone paying much for a picture of Goyle."

"No more than a couple of Knuts, anyway."

Draco maintained a straight face for all of two seconds, and then broke up laughing.

"Draco, that was a *terrible* pun," Harry said, biting the inside of his cheek to stop his own laugh. "You should be ashamed."

"It had to be said," Draco defended himself stoutly. "It's not my fault."

"Oh, well. At least you cleared up the mystery of the pictures of you in a towel that were circulating around Gryffindor Tower last year."

Draco choked on air. Harry smiled innocently.

"You should definitely have been in Slytherin," Draco said with great conviction, and then suddenly looked interested. "Did you, ah, happen to hear what price they fetched?"

"Well, no," Harry said mildly. "I wasn't in the market."

Draco scowled at him. Harry actually recalled several of them had simply ended up on the table in the Gryffindor table until the twins had magically altered the towel to a pink one with hearts on it reading 'Malfoy and McGonagall forever'. He tactfully did not mention this, or the fact that he and Ron had laughed themselves sick.

After all, it would be much funnier if he could locate one of the pictures and then show Draco.

Draco was still scowling and muttering comments about people who thought they were *sooo* amusing when the boat lurched.

"Oh my God," Draco exclaimed, going pale green. "It's the squid. I told you, it's the squid."

"Draco, I promise you it's not evil."

"I don't *care*," Draco wailed. "It touches people with its tentacles." He peered anxiously over the side of the boat again. "I don't want it to touch me," he added wretchedly. "It's all slimy. Hit it with an oar."

"I threw them over the side, remember?"

Draco gave him a baleful look, and then folded his arms over his chest with the martyred air of a man who had resigned himself to a slimy fate.

"Brilliant, Ignatius Trout."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing this time. "You are even more insane in the mornings," he remarked. "And you're a little quirky at the best of times."

"Eat him first," Draco advised the squid loudly. "He's much crunchier."

"No, eat him," Harry counselled. "He's more evil. I hear evil's full of flavour."

"As a matter of fact, I'm very bland," Draco corrected hastily. "I'm evil milk pudding."

"Oh, shut up," Harry said, reaching over the side and splashing some water into Draco's face. Draco spluttered briefly.

"That had slime in it!" he cried. "That was slimy squid water! You will pay for this, Potter."

Harry's glasses were suddenly liberally sprinkled with water. He saw Draco smirk through the droplets. Harry smiled. Draco's smirk faltered.

"Now we're even," he announced in a suddenly placating voice. "All right, Harry?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Draco nodded, still looking apprehensive. "No, don't even think about it. My hair gets fluffy if it gets wet and is not properly dried."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I see."

"So you're not to splash me."

"If you say so." Harry grinned then, and splashed up a little wave directly onto Draco's head.

"Fluffy."

Draco glared at him through a dripping fringe. Then he began to take off his clothes.

"Er?" Harry said interrogatively.

Draco emerged from his robes, water already falling onto the shoulders of his shirt.

"I am preparing to sunbathe," he explained with dignity. "I shall need a pillow in order to elevate my head so it will be properly dried, and also for the secondary purpose of comfort."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco tilted his chin and continued to look appropriately serious.

"Can I share your pillow?"

"Fine," Draco agreed ungraciously. "So long as you understand that my hair is not a laughing matter."

"Oh, I understand," Harry told him, laughing softly as he stretched out along the bottom of the boat.

Draco shaded his eyes with his hand to look up at him.

"That's twice in as many days that you have committed assault upon my hair," he sniffed, and kicked Harry sharply in the ankle. "Infidel."

"Honestly, I've heard of someone's body being their temple, but this is ridiculous," Harry muttered.

Draco sat up abruptly.

"That's it," he declared, and plunged his arm in the water up to the elbow. He removed it and then vigorously ruffled Harry's hair.

Harry put up no resistance, just raised himself up on his elbow and grinned at him, convinced there was very little Draco could do to adversely affect his hair.

Draco wiped his hand fastidiously on his jeans.

"I touched the squid," he informed him cheerfully. "You have slime in your hair. So there, Potter. Now we're even."

"Slime! That's *disgusting*. What are you, four years old?" Harry punched Draco's shoulder as Draco began to lie back down.

Draco looked most affronted, and punched back. "You deserved it," he retorted, pushing his wet hair behind his ear.

Harry pushed him and Draco fell on his back. He squinted up at Harry, eyes almost shut against the sun.

"After all this trouble," Harry mock-reproached him. "Ingrate."

"Never mess with the hair," Draco told him calmly. "And no more rough-housing in the boat; it will tip over and I will scream like a girl and then be forced to drown you to hide my shame."

There was a grain of real fear behind Draco's smile. Harry lay back down. The sun was shining down and he could have slept, but then Draco jostled his shoulder.

"Harry. Hey, Harry."

"Yeah?"

Draco strained to see the sky. "What do you think that cloud looks like?" he asked, in what seemed to be the spirit of scientific inquiry. "I think it looks like a tortoise in a wig."

\* \* \*

They lay there for a few hours in the sun, soaking it up and both dozing off at intervals. Every time Draco roused he seemed to have a new question, such as 'If you had to be an inanimate object, which would you be?' and 'Do you think house elves choose mates based on the size of their eyeballs?'

Draco thought they did, and he also decided that Harry should become Ginny Weasley's broomstick, for which Harry was forced to threaten to hit him.

Then Draco said, "And what's your greatest fear?"

Harry lifted his head from his arms, catching the curve of Draco's cheek in the corner of his eye, but most of his mind fixed on a stark and private nightmare.

"Not having the strength to kill Voldemort," he answered quietly.

Draco flinched from the sound of that name, glancing around at the calm water. "I was hoping you were going to say something amusing, like Hannah Abbott in her unmentionables," he complained, trying to keep his voice light.

"Come on, Draco."

Draco sighed and sat up, pulling his legs in against his chest, arms looped around his knees.

"I... fine," he said. "Losing them. Losing the Slytherins. The ones on our side."

Harry levered himself up on his elbows, looking worriedly up into Draco's face.

"Do you mean - them dying, or disappearing?"

"No." Draco bit his lip. "Well, that too. It's that - I'm not saying I made them all join the Young Order, but a lot of us have parents who are - have parents who have expectations of us, or are in places where we're scared, or... It was hard for everyone in Slytherin to make up their minds. And after my father - died, I came back, and I had a - mission, I suppose, and I knew that some of them looked up to me and I took advantage of that and I don't regret it and I *don't give up*. So I got what I wanted, and I usually do, but all I wanted was revenge and I had to take responsibility too. And now... I'm scared for them, and I have to keep them, and..."

Harry looked at Draco, really and utterly serious for once, with his face pale and intent, profile strained against the calm water.

Draco glanced over and then down, took a deep breath, smiled faintly because they understood each other and tried again.

"It's just... it took so much work," he said. "Not that many of us were hopping up and down panting for branded forearms, but there seemed so little choice and there seemed so little to fight for - we aren't his targets and we don't care much about Muggle-lovers or the Muggleborn. I couldn't count on any blind loyalty to Dumbledore or bright shining ideals. We're not like that." He paused, glanced down at his own hands linked around his knee. "I've worked too hard for them to let them go now."

"Are you saying there's really a chance they could - ?"

"I'm saying I don't know!" Draco snapped. "We're not like the rest of you. Some of us are throwing away our families for this. Most of us like Lupin, but it's hard for us to rely on someone who's not our own. I don't like Dumbledore and I won't let him tell me what to do. And now Snape's gone and everyone resents these accusations and it's hard, and I don't know what to do!"

Harry didn't even know what to say. He was sitting there gaping at Draco. He remembered now, Lupin saying that Professor Snape was away, attempting to gather information that would help explain the recent attack.

Snape had left at the end of March. And this was May. And Harry'd been so used to his absences, so preoccupied with - the Tournament, the war, the worries, Draco - that he *hadn't noticed*.

And he'd wondered why Draco looked tired so often!

He looked over at Draco's bowed head, almost in appeal.

"Draco. You've been trying to carry all this on your own."

Draco didn't look up. "Slytherins don't need any help."

"You stupid *prat*." Harry stopped then, and said, less vehemently: "Are you - are you worried about him?"

Draco did look up then, his eyes wide as if he'd received an unexpected blow. "Yes," he said harshly. "We know exactly the risks he's taking. And he's the only adult here we can trust - and who has any kind of belief in us."

Being Draco, he didn't add, *And I care about him.*

"You can trust Lupin," Harry said. "You can trust Dumbledore."

"Yeah?" Draco snarled. "You want me to ask people who have been brought up to distrust anyone outside of a certain social circle to put their faith in a werewolf? It's hard enough for me to tell myself that. And you want me to trust Dumbledore, who arbitrarily decides to take the House Cup from Slytherin every few years? I don't. He was never my mentor figure. He isn't my leader, and I don't trust him."

"Look, Gryffindor won the House Cup fairly -"

"I'm not accusing you," Draco answered. "I'm telling you how we see it. He never explained anything to us. We don't trust easily, and he never even tried. Do you know what happened when Crouch Transfigured me and then hurled me against stone? Snape told him that if he touched one of his students again, he'd kill him. And Dumbledore hired the maniac. I know which one I trust."

Harry looked at the angry, stubborn look on Draco's face, and thought about the way he told the little story. He recalled a boy in Potions class once telling Snape he was the best teacher in the school.

"Snape will come back," he said softly. Draco looked down at his knees again. "With all this focused loyalty," Harry added carelessly, "maybe you should have been a Hufflepuff."

Draco looked up with his eyes flashing, and a trace of relief behind the flash.

"Take that back, or I brain you with the hamper."

He went rummaging around the bottom of the boat for it, but looked up again when Harry touched his arm.

"You *can* trust them," he said. "Lupin and Dumbledore. Really."

"Why should I believe you, Potter?" Draco inquired disdainfully. "You trust everyone. You even trust *me*. Is there anyone in the school I can have a nice healthy lack of faith in?"

The set of his shoulders was a little too strained, and Harry offered him a reassuring smile.

"Filch," he suggested. "Filch and his really evil cat. You can distrust them all you like."

"I like cats," Draco objected, relaxing. "They're so magnificently selfish. I empathise with cats."

"Nah," Harry said. "I like dogs. I always wanted a puppy, when I was little." He brightened, thinking of something. "And I'm going to get one, when we leave school."

Draco threw his head back and it hit the side of the boat. He didn't seem unduly disturbed by this,

just kept his eyes on the sky.

"Oh, yes. Next year," he said. "We've never talked about that, have we? What are you going to do?"

*What are you going to do?*

He spoke as if Harry's future was going to be utterly unconnected with his, and they never had talked about it before, but what if he, Draco Malfoy, had his all planned out and it just wasn't going to have room?

The sun was out, but Harry felt a little cold. He looked over at Draco and could only see his throat, and he tried to form a casual sentence.

"Am I still going to have you?" he blurted out instead, and he would at that moment have given up all the Quidditch skills if he could have learned to be less disastrously awkward with words. "Um, I mean..."

Draco looked over at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Not as a pet, Potter," he informed him. "I'm going to be staying home. Staying at home with mother does sound like it will cramp my style, but we have thirty bedrooms, so then again possibly not. Besides - some Slytherins are going to need a place to stay. My house will work for that."

His mouth lifted up at the corner.

"You could come stay too," he offered easily. "Now and then. Father had several Quidditch pitches built on the grounds. Are you jealous?"

Harry beamed freely back.

"Yeah, very." He paused. "I'm taking a job with the Aurors," he told him. "I've already bought a flat in a magical part of London."

Remembering that, flat viewing with Sirius last summer, still gave him a jolt of pleasure in his chest. Sirius had offered him a home once, and he had dreamed of nothing but that, a real home and freedom from the Dursleys, but now he was grown up and his earliest childhood dreams had come true. He was able to just buy himself a place and walk out of Privet Drive forever.

A home. Harry had bought it and then asked Sirius to go away for a bit and he had just sat there. No rules, no relatives, permanence and security, a glimpse at some future after this war. He was going to choose furniture and buy a dog, and...

"You should come and stay there sometimes, too," he said.

"Great," Draco said in a pleased tone. "A bachelor pad in town. Fun." He frowned. "Unless Weasley's going to live there too, in which case I shall refuse your kind invitation on the grounds that he would inhospitably smother me in my sleep."

"Ron's staying home," Harry told him. "I think - and don't tell anybody - he wants to save some

money and get up the nerve to ask Hermione to live with him in a couple more years."

He was expecting a nasty remark about the golden couple, but he unexpectedly got a golden smile instead.

"Wonderful," Draco said, sunnily. "May I help decorate the spare bedroom?"

"You're going to decorate it in something that will clash with red hair, aren't you?"

"Would I?"

"Ron won't care, you know."

Draco looked vexed.

"You can help me pick out the dog," Harry offered generously.

"I don't want to. I want to help you pick out a cat."

"Draco, if you want a cat you can get one yourself. I'm having a puppy, because I wanted one so badly and the Dursleys always said it'd be -"

"I can't have a cat," Draco sulked. "There's antique furniture in my house. Father always told me a cat would be -"

"Too messy," Harry finished for both of them, and flashed him another smile. Draco looked thoughtful, curling up at the bottom of the boat like a pensive child. The wind was rising just a little and his hair was lifted slightly off his neck.

"How was it, with the Dursleys?" he asked. "I mean, I've heard the rumours, and I know you never went home for Christmas. But - how bad was it?"

Harry looked at him. Draco looked back, half curiosity, half concern.

God, life was strange. To think that one day he would tell the story of his wretched childhood to Draco Malfoy, of all people.

He took a deep breath, and told him some things. The cupboard. The room with bars on his window and the days with pathetic amounts of food.

When he told Draco that, Draco reached over and took his wrist, fingers pressing painfully against it. He only told him a few things about life with the Dursleys, hesitating as he did so. It was all over now. It didn't matter anymore.

Once he was done, he glanced up at Draco. Draco had that alarmingly determined look he wore before Quidditch games.

"That's nice, Harry," he commented in eerily airy tones. "Now, this is what we are going to do. We're going to leave school with our pretty new licenses and we are going to turn those people into beetles. To give them a new life experience, you see, and then *tragically* we are going to



accidentally crush them with a rolling pin, over and over again."

"Draco, I do not want to crush my relatives with a rolling pin." Harry reflected. The idea did have a certain appeal. "Well, anyway, I'm not going to."

Draco's eyes still had that disturbingly fanatical look.

"No jury in the world would convict us," he argued. "You're famous and I'm rich. We're young and reckless. We have to commit crimes and get away with it. It is our public duty."

The idea of Draco even being in the same room as the Dursleys was very odd. They were so dingy and petty, and he would seem so completely out of place in Privet Drive, all fancy cloak and flashing-pale hair and oozing magical aristocracy from every pore.

It was an incongruous image, superimposing Draco onto his old life. He was too animated, too bright for that, and Harry had left all that stifling drabness behind. He had taken everything from his room, and he had known as he had left that he was leaving forever, and so had they, and there had been nothing but relief and that continuous grinding hatred on both sides.

It really did not matter anymore.

Though he would have liked to see Draco's face, just once, if Aunt Petunia ever told him to cook the bacon for Dudley.

He would have wanted to leave before the explosion.

"All right, so you don't want to kill them," Draco said eagerly. "What we do is this. We give them false memories and convince them that they are all go-go dancers -"

"Draco." Harry laughed. "Stop. Really."

Draco did, eyes searching Harry's face again.

"No good can come of go-go dancers," Harry informed him solemnly. Draco nodded, and dropped Harry's wrist.

"I'm sorry, Harry." He looked up to catch Harry's glance of surprise, and continued. "Your wrists aren't that bad. You don't really have to worry."

"Thank you, Draco. That was tearing me apart."

Draco lifted his chin. "I'm sure it was. Not all of us have the assurance of beautiful bones bred in their blood."

"Sorry," Harry said, "did you say bred in, or inbred? Because I've heard some stories about the old pureblood families -"

"Shut up."

"Were your parents related, Draco?" Harry asked in a hushed voice. "Because you can tell me if

they were. It's not your fault - and it would actually explain a lot."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Draco's face was flushed with indignation, the wind from the lake tousling his hair despite all his best efforts to keep it in order, locks whipping around his fingers as he pushed it back. Harry remembered the first time they had walked around the lake, and thought *how different, how strange, and how could I ever have guessed*, and smiled up into his face.

His voice was soft, and solicitous. "Were they cousins, Draco?" he inquired.

Draco smacked his head. "They were linked only by the sacred bond of matrimony, I'll have you know," he said sternly. "And they looked nothing alike, aside from both being blond and devastating. *I don't even look much like my mother.*"

"Aside from being blond and devastating, you mean," put in Harry, who knew this Malfoy.

Draco flashed him a dazzling smile. "But of course." He tossed back his hair superbly, and then looked almost pensive. "People say," he began almost tentatively, which was an odd tone for Draco to use.

"Yes?" asked Harry.

Draco paused for a few moments longer.

"That I look just like my father," he finished abruptly at last, and then looked up and spoke with an eagerness he was clearly trying to hide. "You saw my father, didn't you? Once in a bookstore, and once at the World Cup. Did you - think I looked like him?"

*He is looking just like his father.*

And the first time Harry had ever seen Lucius Malfoy, he had known he could only be Draco's father.

So like him, the Malfoy eyes and the Malfoy hair and the Malfoy face, the Malfoy heir created in Lucius Malfoy's image and designed to follow Lucius Malfoy's path. Except that Lucius Malfoy was gone, and the hair and the eyes and the face and the destiny belonged only to Draco, and Harry had never been so vindictively thankful for someone's death.

Harry wanted to say *No*. He wanted to say again, *nothing like him*, and have Draco believe it, and believe that it was good.

But there was that look on Draco's face, that ill-suppressed hunger, that fixed burning need for love you never had and could never have. Harry knew it because he had seen it in the mirror, and though Draco told himself and everybody else lies about being a spoiled child, Harry couldn't fail to notice desperation he knew from the inside out any more than he could believe his own lies about it not mattering now.

He reached out, tilting Draco's chin up. Draco submitted entirely to this, clearly presuming that it was for better examination of his features in order to compare them with paternal ones. It wasn't

about that. It was about...

That hair and those eyes and that face.

"I think you look better," said Harry.

Draco raised an eyebrow and leaned back, leaving Harry's hand hanging in space for an instant. "That would come in useful for the campaign posters, wouldn't it?" he remarked.

"Sorry?"

Draco leaned forward again, elbows on his knees. "My father always wanted me to go into politics," he said, "but I don't know. I'm not sure I'm interested, but then I'm not sure what I am interested in. Maybe something in Creative Magic, or maybe - I've always wondered about the Unspeakables."

"You'll work it out," Harry told him.

"I'll have plenty of time," Draco agreed coolly. "It's not like I can do anything until the war is over. I've got things to do, people to organise, and who knows what could happen."

Meaning that Voldemort could win, or Draco could die, but with Draco being too much of a defiant brat to admit either possibility.

Harry wouldn't allow either of them to happen.

"You'll work it out," he said again, more firmly.

Draco smirked. "Your faith touches me," was all he said. "Maybe I will be a gentleman of leisure, reclining on silk pillows with dozens of dancing girls and chocolates to hand."

"Sounds good to me," Harry answered. "You did say I was invited over. I like white chocolate."

Draco passed a hand over his brow, looking suddenly and very dramatically faint.

"Typical of your heartlessness to harp on about food when I am perishing of malnourishment," he said reproachfully. "Not that I blame you, Harry, for bringing me out here to starve to death. Don't let my early death prey on your mind for a moment, I'd hate to think that my tragic passing upset you."

"It's half past one. I don't think you're going to die just yet."

"Even though you will be directly responsible for my death, don't let the burning guilt consume you. I forgive you, Harry, I really do, in spite of the torturous hunger gnawing at my very vitals."

Draco looked martyred. Harry sighed in resignation.

"You can look in the hamper if you like, Draco."

"Yay," said Draco, seizing it and beginning to rummage through its contents. "Hmm, hmmm, hmm, sandwiches, cheese and ham and you have no imagination, do you, hmm, hmm, hmm, what's in this

flask?"

"Pumpkin juice," Harry said.

"And the other one?"

"Well, coffee."

Draco beamed.

"Coffee," he noted with great pleasure. "Oooh, and - weeds. Weeds, Potter. I'm not eating weeds, I don't care how good they are for the complexion."

"It's Gillyweed," Harry explained. "In case the boat tips over."

"In case the boat tips over?" Draco looked scandalised. "How unsafe is this vessel? Why didn't you share your doubts on its seaworthiness earlier? Are we going to spring a leak?"

"Maybe in your brain," Harry theorised, and looked down. "Like I was going to take chances with you. Idiot."

Draco sounded slightly mollified. "Oh."

Then he recommenced rummaging through the hamper.

"Hmm, biscuits, hmm, oh!" He glanced up, startled. "Blood-flavoured lollipops. You remembered."

Harry shrugged and nodded uncomfortably, and then looked back to see if Draco was pleased.

"Assortment of sweets, hmm, hmm, mmm, and a spoon, all right, and - a jar of marmalade, and - a packet of icing sugar." Draco looked up again, letting his hair fly any which way for once, and his glance was almost helpless. "Oh, *Harry*."

"Well, I wanted it to be the weirdest picnic ever," Harry excused himself.

"Best. Day. Ever," Draco said with conviction. "Harry, we have to do one for you next. Maybe I will hire dancing girls. What do you want?"

Harry started taking out the boring things that Draco had ignored, like plates, and laying them out.

"I like being with you," he answered matter-of-factly. "Pour me some pumpkin juice."

"Consider dancing girls," Draco suggested, getting the flask. "I think you'll find the idea preying on your mind. Or at least twisting around a pole in a rather predatory fashion."

"We'll see," Harry agreed placidly.

He looked over at Draco, who was concentrating on Harry's cup, face intent as the boat rocked slightly, bottom lip sucked in just a tiny bit.

"We should order dancing girls when you move into your flat," Draco decided brightly, straightening up. "I've never actually ordered dancing girls before. It would be the best housewarming ever."

Harry winced. "My godfather and Professor Lupin are coming to my housewarming. Don't make me think these things."

"You know, they're really pretty old," Draco remarked. "I'm sure they know about -"

"No, Draco. Don't even suggest it; don't even say the word in connection with my role models. Stop it, how would you like it if I did it?"

"Weeeeell, I think I can argue for reasonable doubt with Professor Snape," Draco pointed out, frowning thoughtfully. "I mean, he's so moody, and he has that terrible hair. Then again, he is a Slytherin..."

"What, are - like, flings a Slytherin ritual?"

Draco paused and tilted his head, the sun reflecting off his hair and making him look impossibly innocent.

"Yes, Harry, that's it. It's a ritual. When all Slytherins are twelve, they are forcibly deflowered on an altar stained with the blood of lambs, while dressed in rubber, *by an elderly relative*. Don't say a word. Do I disrespect your house traditions?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Thanks for that image, Draco. I didn't mean it that way."

Draco sniffed. "I'll have you know that we hold purity in great esteem. Not one of us ever says a word to Crabbe on the subject of his personal virtue."

Harry had to look away and have a moment of reflection before that terrible mental image could be assimilated. The lake was darker blue under a slightly darker sky, melding with the hazy dark-greens and greys of the land beyond.

"Are you saying that -" He stopped, and swallowed. "So, like, Goyle has?"

"Oh, yes." Draco nodded calmly. "With Millicent Bulstrode."

"Urgh, stop. Are you *sure*?"

"I'm very sure. He woke me from the sound sleep of the just and mildly intoxicated in order to check on a certain vital spell."

"Oh, ugh, my God. What did you *say*?"

Draco's smile was impish. "As I recall, 'Go get her, tiger.' " He smirked at Harry's look of speechless horror. "I'm a good friend," he defended himself stoutly. "Part of the bargain is to be supportive of your friend's learning experiences."

"Blech," Harry said succinctly. "I never even knew they were seeing each other."

Draco squinted at Harry as if trying to decipher hieroglyphics.

"I don't think they were," he answered slowly. "They were just experimenting. It didn't have much to do with emotions."

"Oh, repulsive," Harry said.

"Thank you very much," Draco returned absently, opening the icing sugar.

"Draco, I didn't mean - You never actually told me how, er, many -"

Draco raised an eyebrow inquiringly. Harry gave up and punched his shoulder.

"Come on."

He relented. "All right, then. Five. Two relationships, two flings and one friend who things happened with a few times."

"Only five?"

Draco looked insulted. "I happen to think that's pretty good for eighteen, Potter," he informed him. "What kind of thing do you people think goes on in the Slytherin dungeons, anyway? There's no whips and leather. In fact, some evenings we do crosswords."

"Right, sorry," Harry said. "Don't look at me. I'm not an expert on this subject."

"Yeah, I know." Draco looked deep in thought. "Harry, would you - would you mind if I - ?"

"What?"

"Would it be completely disgusting if I put the icing sugar and marmalade into a sandwich?"

"Yes," Harry said, very definitely. "Yes it would. Don't you dare do it while I'm eating."

"Oh, fine," said Draco sulkily, licking the marmalade off one finger. It was probably the effect of how pale he was that made the inside of his mouth look such a dark red. Harry realised that Draco had just asked him a question.

"Sorry, what?"

"I guess it upsets you because you're waiting for some great big feeling?"

Harry was uncomfortable enough about this conversation not to want to meet Draco's eyes. He looked at the inseam on Draco's T-shirt instead.

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't really thought about it that much."

That was true. There was always so much else happening, and nothing had been terribly immediate. The issue was a vague promise of comfort and enjoyment in the future, but had always seemed basically disquieting.

"Budge over, I want to stretch out," Draco said imperiously.

Harry obligingly shifted to one side. Draco stood up carefully, still clutching his bag of icing sugar, and stepped over the plates. Then he settled comfortably by Harry's side and continued.

"Bet you are, though," he said. "I know you, with all your ludicrous ideals. You know things aren't black and white, but you want them to be."

"And why is that so ludicrous?" Harry asked, nettled.

Draco leaned back on his elbows.

"Nothing's absolute," he said lazily, stretching out. "It can't be. There's no such thing as absolute beauty or absolute perfection, or absolute feeling. I can't feel absolute faith in someone, and Weasley can't feel absolute affection for Granger, and - my father couldn't feel absolute love for me."

That Draco should gauge the emotions of the world by the experience he had of a cold-blooded murderer.

"You're contradicting yourself," he told him in a soft voice. "You told me once about how you live, remember? About living with fury. If that's how you exist - if you have to live with passion - then what is that but absolute?"

Draco lifted himself up on one hand, hair soft from the breeze still ruffling the lake.

"Murderous paradox, isn't it?" he asked.

He looked almost pleased by it, by inventing an impossible world around himself. Harry didn't see why he should seem so complacent about what seemed like painful uncertainty about everything.

He could have done with, and believed in, a few more promises of absolute. He wanted an answer for everything so much.

He reached out, and touched Draco's shoulder.

"I completely want to be your friend," he said.

Making a promise of absolute himself was the best he could do.

"Now can we please talk about something else?" he asked ruefully. "I could see that wanting-to-set-me-up glint in your eye from a mile off."

"I was just considering the merits of Lavender Brown," Draco said hopefully. "We've been overlooking her, you know. She's a charming girl."

"Draco, I have warned you."

Draco's lip quirked.

"Oooh, Harry, I fear your wrath. Whatever shall become of me?"

Harry hit him over the head with a napkin. "Shut up."

"Don't hurt me," Draco squeaked. "The might of the great and merciless Harry Potter is known to all. I quail before your titanic power. I should fear I was doomed, did I not possess a secret weapon \_"

Draco moved in a fraction, and reached out a hand to Harry's face.

His fingers opened, and he tried very hard to force a Nose-Biting Teacup onto Harry's nose. Harry only just caught his wrist in time, and then yelled and pushed him off. Draco landed on his back, the hand with the Teacup in it curled on his chest and a fiendish smile still playing around his lips.

"You carry around tricks in your pockets," Harry said. "You really do behave like a four-year old."

"Nearly got you," Draco said smugly.

"That's not the point."

"A-*ha*! You admit it!"

Harry shook his head and mumbled, "Four," again. A drop of rain fell on his hand and he saw Draco's eyes focus on it in utter dismay.

"Oh no," he declared. "It's going to rain."

Harry shrugged. "So we'll get a little wet."

Draco's face crumpled. "My hair," he said in a small, piteous voice. "It's going to be ruined. Ruined, I tell you!"

Harry looked up at the sky. The clouds did look dark grey, and somewhat ominous. Raindrops were hitting him with ever-increasing regularity.

"We could go back," he offered reluctantly.

Draco dived for something at the other end of the boat. "Nah," he said. "I have a plan. Under the robe!"

At that point, he flung his own discarded robe over his and Harry's head.

"Wonderful plan, Draco," Harry remarked in a muffled voice, trying to move further under the cloak. "I can't see a thing. Oooh, Slytherins are truly cunning folk."

"Quiet, you," commanded Draco, scrambling in order to make sure his hair was covered. Harry felt Draco's wrist brush his knee.

"Draco."



"Yes?" Draco said in a voice of perfect innocence.

"You're thinking of dropping the Nose-Biting Teacup in my lap. Aren't you." There was a pause.

"... maybe," Draco admitted, sounding vexed.

Harry laughed and grabbed Draco's wrists. "Stop thinking it."

Clearly the wrath of Harry Potter was upsetting Draco less than the rain. They could both feel it falling thicker onto the cloak.

"Eeep," said Draco, moving in even more, and then laughed. His hair was tickling Harry's ear, and as he spoke Harry could feel the brush of his nose against Harry's cheek and the warmer and slightly different tickle of breath. "It would have been funny," Draco assured him. "It was hilarious when I dropped one into Longbottom's lap. He *screamed*."

It took Harry a moment to process this.

"When you *what*?"

"It was ages ago," Draco said hastily. "And now I come to think of it, it wasn't me. It was Crabbe or Goyle or someone, I probably didn't even give the order, and maybe it wasn't even Longbottom, it could have been anyone, and I might not even have been there, and anyway it was very funny."

Harry blinked in the darkness under the robe, a tiny lock of Draco's hair brushing Harry's neck.

"You're not only four, you're a nasty four-year-old," he said, moving slightly to escape the stray lock.

He felt the warm explosion of breath on his skin when Draco laughed.

"All right, it was last week."

"I'm rolling my eyes at you, Draco. Just so you know. Don't do anything like that again."

"Where did this rain come from?" Draco asked irritably.

"Um, probably the sky. Promise me."

"Fine, I promise never to sic teacups on Longbottom again. You're no fun, Potter."

"You're a vicious little ferret sometimes, *Malfoy*."

Draco squawked, which was a terrible noise when someone's mouth was so close that when he started in outrage, his lips brushed a spot under your ear.

"You said the 'F' word! All my friends have to promise never to say the 'F' word!"

Harry breathed deeply, because it was stifling under that robe, and then whispered, "Ferret ferret ferret," in Draco's ear.

It took him a minute to realise the tiny thrumming sound by his cheek was Draco trying to suppress a laugh.

"I don't need this," Draco informed him dolefully, and managing only to snicker once. "It's pouring, and it's going to last forever, and the rain is already seeping into my hair."

"Well, I'm all right here," Harry said. "Anyway, after the downpour there might be a rainbow."

Draco considered. "Well. Do you have the coffee flask?"

\* \* \*

There was a faint rainbow, dim as if Dean had painted a picture and now the colours were running and fading into the deep wet blue. The dream-pale colours dissipated in the bright sunlight almost immediately.

Draco and Harry lay on the bottom of the boat, soaking up the last of that sunlight.

"I have never seen anyone eat that much chocolate," Harry remarked lazily, as Draco levered himself up once more for another Chocolate Frog.

Draco turned to face him, looking offended. "I need it for energy," he explained severely.

Harry smiled and shut his eyes. "Sure you do."

"Harry, you may be one of my best friends and all that, but if you insinuate that I am fat I will hit you with the picnic hamper. And there'll be no commentary on the choice of weapon from you, either."

"Who's insinuating anything?" Harry asked lazily, poking Draco in the stomach. Draco kicked him and squirmed away, raising himself on his elbows in order to glare at Harry and give a speculative look to the Nose-Biting Teacup, which he had balanced precariously, and with a certain admirable amount of nerve, on his belt buckle. Harry gave the Teacup an apprehensive glance. Then he sat up, reached for the Chocolate Frogs and, snatching it on his way past, flung it into the lake.

"Hey!" Draco sat up fast and glared. "You polluted. I'm telling Professor McGonagall on you."

Harry lay back and shut his eyes. "Okay."

"Oooh, Harry Potter, you're such a rebel," Draco said in a sing-song voice, eerily reminiscent of Colin Creevey. "You're bad to the bone. Luring away innocents from their honest day's work..."

"What exactly were you planning to do?"

Harry opened his eyes to see Draco lift his chin. "I had something very important to do. I was going to get my hair cut."

"I'm so sorry to have ruined your vital plans," Harry said solemnly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I expect so. Because, well, kind of worth it." Draco took another contented bite and beamed,

waving the Frog in illustration. "Chocolate," he pointed out.

Harry nodded, feeling drowsy and content. The sun was slightly lower on the horizon, all yellow warmth and so close, and Draco was here on the water and not frightened. Everything was painted in bright simple colours and everything, for a few minutes, could be all right.

Draco looked like he was trying to fall asleep and eat chocolate at the same time, eyes hooded, clothes just slightly out of place so that his T-shirt rose to show a fraction of an inch of skin. He smiled lazily around the chocolate when he caught Harry's eye.

"Kind of worth it," he repeated, and then, "What?"

There was a smudge of chocolate at the edge of Draco's mouth.

"Um, nothing," said Harry, reaching over and brushing it off with the side of his hand. "You just had a little - something -"

"Right, thanks." Draco lay back, looking boneless in his relaxation, one hand curled behind his head. "Hmm. The sun will be going down soon."

"Yeah, we should... get back."

"Hmmm. In a few minutes."

A few more minutes, and in them the sun was growing dimmer, and it was getting just a little colder. Draco's breathing was soft and regular, and when he spoke again his voice was like liquid, happy and completely without strain.

"Harry, how *are* we going to get back without the oars?" Harry sat up, felt around in the pocket of his jacket and took out his wand.

"*Accio* oars," he said, and grinned as they came flying. "Honestly, Draco. Try to remember you're a wizard."

Draco looked at the wet oars for a speechless moment, and then made a horrible face at Harry. Harry laughed and tossed him one of the oars and Draco concentrated on making an even more horrible face.

"I'm such a *slave*," he muttered in martyred fashion. "I could get *calluses*."

"They're manly," Harry told him, and smiled as Draco made a third horrible and indignant face just before pulling his robe back on.

"I happen to be exceedingly manly already, I'll have you know," he said in muffled tones.

The sound of the oars in the water was slow and steady, Draco glancing over at Harry to see how to do it, their oars falling almost in sync. Harry only felt mild regret once the boat hit the shore, bumping against it slightly, and Draco picked up the hamper and flung it on the shore.

"I think you probably smashed the plates."

"Live dangerously," Draco suggested brightly, standing up and leaping out of the boat. Which, since Harry had just started to get up, resulted in the boat almost capsizing. Harry gave him a Look and Draco laughed helplessly, once, and then reached out his hand.

"I'm sorry, come on," he said, and Harry took his hand even though the boat was still shaking and Draco pulled him out too fast, so he gasped and almost stumbled, and Draco laughed again with the breathless glee of this whole day, and dropped Harry's hand while Harry was still unsteady. The light of the sinking sun was gold in his windblown hair and Harry was - was happy, and laughing too, and still caught in that moment where he was about to fall. He leaned forward and grabbed the front of Draco's robes, almost to keep his balance, and just as they both stopped laughing he kissed him on the mouth.

Harry shut his eyes, the outline of the sun around Draco's hair vivid on the darkness behind his eyelids. There was an instant where his mind was empty of all thought and Draco's lips were so soft.

Then his eyes blinked open, and he started back and looked at Draco.

Draco's face was cold and hard, and the sun was gone.

"So that's what all this was about," he said, his voice absolutely furious, and then he turned and stalked away.

Harry was left standing by the lake, staring after him in horror.

# Chapter Thirteen: The Way We Were

*Once upon a time  
When we were friends  
I gave you my heart  
The story ends*

Harry was lying in bed that night, on the point of sleep.

He could not stop thinking about what had happened. He had not been able to think of anything else for hours, and it could not be any different here in the soporific darkness, Ron's breath slow in the bed next to him, his eyes shut tight as if he could will himself into oblivion.

*Why did I do that?*

Why had he even wanted to... what had possessed him to... He had no answers for himself. He was... he liked *girls*. So what the hell had he been playing at? Had he ever even thought about it...?

Thought about what it might have been like today, if Draco's soft mouth had parted under his. If he had been allowed to touch that body, run hands over Draco's chest up to that neck, with Draco's hair so soft between his fingers, and if Draco had touched him too...

Draco's body against his. The taste of him and the thought of those lips pushing back with concentrated ferocity, his head tilted back as Harry kissed him, his skin smooth and sweet under hands and mouth... Draco's voice growing dark and low as it did when his emotions were intense.

"Harry! Harry!"

Harry woke with a gasp and looked up at Ron's concerned face.

"You were making noises," Ron explained. "Was it - a dream about You-Know-Who?"

Harry gulped. "Er, no. It was... It's all right."

Ron nodded sympathetically, and went back to bed.

Harry lay in the darkness, trying to get his breathing back under control. All sweaty and frantic now. Not good.

So - it was no good trying to think up rational explanations. Hot beads of perspiration were slipping down his face, making his pyjamas stick to his clammy skin. Desperation was making things starkly simple.

*I want him.*

Wanted him badly. Why hadn't he realised before...? Had he felt...

Harry closed his eyes and tried to shut out thought, but images kept flooding back to him, tiny vivid particles of colour hitting the darkness. His throat was dry. The feel of Draco on top of him at the

Duelling Club. The curl of his mouth when he smiled. The glitter in his grey eyes, as if the sun had just burst out on a storm-tossed sea. The almost malicious and almost childish sound of his laugh. The feathery feel of his hair under Harry's hand.

Harry realised that his teeth were clenched and his body arched in a spasm of longing. He tried belatedly to calm himself.

*I am unbelievably stupid.*

He should have realised - and he should never have done what he had done. The memory of Draco's face hit Harry now like a blow to the stomach. That look of suffering turned in on itself, how his mouth went tight and his features all seemed to sharpen with the effort of holding himself in. Harry knew it so well, and he had never meant to... oh, how could he have made Draco look like that?

The bitter twist of his lips, and that last distinct glance of - betrayal. I never meant to hurt him! Harry thought with a sudden wrench of anguish. I never, ever meant to do that. Not Draco.

He's been hurt enough. I know that. Nobody knows that as well as I do.

And it was with this pain, rather than with the irrepressible happiness earlier or this sudden shock of desire, that Harry understood exactly how much this lonely acerbic creature had come to mean to him.

*Draco.*

How was he going to make this right? How on earth could he make this up to Draco? How could he even *face* Draco again after that?

He absolutely could not bear the idea of losing Draco. Draco was - he *needed* him!

Harry pressed his face into his pillow.

Things would have been simpler if the Triwizard Tournament hadn't happened. Things used to be clear.

He could not bear it if things went back to the way they had been.

*So that's what all this was about*, Draco had said. Draco thought the whole friendship was just some kind of hormonal impulse. Draco thought...

Draco was probably disgusted and horrified, and Draco thought...

Draco thought that Harry didn't care about him.

And how was he supposed to explain? He couldn't say that he didn't want Draco, and then Draco would still think...

Harry hardly slept that night.

He said 'Draco', under his breath many times, much as he had said 'Voldemort' when he was

younger. Daring the object of his thoughts to appear, conjured out of the air by his call. He had almost wanted to summon Voldemort then, to try and fight him, to banish fear.

*Name the demon and it loses its power.*

He wanted to summon Draco - for a thousand things. The desire for revenge was among them, the urge to demand, how could you believe I was using you, how *dare* you make me feel like this and then run away. He also wanted to simply have Draco with him, quiet and comfortable, simply to be able to glance over and receive an occasional smile.

And he wanted to kiss him again.

Harry bit his lip and shut his eyes.

\* \* \*

He could not respond to Ron the next day. He barely saw Hermione in the common room. It was as if they could not be there, as if he was operating on a different level, was looking up through water to their dimly perceived forms.

Only one thought was impelling him today, this one driving anxiety.

And when he reached the Great Hall, there was only one face that was real, that he could see at all clearly.

Draco was at his level. Draco was all he could see.

He was sitting at the Slytherin table, toying idly with some toast. Harry could only make out the too-sharp curve of a chin, and the licks of blond hair lying against his neck. It held him, for a moment. He had never realised how true the metaphor of a pinned butterfly could be. He was transfixed by a single point of pain, regret and worry and affection and desire all forming a sharp edge. Confusing and tearing feelings churned inside him and his throat ached as if something was trying to claw its way up.

Once he could move and breathe, Harry acted. He could not help himself. He went over to the Slytherin table, desperately uncaring about making a scene, and said, "I need to talk to you."

Draco looked up.

The look shocked Harry backwards. It was a single purposeful blast of vision, like a swordthrust, and it was entirely lacking in any emotion but anger.

"Then you can go on needing, Potter."

His tone was furiously cold.

"Draco -" Harry said, terrified to hear the depth of passion in his own voice. Draco's plate and cup went clattering down the table as he shot upright, his face cut clean by venom.

"My name is Malfoy," he hissed.

Harry hated the remorseless lack of warmth in Draco's gaze, and found it utterly impossible to look away.

"Draco," he flung at him, almost in a challenge.

"Shut your mouth."

It was a chilly, typically Malfoy thing to say. And Draco's fists were clenched on the table as if he were aching to kill something.

"Draco, won't you just listen -"

Draco snapped.

He jumped over the table, and seized hold of Harry's robe in order to shove him backwards into a chair.

Harry stumbled at the painful impact, but refused to fall.

Draco's mouth twisted with frustrated spite. He stood there looking white as rage, utterly malevolent and very much as if he wanted to strangle Harry with his bare hands. Something must have flickered in Harry's eyes, because Draco's became slits of steel.

"No," he said, each word a carefully selected weapon. "I won't listen. I never want to see or speak to you again. This whole farce of friendship is over, Potter, so go crawl back to your loathsome little cronies and leave me the hell alone."

He still had hold of Harry's robes. Harry grabbed his in return.

The flare of outrage in Draco's eyes reminded him too forcibly of yesterday, brought back with terrible clarity the taste of his mouth. Harry forced the memory away with a surge of anger.

"Stop being a stubborn bastard and listen to me!" he shouted. Draco shoved him, and Harry shoved him back. And then suddenly they were fighting, not hitting each other but locked in straining, shoving, utterly fierce combat.

"Get away from me!" Draco snarled, lashing out savagely.

"Bloody well *listen!*" Harry was breathless from the effort of fighting. Draco's arm hit out, brutally cutting off his air supply.

"I don't want to!" he spat.

Harry flung the arm down.

"I don't give a damn! Because I'm not giving up until you do, I won't go away, I'm not letting you walk off from this! Because you're my *friend!*"

"I'm not your friend," Draco growled. With a sudden rush of strength, he hurled Harry backwards.



Harry grabbed Draco's wrist as he fell, and caught himself. They both saw the other wince at the force of the blow, the sickening twist of the wrist.

Then they were at arm's length, and slowly became aware of their surroundings. All of Hogwarts was staring open-mouthed.

It didn't seem to matter.

Draco's face untwisted gradually, and as he gazed at Harry it seemed still and unforgiving as a frozen landscape.

"I'm not your friend," he explained, "because I hate the very sight of you."

Harry stood stricken.

It had been stupid to place his trust and affection in someone like Draco Malfoy. He realised that now, numbly, even while he knew that the mistake was irrevocable. Draco had a horrible capacity for cruelty.

Now, watching the slow collapse of Harry's face, the corner of Draco's mouth curled in satisfaction.

"Now get lost," he ordered, and turned away.

Harry watched him leave the Great Hall, and then Blaise Zabini's sneering face came into view.

"You heard what he said," Zabini snapped. "Get away from our table, Potter. You're not welcome here."

He stood close to Harry, and lowered his voice.

"You were *never* welcome here. And now he's come to his senses, and if you come anywhere near him again - you're going to regret it."

Zabini stepped back, Crabbe and Goyle flanking him, the promise of menace in their faces.

Harry stared at them dully.

*He's come to his senses.*

\* \* \*

Harry ran up the stairs from the Gryffindor common room, ran so fast the world was blurring in front of his eyes. He didn't want to talk to anyone, couldn't explain and couldn't sort out his own feelings and could barely think through the pain -

He hit Ginny Weasley so hard the breath was knocked out of them both.

"Harry!" she said in her soft sympathetic voice. "I just heard about the fight. Are you - okay?"

Harry backed away from her with sudden alarm, trying not to be close to her in the darkness of

these stairs, trying not to see her hopeful wide-eyed gaze in the dimness because it was all so like... It was just like...

Back in sixth year, when Snape and Sirius had both tried to remove five hundred points from each other's favoured houses, and all of them had found themselves storming up to Dumbledore's office to complain about each other.

"You know, Snape," Sirius had snapped, "you might be a less utterly obnoxious person if you hadn't been born hideous and unable to get any."

Every Slytherin outside Dumbledore's office had sucked in a hissing breath. The assembled Gryffindors and Slytherins had all glared at each other.

Harry, standing staunchly at Sirius' right, had sent a ferocious look of hatred towards Malfoy, who had his arms crossed and was positioned firmly on Snape's left. Malfoy had curled his upper lip disdainfully.

"I can't think of anything which might make you less obnoxious," Snape had replied. "You were unbearable from the moment we met - you and your precious cronies, the traitor, the werewolf and the utterly hypocritical -"

Sirius had lunged at Snape then, black eyes flashing, and they had fallen in a flurry of robes and fists.

Malfoy had turned, clearly with the intention of lending his favourite teacher a bit of dishonourable help. Harry, stinging from the insult to his father and the outrage from Snape's latest points cut, wasn't having any of that.

He had grabbed Malfoy's arm.

Malfoy'd whipped around, his cold eyes bright with fury, and swung at him.

"Don't you *dare* touch me, Potter," he had ordered, even as his fist connected with Harry's jaw, snapping Harry's head back.

Harry hadn't thought before he had hurled himself at Malfoy and knocked him to the ground. He was barely aware of both houses taking this as a signal for instant war, couldn't hear the roar of erupting mayhem above his pounding blood and the pained gasp of Malfoy's breath.

He had heard Malfoy's icy voice very clearly.

"Of course, you people think that scrapping like mad dogs solves everything. Where does your convict godfather get off, attacking our head of house?"

Then he'd jerked his elbow up to hit beneath Harry's ribs.

Harry had let out a sick startled breath, and Malfoy had taken the opportunity to shove Harry off him and onto the floor.

"Where does Snape get off, insulting my father?" Harry snapped.

Malfoy'd calmly rolled on top of him and given him a bloody nose.

"I didn't hear him insulting anyone," he sneered. "I just heard him telling the truth."

"How would you feel if people talked like that about your family?" Harry demanded. "Oh wait, I forgot, you don't have feelings. About anyone other than yourself, that is."

He'd grabbed Malfoy's robes in a fist, kept him lying on Harry as he punched him in the gut.

"And you don't have a family," Malfoy had said between gritted teeth.

And just - pure *rage* at all Malfoy's crap had levered Harry up off the ground, scrambling almost upright and then falling into the seething mass of bodies on top of Malfoy.

"Another thing I forgot," Harry had snarled, "was that everyone does talk like that about your family."

Malfoy's eyes had narrowed even as he tried to heave Harry off.

"You bastard, Potter."

He'd hit Malfoy in the mouth.

"Takes one to know one, Malfoy."

He had seen with fierce satisfaction the blood welling on those curling lips, that arrogant hateful face going flushed with frustration as Malfoy struggled to get Harry off him. He'd exchanged punches and kept him pinned down as he fought and lashed out, twisting as Malfoy shoved up and breathing came ragged and...

Dumbledore had come out of his office and the brawling mass had frozen.

"Students!" he'd bellowed. "What is the meaning of this? Where are the teach-"

His voice had been cut off as Sirius and Snape raised their heads, and two furious pairs of black eyes met his.

Harry had glared down once more at Malfoy, who was breathing and bleeding heavily, but who nevertheless returned the glare with interest. Then he had pushed himself up and off. Malfoy'd risen in one smooth motion, and both of them backed away to their respective sides with their eyes still locked.

Dumbledore had dismissed the students while he dealt with Snape and Sirius, and Harry had made his way up the stairs from the common room, rather urgently wanting a shower. He must have been distracted or something, because he'd almost knocked down Ginny Weasley. She had smiled at him despite it.

"Harry! I just heard about the fight. Are you - okay?"

Harry had realised he was still breathing hard. He needed a shower now, but she was standing there

hopefully and he had to answer her and he had been angry and frustrated and - just itching to do something...

He'd flashed on the memory of Malfoy's hateful pale face beneath him.

I wish I'd got one more good punch in, he had thought.

And he'd said, "I'm just fine," and taken hold of Ginny's hair gently, and kissed her with a sort of straining desperation to be doing something and to feel something...

Her hesitant kiss back hadn't been right and hadn't been enough and he was empty and everything was bleak, like always, and Harry'd drawn back as soon as he could.

He had looked at her with a sort of blind horror, and she'd blushed.

He looked at her now with a different sort of blind horror, but she blushed in just the same way.

"Even then," he whispered. "Oh - shit, even then, oh - I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm - I'm so sorry."

He fled up the stairs, and she stood trembling and delighted in his wake, caressing the memory of unmistakable desire darkening his eyes.

\* \* \*

Now he was sure, absolutely and hopelessly sure...

It was strange... wanting something again. Harry had almost grown used to the dull ache of not caring very much any more.

And now, suddenly, he wanted something so much.

It was terrible.

It came as a shock every morning. He would wake up tranquil, wondering perhaps what he and Draco would do today, and then something would remind him, and this astonishing new desire would hit him again.

Often, it seemed so bizarre Harry thought he was dreaming. Surely he couldn't - wouldn't he have known before...?

It only took a glimpse of Draco to resolve this doubt.

At other times the feeling would seem purely physical, the distress as well as the lust coiled up in his stomach, too real to be simply emotion.

Every time he tried to tell himself that he couldn't be... that way, something would occur to him, like...

Harry knew Draco Malfoy's mouth better than any other mouth on the planet. He had spent almost seven years watching it, knew every expression it could form. He had thought about every wicked

curl, every smirk, every scowl with varying emotions and equal degrees of intensity.

He had observed it in classrooms and Quidditch, focused on it as if simple furious attention could just force the boy to shut up.

At certain times he had glared in pure hatred at that mouth when it was snarling out something truly appalling, and he had visualised his fist slamming into it. More recently, he had tried to decipher emotions from that mouth. It went slightly tight when Draco was upset.

He had never dreamed, in all that focusing and hating and analysing, that he would come to obsession.

But perhaps it was inevitable.

Now when he passed him in the corridor, one corner of that mouth curled in involuntary disgust, and it hurt.

And when Harry was sitting in classrooms or walking through the school or staring up at the ceiling of his dormitory on yet another sleepless night...

That mouth was before him again, so flexible, which only expressed the emotions Draco wanted to express. His whole face was trained, including the curve of his mouth.

Harry thought about them, turned over the feel of them in his mind again and again. Dreamed about pressing his thumb down on that lower lip, feeling it give, being *able* to do that. Dreamed about the feel of that mouth, opening in returned kisses.

On the night before the next Young Order of the Phoenix meeting, during which he was planning somehow to talk to Draco, he dreamed.

He dreamed he was sitting by the lake, and the sky was grey and cold but that was all right because he was protected by the translucent walls of the maze.

Draco was walking towards him, sure and silent, wearing a set of Snape's robes. They were a little long and overlarge, the collar slipping down to the left. Harry stared at the soft white skin of exposed collarbone and throat.

"Why are you wearing those clothes?" he asked, since it seemed a little odd. Draco pushed Harry up against the wall next to the statue, and Harry closed his eyes and turned his face into Draco's hair.

Draco's voice was low and precise in his ear.

"Don't you know?" he said, and Harry just turned his face blindly towards the warmth of Draco's breath.

He blinked and stared at the face of a griffon, then a chimera, then a basilisk.

"Don't you know?" it asked him.

Hermione was kneeling on a sofa, sifting through a pile of books. Harry looked at them in confusion:

*Men Who Love Dragons Too Much* was among them, but she selected an enormous tome.

"Don't you know?" she inquired, taking off her glasses.

Draco leaned against his chest, and everything was all right, they were in the boat and nothing had ever changed, and Draco was saying, "I like cats," but all Harry could hear was '*Don't you know?*'

Harry woke up gasping.

He knew what he wanted.

\* \* \*

Hermione thought that the world could be restored to order, now.

Malfoy and Harry had had their huge public fight, and the entire ill-conceived friendship had fallen catastrophically and irrevocably apart. As for Harry's little - thing, well, teenage boys often had odd hormonal impulses, and Harry was too sensible to let it affect him for long.

It broke Hermione's heart to see him unhappy, but she and Ron tried to keep him amused. He smiled when Ron beat him at chess, even.

Everything else was so hard. She told herself *this* was going to be all right.

It was at the first Young Council meeting since the fight that she realised how wrong she was.

There was no scene. There was not even the slightest hint of unpleasantness, not the slightest hint of *anything*, and that, when it came to Draco Malfoy's reactions to Harry Potter, was strange and almost - terrible.

She saw Harry flinch when Malfoy glanced over at him, but Malfoy's gaze was impassive and simply swept the room, checking that everybody was present. And that lack of reaction actually shocked her, felt wrong at bone level.

He was just sitting there idly, twirling his quill in his fingers, and Harry had his eyes fixed on him, and she had never seen anything quite like this before...

Except that she had.

When Draco Malfoy had just joined the Young Order in fifth year, he had behaved in a perfectly civil manner all the way through the first meeting. Ron had announced that it was a Slytherin plot, but Ron also thought that the Slytherins made it rain when the Gryffindor Quidditch team practised.

Harry had vehemently agreed.

When Malfoy started passing him in the hallways and not insulting him, Harry twitched with annoyance.

On the third day Harry got his finger stuck in the gargoyle's mouth above the sink in the Potions classroom. Malfoy bit his lip, clearly dying to fire off several dozen insults and erupt into laughter,

and then passed over a towel.

Harry shoved Malfoy against the doorframe when they were leaving class, which was the first time Hermione could remember him touching Malfoy voluntarily.

"What's all this about, Malfoy?" he demanded. "What are you planning?"

"Get off," Malfoy snapped. "Are you having one of your psychotic episodes, Potter? Is your scar going off ag-" He paused, and breathed in. "I mean," he said tightly, "Why are you being so unreasonable? We all have to work together."

"I'll find out, you know," Harry said, and shoved him again.

"You do that," Malfoy told him, pushing him away and walking off. Harry had stared after him, face intent.

"I'm not letting him get away with this," he said. "Whatever it is, I mean." Hermione'd thought that he was spending too much time with Ron.

In the next Young Order meeting, Lupin had asked people to shake hands across the table in an effort to quell the hostility towards this Slytherin influx. Malfoy had glared over at Hermione, who he was sitting opposite, and said sharply,

"I don't see why I have to touch a Mud-"

Then he had shut his mouth, to the amazement of all, reached over and abruptly shaken Hermione's hand. He had sat back down quickly and begun writing on the parchment stretched out before him. He looked up several times when people said stupid things and Hermione had seen the palpable yearning to mock clamped down on, and the quill taken up to write ever more vigorously.

Hermione stood up at the end of the meeting and glanced over at the parchment in the moment before he could roll it up.

Over and over again, Draco Malfoy had written '*Get over yourself*'.

Harry, vibrating with anger, had interposed himself between Malfoy and the door.

"Look, what are you trying to do?" he exploded.

Malfoy's fingers had been white against his bag. "I'm trying to get through the door," he told Harry, obviously struggling to keep his voice even. "Do you think you could help me with that?"

"Oh, get over yourself, Malfoy," Harry snapped.

And Malfoy's face had slowly relaxed into its usual malice.

"Now, Potter, why should I do that?" he inquired lazily. "I think I'm *marvellous*."

Harry's face had relaxed into its familiar Malfoy-induced expression of disgust.

"Only you and your girlfriend are deluded enough to believe something like that."

"At least," Malfoy had pointed out in acid tones, "I have a girlfriend."

Pansy Parkinson had appeared, glowering, at his elbow. Hermione had noted with amusement that she was slightly taller than Malfoy. Of course, Hermione was taller than Harry and Malfoy as well.

"Oh, congratulations," Harry snapped.

Malfoy and Harry had been hissing at each other, like two small but ferociously angry cats. Harry grabbed Malfoy's elbow.

"I *knew* you hadn't changed!"

Malfoy'd raised an eyebrow. "Why try to improve on perfection? You're right. I still think exactly the way I always have. I'll never be one of Dumbledore's little lackeys," he said. "So breathe a righteous little sigh of relief and push off, Potter. Go sign some autographs for the swooning little Creeveys, why don't you, and do try not to touch me again. I'm sure your retinue of Weasleys has given you lice."

He had shoved Harry smartly away, and walked off with Pansy behind him. Parvati had come up behind Harry and Hermione.

"He'd better pray he grows into that strut," she remarked. "Mind you, if he does..."

"Oh, be quiet and stop being ridiculous, Parvati," Harry had snapped, face twisting in revulsion.

After that Malfoy, while making an effort not to seriously disrupt the meetings, had no longer held himself back to the point where it looked as though his head would explode if he didn't taunt somebody.

That had happened, but back then Malfoy had been significantly worse at ignoring people. And then Harry had been bothered, even unduly so, and afterwards had shoved at Malfoy a good deal more... but he hadn't been upset.

And now Malfoy wasn't trying to behave better, but was actually being more unpleasant than he had been for a while. He was only acting as if he hardly noticed *Harry*, and for some reason Hermione found this a great deal more disturbing.

And Harry was now, clearly, in pain.

Hermione looked at him in concern throughout the Young Order meeting.

When Hannah Abbott came in late Malfoy drawled, "Please don't apologise, Abbott. It isn't as if these meetings are about anything important - although of course we all miss your unique contribution of squeaking at the alarming points."

Hermione had only been able to spare one glare for Malfoy in her anxiety. Harry looked as if he had hardly been sleeping. God, what made him think that malicious little idiot was worth all this?



Later Professor Lupin had quietly discussed the details of how much the Ministry had to disclose to Muggle governments, since a link between magic and Muggles had to be maintained.

"A link the Mudbloods keep open," Malfoy muttered.

"Mr Malfoy, that remark is entirely inappropriate," Lupin returned, as everyone in the room looked at Harry.

Harry said, "Draco, *don't*," in a low serious voice.

Malfoy had not looked at Harry, and said, "Malfoy," without a trace of expression or looking at him now.

At the end of the meeting, Harry had got up with a look of determination on his face that filled Hermione with dread and gone over to corner Malfoy before he reached the door.

"Malfoy, can I talk to you?" Terry Boot asked mildly, getting up with much less haste. Malfoy pushed by Harry as if it was the most natural thing in the world not to bother about him, and answered, "Of course."

"Look," Harry said, "Draco - God, Malfoy if you want -"

"Do you mind, Potter? I'm talking," Malfoy responded calmly.

Hermione put her hand on Harry's arm and tried to draw him towards the door. Every muscle in his arm was taut.

"I hadn't been able to catch you before," Terry said, putting his books in his bag. "I just wanted to apologise -"

"You can talk," Malfoy interrupted with a smile, and reached out to take off Terry's reading glasses, "but you have to remove these. I promise I'm not text."

Terry smiled back. Hermione had always quite liked Terry Boot, and was horrified to see how she had misjudged him. At the very least, she had had too high an opinion of his taste in companionship.

"I have to say I'm sorry about not telling everyone about you at the other meeting," he said. "I panicked. I realise now that I put you in a terrible position. Can you forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive," Malfoy told him easily. "It wasn't some kind of plot to defame me. You only meant to help."

At this point Hermione finally succeeded in pulling Harry out of the door.

"Come on," she said, "Ron's waiting for us in the common room -"

"I - you go ahead," Harry answered, his voice dark with unhappiness. "I just need to - clear my head. I'm going to go out and practise loops. The Cup Final's coming up, after all."

His mouth twisted, and he walked off quickly.

Hermione cradled her books to her chest, and made her way back to the common room. She was thinking about how indescribably strange it was to see Malfoy ignore Harry, and yet he had tried it once before.

She remembered him writing *'Get over yourself'*. The only reason Draco Malfoy, of all people, would have tried to control his own overweeningly arrogant behaviour was if he had a serious objective to attain. If he felt he absolutely had to succeed. He was an absolutely vile person, and he was hurting Harry now, but as she remembered back then, she could only think of one reason for the effort he had made. If he actually cared about the Young Order and the war, then...

She went into the common room, and took a chair at the table where Ron was sitting.

"Ron," she said slowly, "I'm starting to think Draco Malfoy isn't the spy."

She expected one of their fights, but Ron looked seriously up from his homework.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "The fight with Harry - I mean, I hate him, but if he was really trying to worm something out of Harry why would he fight with him?" He paused, and set his mouth. "It doesn't make any sense. What do you think we should do?"

Hermione leaned in to him, ready to cry with relief. Ron could be so difficult, and over and over again they would be frustrated with each other, but he had never let her down once when she really needed him.

She rested her hand on his shoulder, and almost said, "I love you," but instead said, "We need more parchment."

It was later when Harry returned, looking even more exhausted.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he came in. Ron looked up from the parchment Hermione was writing on.

"We're making a list of possible suspects for the spy," he said.

Harry's face was tight. "I thought you'd made up your mind on that subject."

"We're reconsidering," Hermione explained. "Do you - want to help?"

She hesitated because of the look on Harry's face, but Harry was nothing if not determined.

"Yeah," he said. "Give me that list."

\* \* \*

When Harry looked back on pain, with the distant feeling one got at the cusp of sleep, events stood out.

Draco's face when he had said 'Mudblood' again in the Young Order of the Phoenix meeting. Everybody had turned to look at Harry... and Harry had been silent, staring at the only countenance not turned to his, feeling a completely inappropriate pang of desire.

He already felt as if he was going mad, and then *this* had to be added to the mix. The Slytherin-Gryffindor match, which would decide the House Cup.

It had been the same in third, fifth and sixth year. Gryffindor and Slytherin, battling for the Cup, locked in first place with the eternally feuding Seekers locked in combat. It was different this year, for both of them.

Draco seemed even more focused. When they were standing in front of each other at the match, his eyes were narrowed down into nothing but steel and hate.

As Quidditch captains, they had been forced to shake hands.

It was the first skin on skin contact they had had since the... since that day on the lake. And the cool bite of Draco's unfriendly grip made Harry's head spin out of control. The furious strength of that grasp made him think of tight crazed clutchings, being alone together, pressed up against the Quidditch bleachers. That other Draco's face was heated and his soft hair was everywhere, even between Harry's lips as he kissed his neck, tasting sweat and skin and...

Draco yanked his hand away from Harry's as fast as possible. Harry was left blinking, staring at this icy cold face with its perfectly arranged hair as if he did not recognise it. He struggled against insane urges and the bleak bereft feeling he had, and tried to leave emotion behind him as he kicked off. For a moment it felt as if he had succeeded - he was buoyed up in the air, hair and robes whipping in the wind and all he felt was that normal hot rush of exultation.

It would be all right. He had had a crush on Cho Chang and it had never affected him. It was always like the first time he had ever flown...

When Draco had taunted him with Neville's Remembrall, and seeing the shock in Malfoy's eyes had been such satisfaction, and this was *nothing* like Cho Chang because she had never been his enemy and had never been his friend and never been anything real to him, and he had never really cared about her at all.

He needed it to be like it had been before. In either of the before's.

Last Quidditch match he had been boiling over with fury, and Malfoy had watched him with narrowed eyes, and at every break to discuss a foul he had gone and checked the rulebook. Harry remembered hating every molecule of Malfoy's body at about the third time Malfoy had chucked down his broomstick and gone striding over to the bleachers. Malfoy had sat down, flipped open the rulebook, glanced venomously over at Harry through his falling hair, deliberately licked the nib of his pencil and crossed out yet another rule. And Harry's hands had clenched on the broom just as they were clenching now as he realised he knew exactly how Draco flew. It was so calculated, he put so much into getting it exactly right, and it looked smooth as instinct but Harry knew from the pauses before kicking off and after hovering that it wasn't. He had watched for that, to feel the little thrill of triumph.

It wasn't so strange, for him to stare greedily at Draco Malfoy.

Not that he'd ever thought about it before, *of course not*, not when he felt guilty about thinking about that now. It wasn't about that.

It was random that memories were imprinted on his brain, like those long linked fingers or the sweep of a Quidditch robe to show a thigh curved tense over the stick.

A body impacted heavily against Harry's, and shock almost sent him tumbling out of the air. He banked sharply to the left, broomstick cutting into the path of the other player, and of course Harry knew who it was before he glanced over.

Draco was a blur of speed and wind-wild hair for a moment before his stick connected with Harry's and was jarred still. Then his face came into focus, flushed with exertion and strained by concentration and absolutely coldly furious.

He flung his head back and fixed Harry with a chilly glare.

"Don't you dare throw this away, Potter."

It took a moment for Harry to absorb what Draco was saying, because there was a sheen of perspiration on his bare white throat and warm beads of sweat glistened on the skin above his upper lip, rolling down slowly and trembling on the curved line of that mouth. Then he concentrated on his eyes and felt the beginnings of something like outrage reflected there.

"Throw the *game*?" he snapped. "Have a high opinion of yourself, don't you, Malfoy? I've never thrown a game in my life."

"Good," said Draco. "Keep it that way."

"Oh, go to hell," Harry snarled, banking right and speeding downward. In the corner of his eye he saw Draco's broomstick dip and hurtle to follow Harry.

There was no Snitch in sight. Harry just had the vague idea that he could help some of the players the Slytherins were targeting.

Last match Malfoy had knocked Ginny out of the sky, and Harry had only just been able to catch her. Harry vividly remembered the clutch of her hands around his neck, and the mocking glance Malfoy had tossed him as he argued with Madam Hooch that Gryffindor certainly shouldn't get a penalty shoot when all he'd been doing was fulfilling one of Weasley's little prepubescent fantasies.

This match, though... everything seemed quiet. The Slytherins were ahead on points because they were making little Natalie nervous and tricking Dean with feints, left when they were going right and vice versa, but they weren't actually - they weren't cheating. They weren't cheating.

The Slytherins *always* cheated in Gryffindor games. Since Draco had taken over in fifth year, they cheated far less with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Just like with his own flying, Draco liked to make it look easy, liked to show off and make sure it was clear that he could win without effort. He cheated when he had to, but it was rare... unless Slytherin were up against Gryffindor, when the cheating was redoubled and savage and drove Harry utterly insane.

Now it was the last Slytherin-Gryffindor match, the last they would ever play against each other, and everything was different and it was even more important. And Draco was too proud and angry to cheat.

For a sinking minute Harry thought about that, the ferocious obnoxious haughtiness of him, and he did feel tempted to throw the game.

But he knew Draco better than Draco thought he did, and he wasn't the kind of person who betrayed others, no matter what Draco thought. And he had never thrown a game in his life.

He did a swooping circle around the pitch, eyes searching and searching, and then he saw a glint of gold, high up in the sky.

Draco was far above him, far closer to it. He kicked the broom straight up, tearing vertically through the air with the wind sucking at his cheeks, and then Draco saw him and he was speeding towards it, *don't look at him don't look at him*, and all Harry could see was the Snitch and the other player was going to reach it first because his broom simply could not rise fast enough. So he stood up on his broom, swaying violently, and heard the scream of the crowd below as he caught the Snitch in his fist.

Draco's broom slammed to a stop beside Harry's, as if he were a bird who had hit a window. The blank look on his face made Harry realise what a slap in the face it must have been to see Harry win with something Draco had taught him, back when they were friends. It had just been instinct to win, in whichever way he could. And since he knew how to do it...

Draco's pale eyes were intent and unforgiving.

"At least you didn't toss it," he said.

And they were more alike in the end than anyone could ever have dreamed.

"Look," Harry said in desperation, reaching out with the hand that didn't hold the Snitch, "Please -"

Draco did not even glance over at him, just veered left and down, sharply removing himself from the sky.

Harry swooped down until he reached the ground, slowly touching down into the cheering mass of people and hugging Ron in a leap of exultation that fell too fast, and accepting yet another Cup he no longer wanted.

\* \* \*

Eventually Harry thought it would probably be safe to go have a shower. Ron had already gone when Hermione wrinkled her nose and refused to hug him.

Harry had already been hugged by Natalie, Ginny, Ron, Dean and - horrifyingly enough - Professor McGonagall. He was all ready for a nice, soothing shower.

"Potter, could I have a word with you?" asked Professor McGonagall.

Typical.

Harry nodded and gently disengaged himself from Ginny, who was talking brightly about his catch.

Professor McGonagall had become slightly rumpled in the mêlée that had occurred when everyone rushed Harry, and her hat was still askew. Harry's irritation subsided when he saw the streaks of silver in her black hair.

Seven years ago, all of her hair had been black as a crow's. Now the grey had almost consumed it.

She still had a commanding stride, though, and Harry had to lengthen his to keep up. He thought that was impressive for an elderly woman.

They passed the Slytherin stands on their way out of the Quidditch pitch. Draco, Zabini and Pansy were all sitting on Draco's Quidditch robe, spread out on the grass beside the stands. Harry turned his face away from Draco, trying not to stare.

Once they were out of earshot, and walking back up to the school, Professor McGonagall spoke and effectively captured his attention.

"Miss Granger tells me that you have been sleeping badly."

"I..." Harry said, and what he wanted to say was *How* and *why* and *It's none of your business*, but Ron told Hermione everything, Hermione had been giving Professor McGonagall bulletins about other students ever since she became Head Girl and he wasn't stupid enough to say anything like that to Professor McGonagall. Instead he said, lamely, "It's nothing."

"Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a voice sharp with exasperation, then stopped and softened her tone slightly. "You know what Professor Dumbledore told you about your dreams. The nightmares come for the same reason your scar hurts - if You-Know-Who is close or feeling especially murderous. Your dreams are warnings, and you cannot afford to ignore them."

Harry looked at her and tried desperately to frame 'Actually, my recent dreams are more along the lines of sexual fantasies, and thus do not involve Voldemort' into any sort of sentence he could utter in front of Professor McGonagall.

"I really think -" he began, and stopped himself from adding 'Draco Malfoy taking his clothes off probably isn't in any kind of evil plan'.

He glanced at his broom, and wondered whether he could just beat himself into unconsciousness with it.

"Potter, I know it must be difficult for you to judge what is important," McGonagall told him, not without sympathy. "That's why we had a Somnasieve brought in."

"Um. Professor, what's a Somnasieve?"

They reached the top of the hill, and McGonagall began to climb the steps.

"Come along, Potter," she said briskly. "I'll show you."

\* \* \*

Professor McGonagall's office had been moved to the dungeons during sixth year. She and Snape had

been doing research together Transfiguring suicide potions for soldiers into innocuous-looking badges that would turn back in times of need.

It was yet another stupid unnecessary pang when they passed Snape's empty office, and Harry remembered the desolate look on Draco's face when he said Snape's name.

McGonagall's office was as neat and tidy as Harry remembered from a couple of visits, a large desk with docketed stacks of paper dominating the room. The only personal touch was a small, shabby cat basket in one corner.

It hadn't changed at all except for the shallow stone basin in the centre of the floor, which was inscribed with runes and looked, aside from the absence of any silvery contents, to all appearances exactly like a Pensieve.

"Pensieves and Somnasieves in the wizarding world filter the contents of the human mind, and keep the intended residue," McGonagall said, looking happier now she had a chance to teach. Harry suppressed the urge, which he suspected Hermione would have found irresistible, to go find some parchment and start taking notes. "The Pensieve does this with thoughts. The Somnasieve does it with dreams. What did Professor Dumbledore tell you about Pensieves, exactly?"

Harry tried to remember.

"That it's... easier to spot patterns and links with the excess thoughts put in the Pensieve," he said slowly.

If his dreams being recorded would help with the war, he had to do it.

He wasn't ready to deal with this himself. He didn't know if he was ever going to be ready to let Professor McGonagall deal with it.

That couldn't matter.

"This Somnasieve is specially calibrated to draw out dreams locked in your subconscious, which your conscious mind has forgotten," McGonagall went on precisely. "It is also designed to draw out dreams which come to you from an outside source, rather than the dreams your own mind manufactures."

The relief was so great Harry could only stare.

"What?"

"It's an unusual design," McGonagall continued, and Harry thought he saw now that the runes on this stone basin were different and more complex than those on Dumbledore's Pensieve. "It comes by special order from the Ministry, and with several scrolls' worth of instructions from young Percy Weasley. I think it will siphon off only the dreams sent by You-Know-Who, which will save time and also be significantly less embarrassing for you."

Harry's head jerked up. Professor McGonagall was just ever so slightly pink, but smiling wryly.

"I was young once too, Potter," she informed him severely.

Harry's first impulse was to deny everything and demand whether she thought he had lewd dreams all over the place - which he *didn't* - and then he visualised the words he was about to say, which would include 'Draco Malfoy', 'fairly recent' and 'physically improbable'.

"Um, I doubt you were a teenage boy, Professor," he said instead, and she smiled just a bit more.

Harry walked forward, touched his forehead with his wand and then poked his wand into the basin.

He had wondered, after seeing Dumbledore do it, how it felt. He had thought he might see thoughts - dreams, now - rewind in his mind and then played again in the Sieve, like a video recorder.

Instead, it was slightly like a wound administered under anaesthesia must be. A slice into himself that was observed rather than felt, and then the flow of... something, a secondary silvery and more elusive kind of blood. He stood there and time seemed to stretch, viscous as the contents pouring into the Sieve.

And then he opened his eyes, which seemed to have fallen shut.

Soft light was rising from the Sieve, a pale shimmer hanging over the silver surface of it. Professor McGonagall was smiling approbation over the shimmer.

"Well then, Potter," she said. "Let's see. If it is working correctly, it should begin with your most recent warning dream."

She lifted her wand and put it into the Somnasieve.

Harry watched and saw the contents of the Somnasieve go transparent. The image of a lake briefly appeared, and then an image of a maze was superimposed on it.

And then there was Draco's pale face, slightly blurred but coming into ever clearer focus until only the ends of his hair still looked liquid, as if he was underwater. He prowled forward, Snape's robes slipping down off one collarbone, and Harry's image in the Somnasieve backed up against the wall.

Harry felt the simultaneous urges to yowl 'But you promised!' to Professor McGonagall, and to hide his face in his hands and proceed to die of embarrassment.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall. "Do you ever get a sense of menace from Draco Malfoy?"

"No -" Harry stopped, and added as forcefully as he could, "Not for years."

McGonagall only nodded, and kept staring into the Somnasieve. He watched her face and saw her expression subtly alter once, but looked back at the images and could not guess what had affected her.

Next was a small shred of violence Harry hadn't even remembered, just a stranger's face and a scream. Harry felt the line of his mouth go grim.

And then - the lake at night. That dream the night after Seamus had disappeared. Harry was



swimming, and he saw his bare shoulders and thought edgily, *Was I actually wearing anything?*

Professor McGonagall was one of the last people in the world he wanted to see him naked, next to Moaning Myrtle, and that ship had already sailed.

Boats, and Ron and Hermione and then Draco again but Professor McGonagall couldn't think that meant anything, Hermione was in both dreams too. Draco swimming and *Oh my God, was Draco actually wearing anything?*

"Are you all right, Potter?"

"Fine," Harry said faintly.

He had to start paying more attention to his subconscious.

Looking up after that dream, he saw that Professor McGonagall had definitely gone paler.

"What did you -"

"Hush," McGonagall said sternly, leaning forward.

There was a long stream of violent fragments of dreams, most of which Harry had not even remembered. A few had lingered, had lain by him coldly in his bed at Privet Drive or in the dormitory but always alone, but he had had no idea there had been so many. He wondered, with a chill, what kind of effect these dark bloody images had on a mind soaked with them.

He didn't know how long he could stand this.

"How far does it go back?" he asked, voice determinedly steady.

"Since you and You-Know-Who's agent, Quirrell, entered the school in your first year," Professor McGonagall returned quietly.

Harry shuddered and kept watching.

There was the one in fourth year, where an owl had carried him to Voldemort's window and Voldemort had cast Cruciatus on Wormtail...

"An eagle owl," Professor McGonagall said thoughtfully. "I know we have one in the Owlery. Do you know whose it is?"

"No," Harry lied instantly, and then paused for a frustrated moment. "I mean - Draco Malfoy's, but -"

Professor McGonagall waved him quiet.

*It doesn't mean anything, Harry told himself rebelliously. Obviously all these warnings are mixed up with random dream images. I must have noticed Draco's owl at breakfast that day or something.*

Since they were back at fourth year, he was vaguely reassured by the fact that lustful thoughts

were unlikely to spring forth and appal Professor McGonagall.

He kept doggedly watching, trying to steel himself against the screams. It was odd whenever he himself appeared in the Somnasieve, progressively younger and younger until at last he was a first year with astonishingly knobby knees, fighting with the Sorting Hat. The turban was in the dream. A warning that had arrived seven years too late. Harry looked up once that last dream was completed to share a rueful glance with Professor McGonagall, but she was looking even paler and more - scared than she had before.

"Professor, what is it?" he exclaimed.

She seemed to shake herself out of a reverie, her lips tight.

"It's nothing, Potter. I think I might have seen something... I'm not sure. It is no longer your concern."

"It's my mind!" Harry said.

Her voice was strained.

"Yes, and I thank you for your assistance, but you are still a student and I will place no further burden on you!"

Harry looked at her, speechless, but in the next minute McGonagall had composed herself.

"Could you carry a message to Professor Lupin for me?" she inquired. "I wish to see him as soon as possible."

Harry turned and walked quickly towards the door, then stopped at the threshold, struck with a sudden thought.

"Professor - it's already getting dark, and it's a full moon tonight."

He and Sirius had memorised the lunar calendar. And... Dumbledore was at the Ministry and would not be back until late. There was nobody to turn to.

"Should I go fetch Siri- um, Professor BI-"

"No," Professor McGonagall answered. "No. It can wait until morning. I - thank you, Potter, that will be all."

She was still visibly shaken. While Harry was hesitating in the doorway she walked over to her desk and leaned against it, pushing her hat off. It slid off and crumpled on the desk, and he saw the grey and the pins in her hair.

"When Miss Granger was looking through the books," she murmured, and stopped. She looked up and said sharply, "I said that will be all, Potter."

Harry hesitated another moment, and her face softened.

"If you ever need to talk, Potter," she said, a little stiffly, "I realise your godfather is available - but I am your head of house, after all."

Harry didn't feel as if he could do anything but try to reassure her with a quick, forced smile.

"Yes, Professor," he said, and left.

He walked wearily down the corridor, making for the entrance from the dungeons into the Great Hall. He felt that old ferocious hatred twisting in his stomach, like curling darkness and claws. Voldemort caused all this, caused all that pain and sent it to me...

He looked up, and was standing by the wall leading to the Slytherin rooms. Even his hatred felt tired.

He didn't - he didn't have anything worked out, and he didn't want anything new, he just... He wanted to see Draco, to have that gift of understanding offered in an easy voice and not meant to be comfort. He was so tired, and he was aching for something that felt right. Harry lifted his hand and pounded on the wall.

He pounded once or twice more, even after it became clear that nobody was going to answer. Then he realised that there were two younger Slytherins standing beside him, and regarding him stonily.

"Well?" he snapped. "Why don't you say the password and get in, then?"

They continued obdurately silent. He let his hand fall.

"Fine," he told them. "But you can tell him I'm coming back."

He stormed off, and there was nothing in the world but that black hatred, and being utterly alone with it.

\* \* \*

Hermione didn't know exactly what had happened with Malfoy, but she could see what it had done to Harry.

She could see what it had done to Harry, it wasn't *difficult*... the difficult part was knowing what to do. Because she loved him as she had always loved him, but he didn't come to her with his problems any more, and she didn't know how to reach out and reclaim that old trust, let alone help him.

And it was a heartbreaking thing about friendship, that even when she knew she was going to blunder... she didn't know how not to try.

Harry had come back from his talk with Professor McGonagall and refused to talk all evening. He was sitting in front of the fire with his legs stretched out in front of him, head bowed over *Flying With the Cannons*. His attitude towards that book seemed to have become that of an addict to his drug.

She waited until the common room was empty for a time, and then reached out and touched his knee.

"Harry."

He looked up, green eyes shadowed. "What is it you want to say, Hermione?" he asked in a peculiarly neutral tone. "You've been watching me since I came back."

*You're hurting, and I'm desperately worried about you, but I can't reach out to you because I don't understand and reaching out will only hurt you more.*

She looked down into her lap, and hoped that she had caught him at a time when he was tired enough to be honest with that painful openness which might help him.

"You're not... happy, Harry."

He was quiet for a minute, and then he said, "No."

The admission was enough to break her.

"Harry..." she said, and she was horrified when her voice seemed ragged and on the point of tears. "Can't you just *tell* me, I'll understand, I swear - can't you just tell me what you... I'm asking you not to shut me out. If you'll just tell me - what you want -"

He glanced up at her, affection and pain and distance in his eyes.

Slowly, he said, "I want him back."

"Come on, Harry - just think of all those years when you'd have been glad to be rid of him -"

Her scared, uneasy laugh was cut off by the look in his eyes, a look as if he'd been wounded and the wound was still open and bleeding.

"No," he said. "You don't understand."

She looked speechlessly into his face. *I know I don't*, she thought. *I know, and don't you think that hurts worse than anything, that in these terrifying times I can't even be sure things will be right between us...*

"We weren't friends when I found him at the -" Harry swallowed. "At the bottom of the lake."

"But that was a..." Hermione's voice almost failed her, and she heard the next word pass her lips as if she was afraid of it. "Mistake?"

"No," Harry said again.

She stared at him imploringly, as if she could make him change his mind. He was looking broodingly into the flames.

"I never had anyone before Hogwarts," he told her, and his voice seemed almost still. "And then I came here, and I met you and Ron, and - it was you and me and Ron. Then it was you and Ron so much that there didn't seem to be much of a place for me. But I met him at Hogwarts too, and sometimes when we were fighting - I didn't *realise*, it was just a constant, I didn't think about it

but sometimes... it was just me and him."

He clenched his jaw.

Hermione clenched her hands around each other until the bones creaked. She hadn't thought about it, hadn't thought about Harry's life before and how much simple undivided attention could mean to him. How much undivided attention could mean *from* him.

The fire that helped transform house rivalry into a house war in third year, spirals of violent tension centred upon their concentrated hostility.

The way Harry, who did *not* gloat, had pointed out Malfoy's horrified face in first year as if victory over him was what they had to celebrate, was the thing to be savoured.

The way, by fourth year, students ran when they went for their wands, fled down the hall just because of the looks on their faces and Hermione felt that she should have *known*...

"I miss that more than anything," Harry was saying in that belligerent tone boys use, staring in bewildered anger at their own pain. "I want him *back*. Any way at all. I can't stand being - this alone again."

Hermione bit her lips to keep from crying. "You're not alone," she said fiercely.

Harry looked at her again, a brief raw glance. "I didn't mean it like that," he said, but he didn't seem comforted.

Hermione bowed her head so he wouldn't have to see her fight off these shameful tears. She'd been so pleased, felt so utterly *smug*, thought that things could go back to normal now because Malfoy was just his enemy again. But things weren't back to normal, she understood now, Malfoy had never ignored him before, never not sought him out some way before and maybe things had never been normal. Now she understood and worse, now *Harry* understood, and it was tearing him apart.

"Harry, I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "I have to go." She jumped up and ran to the door, her movements oddly clumsy, knocking against the furniture as she went. She didn't even know where she was going until she was out of the Great Hall, hurtling down the steps to the dungeons.

She didn't know what she was going to do until she saw Malfoy himself, strolling down the corridor with his two thugs behind him. Then she - *still* didn't know what to do. She was much more painfully conscious of it, though.

There he was, hateful as he'd always been, just as she always pictured him. Sneering and cold-eyed with those gorillas at his back, but maybe he wasn't the same, since now there was no venom in his eyes, no recognition of her as a target because she was Harry's friend but a simple impersonal contempt as if she were Neville and - *did that mean something?*

"Granger," he said coldly. "Are you *lost*?"

She hesitated and tried to analyse him. She didn't want to understand him, she wanted to hate him, but she couldn't do that - for Harry's sake.

But could someone who had ruthlessly cut himself from Harry's life care about anything she had to say? If someone was capable of that kind of cold dispassionate fury...

He couldn't care about Harry. She didn't believe it. She would never have hurt someone she cared about like this.

It was useless to try and get anything back for Harry.

"No," she replied, shooting him a single chilly glare. "I was looking for someone who isn't here."

Hermione turned on her heel and walked away, towards the entrance into the Great Hall. She was already up past time, it had been stupid to even come here, she didn't know what she had been thinking, and...

She heard a noise.

It was coming from a dark corridor to her left. It was probably just students messing around in Snape's office, she told herself, and she should go and discipline them, but even as she lifted her wand and said, "*Lumos*," she could hear the tiny quiver in her voice, and the pounding of her heart in her ears.

She should not have come here alone.

The light trembled as her hand did and she got a firmer grip on her wand, wishing with sudden passion for the everyday comfort of normal things and a simple Muggle torch and one of the plaster corridors at home. The light simply showed the narrow stretch of a stone corridor, massive grey blocks with nooks and crannies running along them where the faint light chased and gave up on shadows.

Then the light glimmered on something else, and for a second she had no idea what it was, but her heart was like a frantic creature running already.

It was the shine of light on fur, and she thought, *Just like when the Chamber of Secrets was opened, just like being twelve years old and terrified again.*

The wand went clattering out of her hand onto the floor with a short scream she couldn't believe she had made.

There were running footsteps at once, and she was whirled away from the sight by strong hands on her arms, spinning her around, and her throat hurt and someone was almost supporting her.

Pale eyes serious and intent beneath pale hair. *Malfoy*, she thought, trying to gather her panic-scattered thoughts together.

"Granger," he said, urgently. "Granger! What is it?"

"It's - it's a cat," she forced out, refusing to need support, refusing to crumple up entirely. "It's - Mrs Norris must have been Petrified, it's just like the Chamber of Secrets -"

*Stop*, she told herself. She would not panic.

One hand still keeping a firm hold on her arm, he lifted his wand and said, "*Lumos*," in a voice that shook slightly just as hers had before she had seen...

Crabbe and Goyle were behind him, both their faces masks of terror. Goyle was looking and his face relaxed just slightly, he moved forward and said, "She's right. Just Mrs Norris -"

Hermione could not look around or she would - She could already see it all. Malfoy's jaw was tight, and when she held unashamedly onto his arm and he held back his arm was rigid.

He pushed words past the horror, the words she would not even think, as more footsteps came sounding fast and furious behind them.

"It's not Mrs Norris," he said. "And it hasn't been Petrified."

\* \* \*

Harry never remembered it all clearly afterwards. Just walking, irritated that Ginny had insisted on accompanying him, and then walking faster because Hermione could be anywhere and he didn't want her asking him where he was going, and then hearing something that sounded like a scream and then *running*...

Ginny behind him, footsteps fast and light and faltering, and her first scream coming with the sound of someone falling heavily.

Harry saw it was Goyle, still backing away even though now he was on his hands and knees. And he felt a brief sense of ordinary incredulity when he saw Draco, with one arm almost around Hermione.

It all came in bits and pieces, trickling like the cold dread that went through him.

Crabbe's hand had closed tightly on Draco's shoulder, dwarfing it, and the hand that held Draco's lit wand was resting against Crabbe's in a gesture of protection. His face was white and scared, but he was keeping his voice steady when he said,

"It's not Mrs Norris. And it hasn't been Petrified."

There was a dead cat on the floor.

It might just be the dark and the constant fear and the memory of the Chamber that caused Goyle's whimper and the keening cry that Ginny was making behind him, but he saw Hermione's white face. He saw the still look in Draco's eyes, pretending to have strength to loan the others until he did have it.

They knew.

He felt Ginny's hands try to clutch him back, but he moved forward out of her reach. Draco's light was held steady behind him and he had to go on because nobody else would, and he thought *I can't do this* but he could. He had to.

He thought past the whirling terrors and thought back to a spell taught back a few months since, the words to make the spell Sirius and Lupin had used years ago in the Shrieking Shack easier...

Harry flung the words out in an almost-challenge at last, resounding against the dark close walls.

*"In Veterem Revolveris Figuram."*

There was a flash of blue-white light.

Professor McGonagall was lying dead on the floor.

Harry would not flinch, but he looked over at the others when Crabbe moaned with an almost desperate relief. Goyle was backing swiftly away.

Neither Draco nor Hermione would make a sound, but she had hidden her face in Draco's shoulder. Draco looked back at Harry, face young and naked in shock but eyes still steady.

Harry was able to look back after a minute. The pins of McGonagall's hair had fallen out and were glittering in the light, which fell directly upon her open eyes.

Ginny's scream was high and pure as fear, and it went on and on until everyone else came, and saw.



# Chapter Fourteen: Shadows of Ourselves

*People in the dark, they don't know what to do  
I had a little lantern, oh but it got blown out too  
I'm reaching out my hand. I hope you are too.  
I just want to be in the dark with you.*

Three days after Professor McGonagall's death, Dumbledore addressed the Young Order.

"There is no doubt left," he said. "There is an enemy in our midst, and he will not stop short of murder."

Everyone was sitting huddled around the table, the Slytherins slightly isolated as usual. Harry looked at all the pale, crumpled faces and felt that familiar rush of rage and desolation.

*I can't let this go on. I won't.*

"In the words of one of our Aurors -" Dumbledore almost smiled, but the attempt failed. "Constant vigilance must be exercised. Minerva was loyal, strong and wary, and she was still taken unawares on her way back to the dungeons. We must be even more careful, and even more united to discover this enemy, and cast him out."

Most people were just gratefully soaking up his words. Hermione's face was pinched with desperate attention. Hannah Abbott was crying again, and Padma Patil was staring at Draco with accusation in her eyes.

"We have received a serious blow. I won't conceal that from you," said Dumbledore. "But none of you are to despair. I have every confidence that we can catch this murderer. I have every confidence in you all. I know that none of you will rest in a world where Minerva McGonagall's killer is walking free."

Except for her killer, who is one of us.

The Slytherins looked just as pale and shell-shocked as everyone else, but their faces as they listened to Dumbledore were impassive. Everyone else noticed that, too.

"If any one of you sees or suspects anything at all, my door is always open," Dumbledore continued, and leaned forward. "Anything at all. Rest assured, they will be believed." He directed a comforting twinkle at Dennis Creevey, who was ashen and who had fainted when he heard about McGonagall. Then he left.

When Dumbledore had gone and it was only the Young Council left, Lupin suggested new safety precautions.

"Mr Malfoy's suggestion of forming into pairs to work on projects was excellent, but has clearly been compromised," he said. "I suggest new pairings, and discretion advanced to the point where nobody outside the pair has any idea of what they are working on. Since people seem to talk inside their houses, I would advise another safety precaution - each pairing should be an interhouse

pairing."

"I'll take Granger."

Harry looked at Draco across the table. He had spoken immediately, and in a sharp voice, and he did not look back.

"Miss Granger," Lupin said mildly, "do you have any objection to being paired with Mr Malfoy?"

"No," Hermione answered in a quiet voice. Harry was startled, and Draco looked vaguely surprised at her ready agreement as well. Lupin nodded, as if that was all settled then.

"Any other volunteers?"

"I'll take Terry Boot," Blaise Zabini said, tilting his head back to give Terry an appraising look.

Terry rolled up his parchment. "I'd rather have Harry Potter, actually."

Harry was even more startled. He hardly knew Terry, and what he did know - *obsessed with books, smiles too much at Draco* - he did not particularly like.

Terry gave him a slight smile. "If that's okay, of course."

"Um, all right." He needed someone intelligent. He wanted to make a difference, and if Draco and Hermione were already taken - *oh, damn you, Draco* - Terry Boot would do. He was definitely not going anywhere near Blaise Zabini.

"I'll, er." Susan Bones blushed. "I'll take Blaise Zabini."

Zabini gave her a baleful look. "You wish."

Lupin nodded and paired them together. Hannah looked a little intimidated when paired with Padma, but she was probably cheered by the fact she was not with a Slytherin. Harry looked around at the table and all the mis-matched pairs. What were any of them going to think of? What could they think of, to make it better?

Professor McGonagall was dead, and Harry did not have the first idea of how to avenge her. Some kind of study group with Terry Boot seemed so inadequate he could have screamed.

Once a lot of people had arrived on the scene that night, and Ron had taken Hermione very firmly from Draco, Harry had approached him. He'd just wanted to exchange a few words, a bit of comfort, something like a reconciliation to hold against all this. Someone to understand the rage that would frighten other people, someone to understand him.

Draco's mouth had tightened and he'd said, "I'm busy, Potter," in a strained voice. He hadn't been able to talk to him since. They were both busy, talking to other people, comforting people and trying to organise panicked hordes of students.

But he was dragging around a sick, heavy load of misery and anger and his Head of House was dead and it was all so unfair and Draco still wouldn't even talk to him. He wanted to take it out on

somebody, but that wouldn't be fair either.

Harry took a deep breath, gave Hannah Abbott a small smile of encouragement and felt his heart beat too fast, almost painfully, when he caught Draco looking over at him.

"Want to meet in the library at six, Granger?" he inquired.

Hermione nodded. Harry looked away.

\* \* \*

Hermione did not like doing things when she had serious doubts about their wisdom. She went into the library uncertain of what she was doing there, and fighting the urge to turn tail and run.

She really resented Malfoy choosing her sanctuary to meet in. She was supposed to be safe in the library! It was her place, always filled with the other serious students who never bothered her, and she came here to rest.

He probably knew that. Bastard!

But she had agreed to take him as her partner. She would have much preferred Padma Patil, who was just as intelligent and much less mean, but he had picked her, and coming from Malfoy that was almost a compliment. And then she had remembered holding onto him in terror, and him holding her. She had never believed Malfoy would do anything like that.

So she had succumbed to sentimentality, and now she was saddled with this blond bastard for the remainder of her last year.

Hermione held her head up high and walked towards the table where Malfoy sat, head bent over some parchment. She noticed he was using an eagle feather quill, which was sheer ostentatious display.

"Ah, Granger," he said with his nasty little smirk. "You took your time."

"I'm busy over in the tower," she replied shortly, and saw his expression change fractionally. She shut her mind away from thoughts of Professor McGonagall, choking off horror and fear, and concentrated on the wood grain of the table in front of her.

"Well, since we have to decide on our project I thought it would be sensible to start by discussing recent events and how to handle them," Draco said.

"All right."

Hermione was surprised and pleased at this methodical approach. She always liked her study partners to be good planners. She almost forgot herself enough to smile at Malfoy.

"I think first of all the Young Council, and possibly the whole Young Order, should view this Somnasieve Potter told the Young Order about, the one McGonagall put Potter's dreams into."

Hermione crushed the flash of pain at the mention of her name, and took a sharp, indignant breath.

*Not in front of Malfoy. Don't lose control in front of Malfoy.*

"Certainly not! Those are Harry's private dreams. A whole lot of people have *no right* to see them -"

Malfoy's voice was chilly. "Professor McGonagall might have been killed because she knew something. That something could be in those dreams, and so everyone has to see them and give us the best chance we can to find it. We have absolutely no time to consider anyone's personal feelings if we want to win this war."

"What about the fact that people have a right to privacy?" Hermione demanded, trying to keep her outraged voice down and finding it difficult.

"Oh, what about it?" Malfoy sneered. "Didn't Muggles invent peoples' rights? You want me to let someone get away with murder and kidnapping because of your Mudblood scruples?"

Hermione forced down her voice again. "I want you to watch your foul mouth," she told him coldly. "We're supposed to be partners."

Malfoy looked bored. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, Granger. Sticks and stones -"

"Might break your bones, Malfoy, if you're not careful."

Hermione winced on reflex, and before she could do anything, Malfoy had leaped up at the sound of that loud challenging voice and was staring into Harry's blazing eyes. What were they both so *angry* about?

"We talked about that, Malfoy," Harry said rapidly, flushing with rage. "I told you it was petty and cruel, and you agreed. Just because we've fallen out doesn't mean that you have a license to stop using your brain - to stop acting like a decent person."

Hermione wanted to hide her face in despair, but kept watching. The lines of both their bodies were taut as bowstrings.

"I have no interest in acting like a decent person, you sanctimonious bastard," snapped Malfoy.

The glitter in Harry's eyes was something like relief.

"That's rubbish! You're just acting like this because you're revolting against everything we talked about, and it's just stupid! You always did cut off your own nose to spite your face, you always behave like a complete little snot -"

"You don't know anything about me!" Malfoy shouted.

He calmed down quickly in the space between two deep furious breaths, chest hitching, and then he spoke more softly.

"What about the way you're acting? Didn't you know that these projects are secret? And yet there you were listening - I'd say that's the behaviour of a *spy*, myself -"

Madam Pince was hurrying towards them and already speaking sharply, but both of them were beyond hearing her.

"How dare you!" Harry roared, shoving Draco into a bookcase.

Students all around the library were staring, and Hermione could only bite down on her lip as Harry clenched his fist around Draco's shirt and leaned in, both their shoulders bunched in preparation for violence, hunched towards each other to block out the rest of the world.

"Why the hell did you have to insinuate something like that?" Harry ground out, eyes boring holes in Malfoy's face. "I know you don't believe it, I know that, why do you just have to lash out -"

"What the hell are you doing!"

"I'm only lashing out because you won't listen to me!" Harry snarled, and he kept snarling into Malfoy's face, and Malfoy pushed in further in order to sneer in Harry's face. "Why can't you stop being so awful, and -"

Malfoy reacted suddenly, shoving him viciously away.

"Why can't you leave me alone!" It was almost a scream.

"Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy, twenty points from both your houses!"

The boys finally noticed Madam Pince, but hardly seemed distracted. Harry looked as if he would have quite liked to break Malfoy's bones. Madam Pince actually had to grasp both their elbows in her hands, dragging them out of the library. While they were being swept in her wake, Malfoy's arm connected with Harry's and Malfoy jumped back as if he had been given an electric shock.

Hermione swept her parchment and quills haphazardly into her schoolbag and hurried after them, catching the tail end of Madam Pince's diatribe as she chucked them out of the library.

"Such behaviour! Never in my life -"

They were obviously beyond listening, just glaring at each other with concentrated, distilled fury until the door slammed behind Madam Pince.

Hermione flattened herself against the wall, pretending to be invisible.

"How do you think I feel," Harry said in a low voice, "with you saying those things, with you -"

"Well, how do you think I -" Malfoy stopped yelling. He stood there tensely for a moment, and then his mouth curled maliciously. "Just leave me alone," he said. "That's all I want. Granger and I actually care about doing work for the war."

"You -" Harry's hands curled at his sides. His face was full of sullen misery. "I care."

Malfoy broke away, wheeling around without another word and stalking down the corridor. Hermione glanced desperately at Harry, who was backing off from her with a look of fierce, private unhappiness, and then for reasons entirely unclear to herself ran after Malfoy.

He burst into a classroom and threw a chair at a wall. He stood in the middle of the room, still breathing harshly, and she hesitated in the doorway and wondered if he was unstable. She would definitely get a great deal of satisfaction from Stunning him.

Malfoy looked around at her, not seeming particularly surprised that she had followed him. She noticed his jaw was clenched, his teeth gritted, and she steeled herself for whatever was coming.

He shoved his hands into his pockets with unnecessary force.

"I apologise, Granger," he said through his teeth. "I am aware that I chose you to work with, and it is my responsibility not to let my attitude interfere with what we have to do."

Hermione stared.

"You're going to be polite to me? I don't know, Malfoy. Are you even capable of that?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, and almost grinned at her. It was very bizarre.

"I wouldn't go as far as polite," he said. "I was thinking 'not intentionally and overtly offensive'."

"I repeat, are you even capable of that?"

"I might end up being a very quiet partner."

Hermione realised that Malfoy was trying to convince her that he was in control of himself, which was a little much considering she had just seen him throwing furniture. She also realised that he was being halfway civil, and she hadn't thought of him as a bastard in over five minutes.

Something had to be done.

"Well, I'm glad Harry convinced you."

"Potter had nothing to do with it," Malfoy said curtly. "He can damn well stop bothering me."

Hermione closed her fingers around her wand. "He's bothering you because he wants to get your attention," she informed him. "You should know something about that."

*You spoiled, sneering nuisance. Let's not pretend you didn't pester him for six years.*

"All I want is to be left alone," Malfoy snapped. "And, don't have a coronary or anything, Granger, but in this particular case you are not in possession of all the facts!"

Hermione took another deep breath. That was true; she did not know exactly how things had happened. Malfoy, utterly unlikely though it seemed, could be entirely innocent. He was not acting like someone whose cruel little plans had all gone perfectly.

"You're right. It's - none of my business."

Malfoy blinked. "Those aren't words I ever expected to hear from you, Granger."

Hermione chanced a smile. "Well, I never expected to hear 'I apologise' from you, Malfoy."

This was an almost civil conversation. It felt very strange.

"Well. As I said, I have to make it possible for us to work together. I can't be relentlessly nasty."

Malfoy looked sulky, as if being condemned to polite behaviour was an enormous burden.

"Be a nice change for you," Hermione said briskly. "This is a truce, then?"

Malfoy looked up at her, eyes wide and startled. "Only until the end of the war. Then I kill you and all of your mixed-blood friends."

Hermione stared. Malfoy grinned.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," he said. "The look on your face is priceless."

"Malfoy! That isn't funny!"

The little twerp clearly cracked himself up. A smile was still playing around his lips when he exited the scene of his desk crime, and he was in a good enough humour to offer to take Hermione's bag as they went down the corridor.

"Thank you, I'm quite able to do it myself," Hermione said dryly.

"You do seem to carry bulging bags as a hobby, but I thought I might as well offer. Always the little gentleman, yours truly."

Hermione snorted. Malfoy looked injured. Natalie McDonald, passing by, gave them a startled look as they went by, and then gave Malfoy an appreciative look. Hermione was going to have to have a talk with that girl.

She thought that Malfoy's jeans attracted attention not because he was, objectively, attractive, but because he wore them as if he were doing something forbidden and daring.

She then realised that she had given actual consideration to the matter of Malfoy's jeans, and felt vaguely dirty.

"Look, Granger." Malfoy hesitated, which was rare enough in itself to make Hermione glance inquiringly up at him. He was frowning slightly, as if in thought. "I was wondering. Would you like to come to my room in a couple of nights? I'm -"

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Hermione asked in horror.

He smiled. All the blood rushed to Hermione's head as she realised that he was serious.

Bastard!

"I cannot believe the *nerve* of you, Malfoy," she snapped, and for the second time in her life she slapped him around the face.

Then she stalked back to Gryffindor Tower.

\* \* \*

Harry walked around the lake, round and round with the wind lashing his face and misery in a tight knot under his ribs, and a strange feeling of relief easing the raging headache he had had for days. At least he had been able to relax for a while, been able to just let it *out* and not worry, and at least Draco had reacted. He hated it but he had felt alive, and if that was all they could have then he wanted more *now*.

This wasn't healthy.

He didn't want it. He didn't. He wanted things to be right again.

He really did not want to go back to Gryffindor Tower. He felt like he was going to break apart with frustration if he stayed there a moment longer. There was a hush hanging over the whole tower since McGonagall's death, and he kept finding people crying and trying to comfort them, kept seeing people looking to him for answers and reassurance and having none to offer. It made him want to break things. No, it made him want to break *Voldemort*, somehow crush him and make him pay for everything.

He had sat up talking to Neville all night last night. Earlier today in the common room Ginny had hurled herself at him and wept, and he had patted her shoulder, gently and awkwardly as he had spoken to Neville. He was no good at this, all he had ever been good at was facing down something that had to be faced down, he was trapped, he wanted to *act*, and he wanted to scream out his fury to Draco and for Draco to scream back at him that he was an idiot, and then he could finally rest, sit leaning against Draco and talking, and not feeling so responsible.

Harry kicked a rock violently into the lake, and saw the squid stir in protest under the murky surface of the water.

Harry glared at it. "Sod you, too," he muttered, before he realised that he was talking to a squid and might be going irredeemably insane.

He glanced over at the looming lump of stone that was Hogwarts and then at the small light in the window of Hagrid's house. He left the lake and went towards it.

He hadn't been to see Hagrid for ages. He felt his spirits lighten as he approached the door. Hagrid wouldn't expect anything from him, Hagrid had been his first friend in the world -

Hagrid opened the door a chink, looking very embarrassed.

"Ah... hello, Harry," he said in a worried sort of way.

Harry squinted up at him. "Um - hi? Can I come in?"

"Well, o'course," Hagrid replied, opening the door an inch further. "It's just tha' - well, it's a bit of a bad time, don' you know..."



The awful idea that he might have interrupted Hagrid and Madame Maxime flashed on Harry and blinded his mind's eye.

"It's jus' tha' young Malfoy is here," Hagrid finished awkwardly.

"Oh," said Harry.

"An' I know you two have had another fight, so I thought you mightn' wan' ter see him..."

Another fight, because of course all Harry and Draco did was fight, and nobody could have expected a friendship to last, and that was all there was to it. Hagrid's face was still worried and well-meaning, and Harry forced down another wave of desolation.

"No," he said with an effort. "I mean - I do want to see him, it's all right -"

"Ah well," Hagrid beamed. "Tha's good, then, i'n't it?"

He flung the door wide open and Harry followed him into the sitting room, where a fire burned brightly. Madame Maxime was reading a book with fanged horses on the front, the baby was sitting on the hearthrug waving what appeared to be a fanged rattle and the window was wide open, the curtain billowing in the wind.

Draco was gone.

"Oh, it's 'Arry," Madame Maxime said with a faint, uncertain smile. "I vondered vat inspired Draco to 'is - precipitous exit. 'E generally 'as such good manners, for an Eenglish boy."

"He's been comin' here a fair bit," Hagrid told Harry. "He likes playin' with the baby and havin' a bit of a chat wi' Olympe. I think things are gettin' a bit on top of him, ter be honest."

Him and the rest of the world, Harry thought. He found the concern in Hagrid's voice touching and bitterly ironic, and God, Draco was unhappy and he couldn't even talk to him.

"Oh," he said again, helplessly.

Hagrid glanced over at him, beetle-black eyes troubled.

"I've talked to him a bit, since you brought him round a couple o'times. He's a not a bad lad, in his way," he said. "I think we've all been a bit hard on him. This's no time ter be arguin', Harry. Couldn' you make up with him?"

Harry stared at the carpet, and hated every fibre of it. He had been fairly carpet neutral up to this point in time.

"I wish I could," he admitted finally, his voice sullen in his own ears. "He won't talk to me."

\* \* \*

Ginny hugged her knees, pressing her face against the window. She had watched Harry walking around the lake until darkness fell, but now she could not make out if he was still there. She

wondered what he was planning.

She wished he would come back. She thought she would sleep better if he was back in the tower. She kept having nightmares of that night, of darkness and terror and Hermione almost collapsed and even Harry helpless and Professor McGonagall... She kept waking up screaming. It was common enough in the dormitories to wake up screaming these days, so nobody minded much, but Ginny minded. She wanted to be better. She wanted to feel safe. She had felt safe earlier, when she had broken down and Harry had held her. He wasn't scared like everybody else.

"Ginny, it's pitch black out there. Give it up."

Ginny glanced over at Dean, standing by her window seat with a concerned look on his face. She hugged her knees tighter.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're not going to be able to see Harry," Dean said gently, sitting down beside her.

"I was just -" Ginny stopped, and looked up into Dean's face for some wordless comfort. He had always offered her that before, but he looked distant now, in pain and not reliable at all.

"I know," he told her. "I understand. It's only that - Ginny, I've been trying to understand for months now. I'm getting so tired."

He spoke quietly, in a weary undemanding sort of way, and Ginny did not understand why her throat seized up. She stared at him, and tried to speak past the sudden lump.

"I don't know what you mean."

Her voice sounded cold, and small. She felt cold.

"You were all right before all this started happening. You were - better than all right. You were beautiful, and so alive, and - we were together, and it was right."

Dean stared at the floor when he spoke. Ginny looked up at him, stricken.

"Oh, Dean... but I explained, it's Harry, it has to be Harry..."

"Oh God damn it!" said Dean, so loudly Ginny jumped. "It doesn't have to be Harry! It wasn't Harry before people started being taken from Hogwarts! It was you and me, and I know you're scared and you want to be rescued, but how do you think watching this makes me feel? How do you think I feel without - Ginny, I've been waiting and waiting and I'm scared, too!"

Ginny swallowed. He was scared and Ginny was scared, and she could have taken anything outside and wanted to fight the good fight but this... this slow sapping of their numbers, this constant fear, this violation of their only safe place... She felt as lost and helpless as she had when she was a child whose mind was being invaded. She could not fight something she knew nothing about, but Harry could swoop in and defeat an enemy Ginny had not even been able to recognise. Harry was the hero, Harry was not scared, Harry would save her, and it was Harry she loved.

"I'm sorry," she said in a trembling voice, "but it doesn't change anything."

Professor McGonagall had been *murdered*.

Dean's face made Ginny want to cry. "You were so bright and brave," he said, his voice low and dull. "I always wanted to draw you. You made me laugh and we held each other up -"

"I can't hold anyone else up!" Ginny's voice was almost a scream.

The shadows were closing in around her. Waking in dark corridors with blood on her hands and messages written on the walls, and now another corridor with another cat in it who was...

"I'm sorry," Dean told her, and he regained his usual quiet with an effort. "I didn't mean to - It's just all so -" He stopped. "I love you," he said. "You know that."

He stood up.

"I won't bother you again."

Ginny looked after him as he went with speechless misery. The other people were looking over at her curiously, but most of them were gathered around the fire talking in fearful whispers and did not come over to her. Parvati Patil was walking around the room, looking uncertain about something.

Ginny tried to cry unobtrusively. She felt as if she was drowning, they were all drowning, and she longed more than anything for Harry to come and save everyone.

\* \* \*

Harry did not stay long at Hagrid's. Madame Maxime could not stop tiptoeing around the subject of Professor McGonagall, and the whole visit was a horrible failure. He still felt wretched and in need of comfort and terrified that he would snap at people if he went back to the tower, though, so he went up to Sirius' rooms. Lupin had patiently explained to both of them that it would be an infraction of teacher and student relations for Harry ever to visit him, and so Sirius had always told Harry to do it discreetly.

They might be less close than Harry had hoped, but he knew he could rely on Sirius.

He looked up when Harry came in, and his mouth moved out of its usual lines of cynical endurance, and into a warm smile.

"Harry," he said. "I was hoping you'd drop by. How are you?"

Harry looked at him for a minute, lost in sick unhappiness, and Sirius got up from his desk at once.

"Stupid question," he said shortly. "Come on, come sit by the fire, I'll make you a cup of tea." He paused. "I could put something stronger in it?"

Harry looked up, startled, from the chair where Sirius had almost forcibly deposited him. Then he grinned faintly. "OK."

"Great," Sirius told him, and grinned his slightly rakish grin back, going for a cupboard standing against the wall. "Don't tell Remus," he added sternly. "He'd have kittens. And then he'd have my head."

"Might be worth it to see a werewolf having kittens," Harry answered. Sirius actually laughed. Harry hadn't heard anyone laugh in days.

He came back with a bottle of Ogden's Firewhiskey, a glass, a cup and a kettle. He put the kettle on the fire. Sirius was still a little awkward with household routine, moving as if doing such normal things was odd, but Harry liked it that he tried. He sat back with a sigh, and then looked at Harry with attentive black eyes.

"I don't know if this will help," he said abruptly, "but Dumbledore just told me that I'm going to be the new Head of Gryffindor."

"You!" Harry blinked. "What about Lupin?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "He turned it down. He was wittering on about how he needed to retain a neutral position for the Young Order. If you ask me, the whole thing is ridiculous. You're almost out of school. You and Ron and Hermione should be allowed to be part of the *real* Order." He made a mock grimace. "Anyway, what's so wrong with me?"

"Nothing," Harry said quickly. "I was just surprised. I - didn't want to think about someone replacing..."

*I don't want to say her name.* He looked down at the stone floor, and then up again as Sirius reached over and closed his hand around Harry's shoulder. He did it sympathetically, but Harry thought he looked disappointed. He'd wanted Harry to be thrilled it was him.

"Sorry," he told him. "It's great. Really."

Sirius brightened, and for a moment the lines left by Azkaban softened. Sitting in the firelight, Harry could see how Sirius must have looked when he was young and happy, before Voldemort had destroyed all that too.

"At least now there's a silver lining to Snape disappearing," he remarked. "I won't have to discuss house protocol with the slimy git."

The kettle boiled, and Sirius set about making Harry's cup of tea. Harry watched him do it.

"Sirius," he said quietly. "The Slytherins *need* Snape. He has to come back."

Sirius began to pour in the Firewhiskey. "Yes, well, I hope he does. I'm just pointing out the silver lining, like I said. You can't get on with that man."

As Harry recalled, Sirius never made that much of an effort - but it probably wouldn't have mattered if he had. Snape was impossible, he reminded himself. Just because Draco...

"You look down in the dumps, Harry," Sirius commented, handing Harry his cup. "I mean - I know

that's natural, and there's not much I can do about it. But is there something else wrong I can help you with? Girl trouble?" He gave Harry another hopeful grin. "I can give you a *lot* of advice about that."

"Er, no." Harry took a hasty sip of his tea. It burned as it went down. "Not girl trouble. Definitely not."

Sirius looked disappointed again. "It beats me why the girls aren't swarming over you," he said, in a disastrous attempt to be cheer Harry up. "When James and I were young -" He paused, pouring himself a generous glass of Firewhiskey, and seemed to visualise the wrath of Lupin. "We were quite popular," he concluded circumspectly, and then smiled a brilliant and slightly wicked smile. "And you don't have any competition like me, do you? So shouldn't you be the school heartthrob or something?"

"I'm not the school heartthrob," Harry mumbled, aware that he had gone red. *Please, please, Sirius, stop talking about women.*

Sirius looked offended, as if someone was villainously stealing the title from his godson.

"Who d'you think is, then?"

"I don't know..." Harry wished the ground was hungry and could be persuaded to swallow him up. "Draco Malfoy," he muttered. "Um. Maybe."

Sirius choked on his drink.

"*Draco Malfoy?*" he exclaimed, coughing. "That pasty, *pointy* boy? Snape's little disciple?"

Harry took another long drink, and said rebelliously into his tea, "He's not that pointy."

"The anaemic little prat who never stops mouthing off and who spends half his Hogsmeade time at Robe Wardrobe? Is *that* what girls think is attractive?"

*You'd have to ask them. But I seem to think so.* Harry decided there might be too much alcohol in his tea, and compromised on a 'Yeah'. After all, girls like Parvati were always hanging around Draco.

"Girls don't like boys who fuss over their hair too much," Sirius told him, still looking appalled. "Your mother told me that herself."

Harry took that sentence and filed it away in his memory. He'd been collecting little bits and pieces of his parents since Sirius and Lupin came in sixth year, even though Lupin confessing that his father had sometimes been cruel had made the depression grow even heavier. If he didn't even have his father to aspire to...

"Hey. Harry," Sirius said, frowning. "You look - upset. Look, I didn't mean -" He stopped. "You've been a little friendly with that Malfoy boy lately, haven't you?"

*A little more friendly than he cared for, actually.* Harry choked. Too much alcohol in his tea. Too

much alcohol.

"We had a fight," he said instead.

"Yes, I know. Well... it's the best thing, Harry," Sirius paused. "I used to know Lucius quite well. I - saw him around at family parties when he got engaged, to tell you the truth. I was fairly young then, of course, and he wasn't much older, but the man was foul." He tipped back his glass with a practised air. "I've never liked people who slither around to the strong looking for power," he growled, and Harry could see that betrayal in his eyes. "I can't stand people like that."

He was remembering Wormtail, and Harry thought, *I let him go when I should have killed him myself.*

He would not make the same mistake twice.

"I know," he replied. "Draco's not like that."

One of Sirius' dark brows flicked upwards. "Oh, no? What exactly was the little Slytherin's reason for being your friend?"

"I don't know. He said it was morbid curiosity." Harry almost smiled at the memory, and saw Sirius' startled look. He hoped that the smile hadn't seemed tender. "Actually, I thought he liked me."

"Bloody Slytherins," Sirius said vehemently. "Being put in Gryffindor saved me, Harry, d'you know that? Otherwise I would have ended up... You don't need a friend like that, Harry. You're better off without him."

Harry focused on some point over Sirius' dark head, trying not to let his face show any expression. *Then how come I miss him so much?*

"Look," Sirius said with one of his abrupt changes of subject, "would you like to be with me and Remus during Minerva's funeral? I have the plans here, I could arrange for you and Ron and -"

The mention of a funeral grated on Harry's ears. He closed his hands around the cup, grateful that it burned him.

He wanted to break the cup. He set it down instead.

"Could we talk about it another time? It's getting late."

Sirius looked confused, and then shook it off and made a furious effort to be gentle. "If you want, Harry. Now I'm your Head of House, we can see more of each other, and if you ever need to talk..."

"Yeah, of course."

Harry had to get out of there. The plans for Professor McGonagall's funeral were on the *desk*, and he wanted to destroy something. He was up out of the chair and going towards the door almost before he realised it.

"Harry, I *mean* it."

The genuine pain in Sirius' voice made Harry look around. His godfather had stood up and was looking at him, struggling to find words to throw over the breach for Harry. Sirius had been so busy, and he really hadn't known what to do with Harry, and Harry had been so angry and miserable and confused, and neither of them had been able to measure up to what they had both wanted.

"I'm a - somewhat rotten and hopeless godfather," Sirius admitted, mouth curling. "But... I do love you. As a matter of fact."

In the end, in spite of disappointments and distance, Sirius would always be there for him. That was why Harry had come here tonight. Besides... that wasn't something Harry had heard often enough to dismiss.

Harry smiled, a bit awkwardly. "Um, I love you too," he said, too fast. "I'll, uh, I'll talk to you later."

Sirius' smile leaped out, that bold flashing smile that made him look young again, and when Harry closed the door, against all the odds, he did feel slightly better after all.

\* \* \*

"Pass me the coffee," ordered Draco, who was looking pale and frenetic. Pansy reached over agreeably and poured Draco a cup. Draco grabbed her elbow.

"Yes, toss the starving man a crust, what a good plan," he sneered. "You leave that coffee pot where it is. Just beside me."

"You're such a morning person, Draco." Draco flung his head back in dramatic despair and Pansy relented, patting him on the shoulder with a distinctly over-familiar gesture. "Don't worry about it. You'll be amazing. Or we can fix your marks."

"Don't insult me," Draco snapped, reaching for his coffee. "I can do this, and I can do it right."

He looked determined, and still a little bit too pale.

At that point, what was obviously meant to be a discreet cough but what sounded like quite a small earthquake sounded behind Harry. He jumped guiltily, and turned to look into Goyle's face.

"Move along," Goyle said.

"I was just *standing here*," Harry objected. He was just standing here eavesdropping shamelessly, but however.

Goyle looked obstinate and unmoved. "Move along."

That was when Draco and Pansy looked over, and after a moment Draco looked away again. His eyes appeared almost hooded. He seemed tired.

Harry felt another of those stupid pangs in his chest as he moved over to his own table and sat next to Ron, who was stacking his plate with eggs.

"Is there something going on today?" he asked.

"Don't think so," Ron answered. "Why don't you eat something, Harry? Hermione, you should as well."

Hermione looked tired, and she dropped the piece of toast she had been playing with and dropped her pretence. She just leaned against Ron for a minute, and he put his arm around her.

Harry looked away, and not at the Slytherin table. At the eggs.

"Malfoy's giving his Creative Magic display," Dean said quietly.

Harry's head jerked up. Dean smiled at him from across the table, though his smile was a little strained. He looked tired as well - God, they were all tired and unhappy.

"I did mine last week," Dean continued helpfully. "The practical project's kind of important. It counts for -"

"I know, Draco told me." He didn't think it counted if Draco couldn't even hear him. Anyone could call anyone anything they wanted then.

Draco had talked about the project time and time again, tossing balled-up pieces of paper around his room and occasionally at Harry. Harry had resented it for taking up so much of Draco's time, but now he could only remember that Draco had talked about it and they had still been talking. Draco had complained about it in the boat before everything went to pieces, and another time Harry had said that he wished he could see it.

Draco had glanced up at him, surprised, and after a moment he had preened. Harry smiled remembering it, and then bit down on the smile.

"I might be persuaded to give you a private show," Draco had said. "If you promise to be very impressed."

"I'm not making any promises," Harry had grinned, and Draco had thrown another balled-up paper at him and ordered him out of his room. Harry hadn't gone.

And now Draco wouldn't speak to him, and his house rooms were blocked to Harry, and Harry was *damned* if he was going to miss the Creative Magic project on top of everything else.

"Dean," he said briskly, "where is Creative Magic taught?"

Dean blinked. "On the second floor," he replied warily. "To the left of the portrait of Lady Violet."

"That's fascinating," Harry told him. "It really is."

He got up and Ron turned in his chair, arm still around Hermione. "What are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm skipping class," Harry informed him. "Tell Professor Trelawney something terrible happened to me, it'll make her day."



*"Harry,"* Hermione began in a scandalised voice, but Harry was already leaving the Great Hall.

It felt good to be doing something at last, even something as small as this. He felt energetic and alive again. He took the steps two at a time, and even smiled at the Fat Lady as he told her the password, Chocolate Armadillos - Harry had never been able to manage a whole one, but some of the girls adored them.

He went up to his dormitories and took out his father's Cloak.

It was strange to be invisible in broad daylight. He usually only used it after curfew these days, but it was also slightly thrilling to go down and walk through the milling crowds unseen. Ginny passed him and did not gaze at him. Blaise Zabini walked by and did not offer an obscene gesture.

It felt like freedom, or as close as Harry could get these days.

He passed the portrait of Lady Violet, and got into the classroom before anyone else came in. Then he sat on the window ledge and prepared to be very quiet.

When students started filing in, he was inexpressibly relieved that Dean took the seat by the window. After a while, he noticed that Dean was the only Gryffindor in the room, and there was a short supply of Hufflepuffs as well. Slytherins and Ravenclaws seemed to dominate the scene. No wonder he'd heard so little about Creative Magic before Draco, Harry thought as he watched Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin giggling together over some sort of journal.

When he came in, he didn't look as if he liked it at all. He looked as if he might have quite liked to bolt.

"Mr Malfoy, you may proceed," said the teacher, who Harry was startled to see was Professor Vector. He supposed Hermione *had* said he was in the habit of saying things like 'Mathematics is the music of the universe'.

Draco came and stood at the front of the class. He still looked too pale, and he swallowed nervously. Harry watched the motion of his throat.

*Go on, Draco. You'll be great.*

It was Draco's innate sense of showmanship that saved him. He glanced around at the attentive faces, and seemed to realise that he had an audience. So he smiled his practised, brilliant smile and made a gesture towards the door.

Crabbe and Goyle came in, pushing what Harry thought for a horrible moment was McGonagall's Somnasieve. Then he realised, because of the different symbols, that it was an ordinary Pensieve.

"Mr Malfoy?"

Draco was, at least outwardly, calm. "We were supposed to display a facet of Creative Magic in our projects," he said. "The only problem was - I couldn't choose. So I distilled my favourite artistic memories, and mingled them together. It took... quite a while."

There was an intrigued murmur around the classroom. Draco, always one to seize the moment to show off, took out his wand with a flourish and dipped it in the stone basin.

The silvery liquid swirled around it, and brighter light began to concentrate inside the Pensieve.

"I'd like everyone to come and touch it," said Draco, who seemed to be enjoying himself by now. He gave Lisa Turpin a dazzling smile. "I want everybody to experience my mind to the full."

Professor Vector only had to nod before everyone was standing up in a mass to go touch the liquid, shimmering thoughts. Dean went last of the students and Harry paused, thought about the wisdom of following, dropped the pretence that he as capable of *not* following and put his hand into the Pensieve.

The whirlpool that sucked him in seemed brighter than Dumbledore's Pensieve had been. He ended up on a bench by Dean, whose perfectly impassive face did not indicate that he was aware of any invisible people beside him, and then realised that the bench was suspended in mid-air, and the air was...

The air was multi-coloured. The air was alive.

Harry remembered sitting beside Draco as Draco pored over one of his art books, remembered some of the pictures catching his eye. The air was filled with snatches of paintings, mixed streamers of green and cerulean blue and a vivid intense gold. And then Draco, who was standing in front of the class, lifted his wand and murmured some more words, and the air was *moving*.

Melody seemed to come from nowhere, or all directions. Faint songs about love and sorrow, filled with passion, made people look around, and then there were sounds like instruments, music that Harry didn't think existed in the Muggle world and which he suddenly thought of as fairy music. The world around them was twisting in a wave of beauty, and words began to flow in as Draco made another gesture.

*"... Fling forth to the sunlight your banner on high, inscribed with the watchword, We conqueror die..."*

*"... I could not awaken my heart to joy at the same tone, and all I loved, I loved alone..."*

*"... Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung..."*

*"... no such song have I heard in the darkness of night before. Where does this tenderness come from?..."*

Snatches of everything he had ever read and loved. All those books piled up in his room.

And then, so faint and passing so fast that Harry thought perhaps the others did not see them, but this was *Draco's* mind and he was comfortable here and he could see everything... Images and emotion twisted up in those artistic sights and sounds, all bound up in them.

They were more impressions than images. He thought he saw a woman reaching out with golden hair

flying in the strange light, and thought it was Narcissa caught in a rare moment of sweetness. There was a flash of Pansy Parkinson's voice made beautiful by concern and Lucius Malfoy seen from someplace low on the ground, enormous and stern and adored. There was the whistle of wind in Harry's ears like flying, the crash of surf against sand, the sound of a storm somewhere beyond the brightness and the sudden soft lap of water against the ground.

He had a sudden impression of himself, changed as the other images were into something... that shone more than reality, caught in a moment of wordlessness and pushing his hair back. He was very sure that was unintentional.

And there was pain, a whole rush of pain all mixed up in the beautiful things, screams and blind fury and horror and misery all flashing through Harry like lightning and then leaving him with nothing but the idea, vaguely reached for and never quite achieved, that it could all be beautiful.

He stared over at Draco, colour and images wrapped around him as he conducted the whole scene. A streak of sunrise red almost seemed to reflect off the pale line of his jaw, and there was darkness with a few stars in it behind his wild hair. He could *take* all this, take everything and care about it and rage about it and want it all to be beautiful, he could make a play of passion.

Harry realised, in a redundant painful sort of way, that he *really* liked this insane boy.

Draco let his wand fall, breathing hard with his eyes shining.

"And the curtain drops," he said, and gestured again with his wand.

Harry felt himself rising with the others, in a flying mass, and then they were suddenly all back in the classroom. Harry hastily replaced himself on the window ledge.

The bell rang, and Draco, who looked drained, quickly picked up his bag and strode out of the room. Most of the other students seemed to want to stay behind and talk excitedly, but Dean got up immediately and, opening the door very wide, went out. Harry came with him and made a beeline for the nearest bathrooms, stuffing his Cloak into his bag and hurrying to Potions before Draco could get there.

He made it, and listened to Lupin with complete attention. Ron and Hermione crowded around him at lunch and asked where he had gone.

"I wanted to see a Creative Magic class," he answered. Hermione looked sad, but Ron only looked curious.

"What was it like?"

Harry stopped and smiled. "I'll tell you what, Ron," he said. "We should have taken it."

The next class should have been Transfiguration, and they stayed up in the common room and talked about extra wards for the common room. Neville hesitantly volunteered his knowledge of protective herbs.

The last class was Care of Magical Creatures, and Hagrid beamed at them all as he talked about

getting them to breed small versions of the Flobberworm Harry had faced during the Third Task. He went into great detail on what they would have to do.

Parvati looked slightly green. "I'll be sick."

"You could help me supervise," Draco offered from across the room, and winked at her.

"You're *supervising*?" Ron demanded. Draco smirked in his direction. "*Git*," Ron said fervently under his breath. "Git, git, *git*."

"Well, yeah." Harry shrugged and Ron gave him a betrayed look.

All they had to do that class was study their books. It wasn't too bad, even though Parvati did keep threatening to be violently ill. Harry went over at the end of class and helped Hagrid put away his alarming diagrams.

He was crouched on the floor tucking away the final papers under Hagrid's desk, when he realised that Draco, Crabbe and Pansy were the last people left in the room.

"How did the display go? We didn't get a word together at lunch. Tell me all about it," said Pansy.

Their footsteps were coming towards the door and the desk, and they were about to see him and shut up. His bag was by his side.

Harry reached over for it, grabbed his Cloak out of it and threw it over himself. Then he got up cautiously, slipped out of the door at the same time Pansy did, and walked along with them, masking his footsteps by walking in step with Crabbe.

"It went perfectly," Draco said with great satisfaction. "I was scintillatingly, overwhelmingly brilliant." He turned to Crabbe, chewing in his lip. "Wasn't I? Didn't you think?"

"Only saw you for a minute," Crabbe answered.

"But it was a scintillating, overwhelmingly brilliant minute, wasn't it?" Draco looked agitated.

"Sure," Crabbe replied.

Draco's agitation only increased. "Fine, don't lie to me," he said. "I can see what you think. I was too nervous. I overdid it. I made a complete mess of it, I was too theatrical, I'm going to fail the class, oh shame ruin dishonour. Is that what you meant?"

Crabbe frowned. "Whatever you say."

"Oh, what do you know," Draco snapped. "You wouldn't know scintillating brilliance if it shimmied in front of you in Pansy's lingerie."

Crabbe shrugged.

"Less talk about my lingerie, if *you* please," Pansy said dangerously.

Harry could not have agreed more. Draco, Pansy and Crabbe had reached the dungeons now, and were going to the wall that hid their common room. Draco leaned in and whispered something Harry did not catch to the stone.

"How long are we going to have to keep whispering the password?" Pansy asked.

"For as long as we have to," Draco said tersely. "Potter has an Invisibility Cloak. So could anyone else in the school, and there are other ways to go unseen. Do you want to make it easier for this spy to snatch us?"

Harry paused guiltily, especially at the grimace Draco made when he said 'Potter'. But Crabbe was directly behind him, and he was swept into the Slytherin common room with the others. He paused for a second at the closed entrance, wondering if he should wait until he could just slip back outside, and then he rushed into the common room and after Draco, following him as he went through the room and then went into his bedroom.

The door shut behind both of them. Draco paused, and Harry was positive for a terrible second that he could see him.

He breathed again when Draco walked across his floor, kicking off his shoes, and then stopped breathing when Draco undid his robe.

*Right. Right. Clothes underneath his robe. I remember. Stop being so pathetic, Harry.*

Draco was wearing a thin dark jumper and black jeans. He looked thinner without his robes, and strangely vulnerable.

Harry couldn't remember ever seeing Draco in his socks before. He said, "*Lumos*," and with the flare of light beside his face Harry saw the circles under his eyes. He was obviously exhausted and he had lost too much weight in too few days. Harry could almost see what Sirius had been talking about. His features looked more pointed than ever, and his pallor was underlining his tiredness, and he wasn't exuding conscious charisma in all directions.

He was almost colourless, and unhealthily angular, and Harry wanted to *take care* of him, but he didn't know how to take care of anyone. He just watched Draco prowl around the room, and watched as Draco sighed and sank into the chair at his desk.

Just then, Pansy came in. She was wearing a jumper and jeans as well, her dark hair pulled back and some parchment in her hand.

"Draco," she said in a subdued voice, "here are the papers for Professor McGonagall's funeral. We have to make arrangements for the Slytherins - someone has to supervise us in Snape's place, but obviously nobody will pay attention to any outsider's arrangements..."

Draco looked up, obviously alert and confident. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll handle it. I'll make the arrangements and I'll get Professor Vector to act as a figurehead, and I'll explain it to the others."

Pansy sighed with relief, and walked over to the desk to give him the parchment. He laid it on the

desk, and she leaned her arms on the back of his chair and looked down at the top of his head.

He tipped back his head to look at her, and it was intimate and Harry's throat closed up with envy.

"What is it?" Draco asked quietly.

"The first years are having more nightmares," she said. "They don't feel safe any more, not with teachers dying, not since Snape could be..."

She stopped then. Both of them looked anywhere but at each other.

"Can't we sedate them?" Draco suggested brightly.

Pansy laughed. "Madam Pomfrey has all these tiresome rules about her medicine cupboard."

"I still think I could wheedle some sleeping powders out of her. I'll see about it." Draco frowned. "Till then, I think we can terrorise the house elves into serving up a round of hot chocolate after dinner, and then I can terrorise the first years with stories of how annoyed I will be if people don't start getting a full night's sleep."

Tension was almost visibly oozing out of Pansy. She began to sift Draco's hair through the fingers of one hand.

"Speaking of talking," she said reluctantly. "Everyone's so nervous. I'm beginning to hear talk about second thoughts. Maybe we could - maybe it's time to go to Professor Lupin -"

"Nobody would accept that. I'll go around explaining matters to people again." Draco's mouth was the mouth of a spoiled brat who did not intend to take no for an answer. "Everyone's bound to see reason. Or there's always the Imperius."

Pansy's mouth curved. "You're not funny, Draco," she informed him nonetheless. "People are afraid to come home. The summer's coming up -"

"They can all come to my house," Draco interrupted. "I've organised it. They'll be safe there, I'm going to..." He tilted his head up to look at her again. "Oh," he said in a different tone. "Letter from home?"

Pansy nodded, curling her free arm around herself as if she was cold. "Sort of an ultimatum," she said bleakly.

"Oh," said Draco again. "You should have told me right away. What, you expect me to read minds and offer sympathy? You should know I can't do either."

Pansy smiled at Draco's head, and only Harry saw it. "Why, Draco. You always told me you could do anything."

"Well, don't believe everything unprincipled young men tell you," Draco admonished. "That's how nice girls get into trouble."

They both stared at Draco's wardrobe for a minute, the silence stretching out.

"What did the letter say?" Draco asked eventually, and Pansy looked relieved that she didn't have to bring it up again.

"I can quit the Order immediately and come home now, or never come back again."

"And what did you say?"

"I told them they could go to hell. Do you have room for me at your place?"

"You can have the guest room with the ice white foam bath."

Pansy laughed and relaxed as much, Harry suspected, as she could.

"I'll leave you," she said softly. "You have enough to be getting on with. I'll go order the house elves to hit themselves with kettles. We need hot chocolate, and besides it will cheer me up."

She let the hand drop from his hair, and he took it and smiled up at her.

"Hey. Wench." He pressed her fingers. "You're doing all right," he told her loftily. "Keep this up and there could be a place in the Malfoy harem in it for you."

Pansy laughed, and the laugh sounded real this time. She held on for an instant, and then left the room, walking with her head much higher than it had been when she had come in.

Draco sat unmoving in his chair for a moment, the candlelight casting bright points against his hair. Then he slumped forward, back hunched and wretched, and laid his head in his arms.

Sympathy and guilt went through Harry. He wanted to go over to Draco, put his arms around him, work out something awkward to say and try to comfort him. But he couldn't, because Draco wasn't talking to him, because he was not even meant to see this, because Draco would have *hated* that he'd seen him like this.

Proud, private Draco. This was voyeurism, worse than that, because Draco would have wanted anyone to see anything rather than his weakness.

Harry had to get *out* of here.

Pansy had left the door ajar and he went through it, as fast as he could while still being discreet. He got out of the Slytherin rooms, up the stairs, back to the Gryffindor rooms, and threw himself in a chair and tried to fight down loneliness and self-disgust.

"Harry," Neville said tentatively, "could you help me with these Herbology books? The protection plants –"

There was nothing more important than this. He *knew* that.

"Sure," he answered. "Of course."

Neville smiled. "Thanks. Knew I could count on you."

Harry sat down with Neville and opened a book. They found some promising passages and Harry did not notice for quite a while that the common room had emptied. When he did, he said, "Neville, you'd better hurry if you want to grab some dinner."

Neville blinked. "Oh, yeah... don't you want any, Harry?"

All these emotions twisting in the pit of his stomach seemed to take the place of food nicely.

"Nah, not hungry."

He concentrated ferociously on the books for a while longer and stubbornly would not think about anything else.

Then Ginny came rushing up from the entrance towards Harry, her red hair blown about her face, looking uncertain and a little scandalised.

"There's a *Slytherin* outside demanding to see you," she blurted.

Harry smiled incredulously, unable to help it.

*Draco. Who else could it be?*

It was a nasty shock when the Slytherin outside turned out to be Pansy Parkinson.

\* \* \*

Harry stared at her numbly, and thought that it was strange the kind of people Draco, looking the way he did, surrounded himself with.

Crabbe and Goyle were dark hulking gargoyles, and Blaise Zabini's slightly shifty good looks were similarly dark and sinister. Pansy was tall for a girl, her hard face framed by black, heavy hair that seemed to weigh her down.

Her face looked more forbidding than usual, even though her hair was tied back. Her heavy brows were drawn together and the expression in her brown eyes was distinctly alarming.

"Potter?" she said sharply.

"Um - hello?" ventured Harry, who was a bit at a loss.

Pansy stood with her arms folded, her face set, looking as if Harry should be volunteering something more.

Eventually, Harry was unsettled enough by her accusing glare to offer a feeble, "Can I, er, help you, Pansy?"

Pansy sighed as if astounded that someone as imbecilic as Harry had not been put out of his misery long since.

"Yes, you can," she said crisply. "You can stop making Draco miserable."



Harry stared.

She proceeded to drive her point home, her eyes cold and hard as stone.

"Do you know the amount of crap he had to put up with when he decided to hang around with *you*, Potter? We're Slytherins. He certainly didn't just receive lectures about his own good. He took whatever was thrown at him, though. He had the massively deluded idea that you might be worth knowing. But you seem to have disillusioned him."

"Er," said Harry, who certainly wasn't going to tell her how he'd done it.

"I don't know what you did," Pansy told him, scowling.

Harry was pleased to hear it.

"All I know is that he came storming in one day and trashed his room. We couldn't get a civil answer from him for days. He's still irritable, and whenever he sees *you* in the corridors he freezes up and gives you a death glare. Even Crabbe and Goyle have been able to work out that it's your fault."

Pansy's hands were clenched into fists, but her tone was neutral.

"They wanted to come over here and rough you up a bit. You're lucky I decided you need a woman's touch."

This woman's touch looked like being violent.

Harry would prefer not to be pummelled by Pansy Parkinson, if that was all the same to her. He needed to go and think about what Draco had done - *trashed his room* - and what it could mean.

He had to deal with Pansy first, though. She had, after all, come here simply because...

"You care about him," he observed, almost wonderingly.

He thought of her smile at Draco's head earlier. He had a sudden vivid memory of her when Draco had been hurt in third year, tears pouring down her face.

The same face, older and stronger, grew even more unfriendly.

"You Gryffindors think you have a monopoly on emotions? Of course I care about him. We've been friends since we were children... and yes," she snapped. "Before you say it, I'm mad about him. I have been forever. Everybody knows that."

Harry felt a bizarre kinship with her. He mused on what she would do if he said, 'You and me both.'

He said, "What are you doing here, Pansy?" He tried to say it gently. Pansy regarded him with extreme disfavour.

"I told you. I want you to stop making him unhappy. If you were just trying to see if Slytherins have feelings, there you have it. We do. We also have great right hooks, as you will see if you don't go and make things right with him. Break off the friendship with a little respect. I don't care if it was

all a game to you, you owe him that much."

Harry forgot that he was talking to a girl he didn't know all that well.

"Oh, sod off, Parkinson!"

Pansy looked outraged.

"No, really, go straight to hell," Harry snapped. "A game - what do you think the rest of the houses are, aliens? You think Gryffindors don't have loyalty, you think that we can't really be someone's friend? Stop talking such rubbish."

"I am *not* -"

"You are talking complete rubbish. You think Draco was some sort of inter-house *experiment* to me... You saw me try to talk to him! You saw me do it over and over again! How dare you come over here and lecture me and act like I don't care about him when I *bloody well do!*" Harry stopped yelling and stared belligerently at Pansy. He was breathing hard.

Pansy just looked at him. "You do," she said.

"Yes," Harry answered, his voice under control now and steely. "I do. So you can take your damn lecture and go marching back to your dungeons, you *bitch*, because I *want* to go to him and make things right and *stay* his friend and it kills me that I can't do it!"

Pansy kept standing there, just looking at him with her steadily unfriendly gaze, not going away.

"Potter..." she said at last, and then Harry saw her face soften for a fraction of a second. "He thought you were *something*. We could all see that. He thinks he's so cool, but he's not hard to read. Especially not when you know him."

Harry looked at her in astonishment for a second, and then felt his first really relaxed smile in weeks curve his lips.

"Yeah," he answered quietly. "I... I remember."

Pansy shoved her hands in her pockets. "He thought you were - I don't know. He used to talk about you, you know? When you were the enemies who thought a Potions class without attempted murder with a cauldron was a Potions class wasted... he used to talk about you a lot. He used to *fume*. You know how he can go on."

"I've heard a rant - or twenty," Harry admitted.

She forgot herself enough to smile at him.

"And then he stopped talking about you. We tried to get him to do it - it wasn't *normal* for him not to. We're Slytherins, we like to talk behind people's backs. But he wouldn't do it. He was so casual about it, but he tried to never ever mention your name. Still, sometimes someone else would say it, and he'd - he'd just smile this little smile."

"What are you saying, Pansy?" he asked, speaking quietly so as not to shatter the image.

"I'm saying he acted as if you mattered," Pansy said. "So he cares about you. So..." She stopped, and made a brief gesture of frustration. She looked as if she wanted to punch the wall.

"I don't *like* you, Potter," she informed him coldly.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't like you either. So what?"

"So the Slytherin password is *king cobra*," she snapped. "Wait a few hours. And don't mess things up this time!"

She glared into his stunned face, and then stamped away.

\* \* \*

He went inside. He sat back down to his Herbology books. He studied with determination for two hours.

He went down to the Slytherin rooms. He walked through the stone corridors. He spoke the password. He strode right past the stunned gazes of assorted Slytherins towards his goal, that particular door, steeled for confrontation.

He pushed the door open, and went in.

It was at this moment that his resolve faltered.

Draco and Blaise Zabini were sitting on chairs by the fire, playing cards. The fire had warmed Draco's face slightly and he was laughing.

It was so different from the scene with the lonely figure that he had pictured that he just stood there for a minute with his mouth open. Zabini's face changed from ease to malice with commendable speed.

"I'll get Crabbe and Goyle," he announced, rising from his chair and fixing Harry with a menacing glare.

"No!" Draco snapped, swiftly, and Zabini's face fell and Harry's heart leaped. Then Draco turned to Harry and said in strained tones, "I'd really prefer it if you left, Potter."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't intend to leave, Malfoy. I want to talk to you. In *private*."

"Of all the nerve," Zabini began.

"Shut up," Draco said. "Get out, Potter. I have had a tiring day, I need to unwind, *you* are not welcome and Blaise and I are not finished our game."

Harry walked across the room and took the low seat by the bed.

"That's fine," he said calmly. "I can wait."

Zabini made to rise again.

"Sit down," Draco ordered. "Fine then. Stay, if you like. It makes no difference."

Zabini sat back down with bad grace. "He's *staying*?" he asked, curling his lip in distaste.

"Are the stakes changing?"

"No," Draco said, dealing the cards. "He's not important. The stakes remain the same."

Harry did not care what they were talking about. He had won this much ground. He was in this chair, he was *staying* in this chair and eventually he was going to talk to Draco. Zabini raised his eyebrows, but made no further protest. The fire flared high and warm behind them, and the game continued in silence.

Harry waited. Cards slapped on cards, and there were long thoughtful pauses before they were laid down. The fire was hot and its crackle was almost soothing. The urgency of speaking to Draco was still with Harry, and he was still nervous and edgy about it, but almost against his will he felt his eyelids drift downwards. He was tired, and now he was warm and it was quiet.

Shh, shh, shh, said the fire, and Harry kept watching Draco and Zabini play cards with his eyes half-shut and a very detached interest.

Zabini was looking attentively at Draco, his dark eyes sharp. Draco was leaning back with an elaborate lack of concern.

At long last, they seemed to be reaching a conclusion.

"Care to specify the stakes further?" Zabini inquired, and Harry thought he glanced over at him. Then he smiled his sly smile.

"I like to keep things interesting," Draco answered.

"I only spoke out of concern for you, Draco," Zabini said, laying down his cards one by one.

"I'm touched by your concern, Blaise." Draco threw down his cards. "But it's really not necessary."

Zabini paused, looking down at the cards, and wet his lips rather deliberately. Even his voice was soft and made Harry feel slightly more sleepy.

"Oh, well. I can't say that I'm all that upset," he admitted. "So, Draco... what do you want?"

Draco smiled. "I want you to get out," he answered sweetly. "I need to talk to Potter."

Zabini stared for a minute, made an explosive and unrepeatable sound, got up and stormed out of the room. Harry was shocked fully awake at last when Draco rose from his chair and looked at him.

His gaze dropped almost immediately, and he stood in front of the fire with his hands clasped

behind his back, like someone granting an audience.

"I think it's as well that we have a chance to talk," he said in a strange voice. "It's dangerous for members of the Young Council to be feuding in the present situation. We need to be able to get along in a civil manner, and communicate. I realise that I have made this difficult, but I was a little angry. Truthfully, I don't much care for your Gryffindor method of courtship -"

"Draco," Harry interrupted resolutely, "I am so, so sorry. What can I do to make things right?"

Draco glanced up, and blinked. At length he said, "I told you not to call me that." He paused, frowned at the carpet and then continued as if he was cross with himself, "What exactly d'you mean?"

To his absolute horror, Harry found that he had no idea what to say. "I mean... I'm sorry, I'll never do it again, I *promise*," he said, and then realised to his eternal shame that he was going red. "I want to be your friend again," he burst out rebelliously, hating words, hating most things in that instant. "That's all I want, I don't know what you're talking about when you say - say courtship, I didn't mean..."

He looked up. Draco stayed quiet and something under Harry's ribs twisted.

"I just want to be your friend again," he repeated helplessly. "I *miss* you, you stupid prat."

That last bit might not be conciliatory, but he was frustrated and felt ridiculous and why did everything with Draco have to be so difficult?

Draco glanced up, and there was an odd expression on his face. "I thought friends tended to be honest with each other," he said, not sounding entirely calm any more. "I was under the distinct impression that you liked women."

"I do!" Harry exclaimed automatically, and then bit down on his lip hard. "I mean, I don't know, maybe I do. I haven't really thought it through. Things are a bit unclear -"

"You're nearly eighteen, Potter," Draco said, his mouth doing something funny. "What are you, sexually retarded?"

*Will you forgive me if I am?*

"I've been a bit occupied with other stuff," Harry said reproachfully. Draco sighed and rumped his hair, a sure sign of extreme inner turmoil. "So what exactly was it about, then?" he demanded, and there was definitely emotion in his voice now, but he pushed it down and it went steely again. "An experiment?"

"No - of *course* not! What do you think of me?" Harry almost shouted, and then realised he was on a mission of peace. "You're my friend," he added in raw, subdued tones. "I wouldn't do that."

"Well, forgive me, Potter, I'm really unclear on what you would and wouldn't do just now. And there was a rather extended time when you were not particularly keen to be my friend," Draco said sharply. "So what were the little boat trip and the picnic all about, then?"

Harry wondered if Draco had been struck with amnesia.

"Er, you're afraid of water, Draco. I thought that I could help with that. I thought you might *like* the picnic. I did it because I was - wait a second, what did *you* think it was about?"

Draco gave him a look.

"You have a nasty, suspicious mind," Harry said, shaken.

"Having high expectations never seems to work out for me," Draco replied.

"Well, I wouldn't do anything like that," Harry told him angrily. "*Never*. I know I made a mistake and you're furious or disgusted or whatever, but I wouldn't plot something and I promise, I *promise* I won't ever try anything again."

Draco sounded faintly intrigued. "You really didn't know you -"

"No," said Harry crossly. He thought he'd made that clear. "I had no idea."

Draco did something else that looked strange with his mouth, but this time it looked a tiny bit amused. "So, what, are you going through some sort of crisis?"

"Shove off," muttered Harry, and then remembered that he had forced his way into these rooms and demanded the conversation.

"And you really didn't intend -"

This harping on already discussed topics was morbid.

"I said no," said Harry. "That's what I keep saying, and you don't listen. I didn't know and I didn't meant to and I would never do anything to upset you on purpose, and I'm *sorry*, and I just came here to ask you to be friends again, but if you won't -"

"I suppose I will," Draco said slowly.

Harry stopped and stared at him. Draco looked slightly embarrassed.

"Well, I can't stop being your friend if you're going through some sort of crisis," he continued, almost defensively. "That would be *cruel*. You need support. Otherwise," he added in speculative tones, "you might go crazy."

Harry rolled his eyes and made no attempt to control the enormous and ridiculous smile. "I'm not going to go crazy, Draco."

"You might," Draco argued stubbornly. "You're enough of a twit to do anything. Besides..." he paused, as if testing the words. "I suppose you were exposed to almost irresistible temptation."

"Shut up."

"After all," Draco proceeded, looking charmed with the idea of his own charm, "I am gorgeous and

marvellous and lovely."

"Shut up." Harry paused, and said awkwardly, "So it's all okay? Friends?"

Draco smiled suddenly and very brightly. "Friends."

Harry went limp with relief at the same time that the clock struck ten.

"Oh, damn it, I'd better go," he said, extremely reluctant. Stupid clocks. Stupid time. Stupid curfew. It was all a very badly thought out arrangement. "Look, can we talk tomorrow? Can we talk at breakfast? I'm -"

"Wait," Draco interrupted, looking thoughtful. "If you like, you can stay."

# Chapter Fifteen: Keeping Faith

*We can't play this game any more  
But can we still be friends?  
Things just can't go on like before  
But can we still be friends?*

Harry stared at Draco, his thoughts exploding in panic.

One part of his brain gabbled, it's all right, it's perfectly all right, Draco is just suggesting a sleepover, get your mind out of the gutter, do you want to ruin everything?

Another part was screaming in Draco's direction, we just established that I'm *confused* here, what on earth do you think you're suggesting, I don't know if I'm even, *are you*, could you?

Another part was staring at Draco in a stupid, avid way all of a sudden, letting him down by getting all mixed up in the rush of happiness and relief. The curve of Draco's hair against his neck was riveting.

"Er," he said.

Draco laughed. "I'm sorry, that was a very tactless way to put it. Especially since you're in crisis," he added conscientiously. "I mean, I'm having an overnight gathering here to discuss the spy and other events. I'd like you to stay."

"Oh," Harry said. "Oh. Yes, of course."

Draco beamed winningly at him. "Good," he answered.

Harry had *missed* that smile, devious and generally alarming though it was.

"I'm going to speak to you all with a pointer," Draco continued. "It's going to point to things. It endows me with a great air of authority."

He went and sat on his bed, producing the pointer from under his pillow, and beckoning Harry proudly over to see it. He waved it a few times, experimentally.

Harry frowned at the pointer. "Draco. Isn't your wand enough?"

Draco smirked. "Nothing's ever enough, Harry."

"It's too much when it looks like compensation," Harry advised him.

Draco hit him with the pointer.

Harry eased himself onto the bed, an enormous sense of relief seeping through him. They were still - right, and he could keep it right.

Draco pulled his legs up and sat in lotus position on the bed, leaning his pointer against his knee.



"We have a while before everybody else gets here," he said. "We should talk about your crisis."

"Um, no, it's all right," Harry told him quickly. "Let's talk about something else. How have you been?"

Draco brightened as something occurred to him. "I displayed my project today," he announced. "I think it might have gone well. You know. Adequately. In a way where perhaps I was brilliant."

Harry looked fixedly at the green coverlet, not looking away from the threads.

"Actually, I saw it." *Please don't be furious.* "It's just - I'd heard you talk about it so often I wanted to see it. So I, um, I used my Invisibility Cloak."

"Really?" Draco laughed, sounding almost startled. "Well... that's kind of voyeuristic. But also flattering, so it's all right. Harry! What did you think?"

He looked eager. Harry smiled at him, relieved again, and tried to form some kind of intelligent sentence about the display.

"It was - different," he said. "I liked it a lot. It was like... concentrated dreams."

Draco glowed. "Well, I am stupendously clever," he admitted shamelessly. "I prattled in Latin from the cradle. Always the little genius, yours truly -"

"Showing off is not clever, Draco."

Draco looked offended. "On the contrary," he said. "If you don't show it off, who's going to know?" He paused. "What were we talking about?"

"You're so clever, you tell me."

Draco tapped Harry on the knee with the pointer. "I know," he said. "Your crisis. All right, don't worry about it. I'm going to help you."

"Er," said Harry. "How?"

Draco bit the side of his lip. "I have to think it over. If only Blaise were willing to help but, well, he hates you, so that's that."

Harry blinked several times after Draco had spoken, and the sentence remained frightening.

"Is Blaise Zabini *gay*?"

Draco blinked at him in turn. "Yes," he said carefully. "And the sky is blue, Harry. The robes we generally wear to school are black. Just in case you hadn't noticed, over the years."

"I don't even like Zabini," Harry said, still shocked. "How could you think -"

Draco sighed, and then looked contrite. "I'm sorry. I forgot about you being sentimental."

"I'm not sentimental!"

The door opened, and Pansy Parkinson came in, dressed in an oversize flannel shirt. Harry only just stopped himself from snapping at her to come back later.

"So the meeting begins," Draco said in an undertone, and reached out and gripped Harry's shoulder, palm flat against his collarbone. "We'll talk later."

Harry smiled at him, unable to help it. "All right."

"Harry Potter," Pansy said archly. "What a surprise this is."

Draco grabbed her lightly as she approached the bed, and shook her by the hips. "We're talking about this later, woman. The conversation may include the words 'unwarranted interference'."

"It's a house pastime," Pansy said, shrugging. Draco laughed and released her.

"Were we supposed to bring parchment and quills," Blaise Zabini began as he came in the door, and then his face changed when he saw Harry. "What is he still doing here?"

"I invited him," Draco said calmly, hand still against Harry's collarbone.

Zabini stood looking down at Harry with disfavour. "Why? I thought we were all supposed to decide who should be present at the meeting."

Draco moved closer along the bed towards Harry, and quite deliberately slid an arm around his neck and leaned forward.

Harry glanced over at Draco's profile, jaw not two inches from his shoulder, and tried not to catch his breath.

"This is my room," Draco told Zabini softly. "So these are my rules. I'll have anyone I want in my room, and if you don't like it, you can leave."

Harry tore his gaze away from Draco, and glanced over at Zabini. He and Draco were staring at each other, clearly locked in a contest of wills. Zabini never even came close to winning. He dropped his eyes, and then gave Harry a resentful look.

"Good," Draco said in the very cheerful way he had when he was feeling triumphant and wanted to rub it in. "Besides, I think he'll be useful."

The door opened and Crabbe and Goyle came in. Harry was just a little stunned to see Crabbe had Marvin the Mad Muggle pyjamas. Both of them stopped and looked at Harry, and then looked at Draco with incomprehension.

Zabini flicked up an eyebrow. "Yes, utility is the idea, I'm sure. Because you invited these two here so we'd all get the benefit of their astonishing brain power, I don't think."

Draco stood and went over to Crabbe and Goyle, standing between them and Zabini as if they needed his physical protection.

"I don't think you should talk about them that way," Draco said in a cold voice.

"Oh, please. You talk about them that way. You talk about them that way every hour of every single day."

Zabini rolled his eyes, still scornful. Draco nodded in a 'you've got me there' manner, and then smiled one of those unexpected, irresistible smiles.

"That's different," he said, glancing back at them. "They're my boys." Crabbe and Goyle stood stolidly behind them. Either because Draco was saying nothing they did not know, or because they really were extraordinarily stupid.

"By the way, you two," Draco added casually, "it was all a misunderstanding. Harry's back. Everything's as it was."

There would be no questions from these two. Goyle nodded.

"Hello, Harry," Crabbe said, as if laboriously coming up with a tactical manoeuvre.

Harry gave him a quick smile. "Hi."

"So that's all settled," Draco remarked. "Isn't harmony a beautiful thing? I have a warm glow. And here are the guests, just in time. Lovely."

Zabini threw himself into the chair he had been occupying earlier, looking as if he had the groundwork for an ulcer. Pansy leaned against the bedpost, and Draco made a welcoming gesture as Parvati Patil opened the door and peeked cautiously around it. She had her black hair in a long beautiful plait, and Harry saw Draco appreciatively eyeing the picture she made in her rose-coloured pyjamas. Harry had some uncharitable thoughts about the shamelessness of people running around schools in their night clothes and luring Slytherins who were supposed to be sitting next to Harry.

Then she saw Harry and looked thrilled, exclaiming, "Harry, I am *so glad* you're here," and rushing over to sit beside him. Since she had ignored Draco, Harry allowed himself to feel guilty and like the terrible person he undoubtedly was.

She was also taking Draco's place, but he was not petty enough to notice that.

"Parvati, did you actually doubt my word of honour on why I wanted this little rendezvous?" Draco inquired, looking hugely amused.

Parvati blushed. "Well, you said no other Gryffindors would be coming. I wouldn't have if I'd known Harry would be here."

"Well, this is certainly my week to have my motives misinterpreted by virtuous young ladies," Draco said. "I had no idea I had such a terrible reputation. It's very thrilling."

Pansy snorted and Draco made a face at her.

"Draco," Harry said. "What did you do?"

"Me?" Draco exclaimed innocently, and made another welcoming gesture as Terry Boot, Mandy Brocklehurst and Lisa Turpin came into the room. They were all in their pyjamas and Terry was in the lead, Lisa and Mandy clutching notebooks to their chests. Draco flashed them a smile. "I was explaining to those already assembled that I tried to invite Hermione Granger to our little gathering."

"Well - surely that would be a good idea. She's the brightest student in school," Terry remarked. His dark-grey eyes moved around the room, and clearly took in Harry, but he made no other comment.

Mandy and Lisa both deserted from behind Terry and went to sit on the bed with Harry and Parvati.

*Marvellous*, Harry thought. *It's after I start being attracted to a boy that girls in their pyjamas decide to swarm me on a bed.*

"Good to see you here, Harry," said Lisa, who he barely knew.

"Er, thanks," he replied.

Meanwhile, Draco was looking a bit sulky. "Granger's not all that brilliant," he grumbled. "And I asked her to come, anyway. It's not my fault that she - ah - misinterpreted my request."

Everyone in the room looked entertained or startled. Harry boggled.

"She what? She never said!"

"She didn't need to apply to her menfolk for protection," Draco said wryly.

Pansy bubbled with laughter. "She hit him," she told everyone gleefully. "Slapped him around the face."

"Oh, not again," Harry exclaimed. Now Pansy and Zabini were looking startled too.

Draco went faintly pink. "I'll have you all know that I was young, and not yet quite so charming."

"Yes," Harry said. "She seems to have been very impressed by your current level of mature charm."

Pansy and Parvati both laughed, and Terry Boot cracked a smile.

"I merely wished to explain why Granger would not be gracing us with her presence."

"Why didn't you explain to *her*?" Terry asked practically.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Somebody thought it was all just too funny, didn't he? Useless creature that he is."

"It is funny," Zabini chimed in. "Imagine *Granger* thinking that Draco was overcome by lust for her."

"I think I could be," Draco said with an introspective look. "I like a girl with spirit."

"That's enough, Draco," Harry said.

Draco glanced at him. Harry looked back. *It's Hermione, so it's not funny, and I'll never in a million years back down like Zabini did.*

Draco did not drop his eyes either. "Or she will never realise our great passion," he said lightly. "Tragic though that would be. Ah, the Hufflepuff contingent has arrived."

Susan Bones slipped inside, drawing a floral dressing gown tightly around herself. She looked around as if she was in the lions' den, and then Draco beamed at her. She smiled back tentatively.

"Where's Smith?" Zabini asked from his armchair.

"He isn't coming," she said, quietly. "I'm sorry. He said he wasn't sure about Malfoy." She spotted Harry and the other girls, and slipped over to them as fast as she could. Harry Potter, ladies' man, was beginning to feel as if fate was playing a practical joke on him.

"Fine, excellent. We can get started then," Draco said, and flourished his pointer. His lips tightened only fractionally when he added, "I never liked that Smith much anyway."

Blaise and Pansy sighed in very loud unison.

"And we all know why, too," Pansy remarked.

Draco looked stubborn. "I don't like blonds."

Pansy looked like a woman who had heard this before, and who was now affectionately exasperated. "Draco, he did not steal the idea from you. You don't have blond copyrighted."

"On the contrary," Draco said. "I'm sure my family must have copyrighted it around 1600. If I could just find the records, that upstart Smith would pay."

Everyone laughed this time. Harry looked around and did not think that Draco had planned to start actual business a moment sooner than this. Everyone looked at their ease, enjoying the other's company.

It was a really impressive performance.

"Let me make a few things clear," Draco continued, on a different note. "I asked all of you here and gave all of you who needed it the Slytherin password, and all I said was that I wanted to discuss current events. All of you must have been quite puzzled - aside from those who thought that I was offering sexual favours, of course."

"You're not?" Pansy asked. "That's it, I'm off."

Draco laughed and pretended to throw her into the chair opposite Zabini. She hooked her legs over an arm.

"The official story is that all you girls are attending a pyjama party of Pansy's in her private room, and all the boys are attending one in mine. Obviously, people will suspect there was a certain

amount of mingling, but that will just make us all seem more interesting and we will be the envy of our classmates." Draco flashed an impish smile. "Nobody will ever have to know the dreadful truth that Harry hogged all the girls."

Harry looked around the bed. "Which would you like?" he asked. "I've got a selection."

Parvati giggled and punched him in the arm.

Draco looked soulful. "I have to pick just one? Sharing is caring, Harry. You should keep that in mind. Now, does anyone have a question about the alibis?"

"I do," said Zabini. "Where are *your* pyjamas?"

Naturally Harry had never liked Zabini. He constantly asked people offensive personal questions.

"Excuse me," Draco said in his most aristocratic manner. "I could not possibly get changed before my guests arrived. I had company."

"Never stopped you before," Zabini pointed out.

Draco glanced over at Harry and grinned. "I had special company."

"Enough of this false modesty," Zabini said. "I seriously object to men wearing clothing at night."

Perhaps Draco had had a point, and Harry should really have noticed about Zabini before.

"Take it off!" Pansy put in helpfully.

People were laughing again, very naturally.

"We're here," Draco continued, "because I thought it would be a good idea to have an interhouse group in which we can share secrets and think up plans - not only with less possible interference from the spy, since the spy could be one of us - but without the jurisdiction of the teachers."

"Yeah, Potter," Zabini said slyly. "What we're talking about is breaking the rules. Sure you don't want to scurry off?"

Harry laughed, genuinely startled. "Well, now I'm sure you really don't know anything about me, Zabini."

He saw Susan Bones was looking a little hesitant at this open talk of rule-breaking, though, so he smiled at her reassuringly. She smiled back, looking more confident.

"I'm not just talking about breaking rules," Draco continued. "We can also do morally questionable things that Professor Lupin obviously can't openly countenance. I haven't a moral to my name, and I'm quite prepared to lie, cheat and steal to do any damage to the Dark Lord."

There were nods from the Slytherins around the room, and Terry Boot, but Harry looked around the bed and saw hesitation until he nodded too. Then Parvati and Susan started nodding as well.

"And we can point fingers at who we think is the spy, and investigate them, instead of pursuing this policy of pretending to trust everyone and watching desperately for a random clue. We can point fingers at teachers, even. And of course," Draco concluded grandly, "I have one final argument to sway people into agreeing to these meetings." He opened his wardrobe. On one door was fixed a calendar-sized notepad, clearly meant to serve as a board. Draco gestured to it with his pointer and a certain amount of pride.

"I think it all looks very official now," he said. "Now, let's have some names. Sorry, Parvati - Padma Patil."

Parvati sat up straight at Harry's side. "I know why you're saying it," she said, "but I know my sister. There's no way. It's not her."

Draco's eyes were cold. "Whoever the spy is," he said softly, "they have people who believe in them. Who trust them implicitly, and who are being betrayed."

"Not Padma," Parvati insisted.

He smiled. "Then let's prove her innocent, shall we, sweetheart?" He wrote 'Padma Patil' on the notepad. Parvati was still trembling with quiet defiance at Harry's side.

"What about *you*?" she asked. "People suspect you."

Pansy sat up straight. "Look, you little -"

"Sh, Pansy," Draco said sharply. He turned and wrote his own name down. Harry noted with amusement that he did so in much fancier script than he had used for Padma's name, and he added a curl to the 'y' with a flourish.

Apparently being suspected of dark deeds was all right if you could do it with style. Parvati still looked unsettled, and it was beginning to infect the other girls on the bed. Susan reached over and held onto Harry's elbow: when he glanced at her in bewilderment the look on her face was a cry for reassurance.

He had not looked over at Terry Boot, but it seemed uncertainty was not confined to the bed.

"In the spy hunt, we can't forget the final threat is You-Know-Who."

"I don't," Draco replied shortly.

"Then - how can we use a little group like this to affect *him*?"

"Well, what do you suggest we do?" Pansy demanded, looking like a small, determined dog ready to attack. "Sit around here and get picked off one by one? Brilliant plan."

Draco glanced, quickly, from one to the other. "Ravenclaws are noted for their brilliant plans," he drawled.

Terry blinked at her. "I wasn't attacking -"

Draco needed some help.

"A group can make a difference to Voldemort," Harry said, and silence fell abruptly. Harry saw Blaise Zabini's lip curl at this solemn-hero comment, and decided to stun him silent.

"Though of course, it might be a bit much for Draco's nerves."

Pansy and Zabini both looked suddenly bent on murder.

Draco took Harry's wild throw and ran with it. He looked ridiculously haughty. "If you're referring to that time when I was *eleven* and a little upset by seeing the Dark Lord drinking unicorn blood and thus made a strategic retreat..."

"Strategic retreat in which you ran screaming like a girl," Harry said sweetly. Susan laughed nervously.

"Little-known battle cry of the Malfoys," Draco explained. "Causes untold confusion. Should really be changed."

The Slytherins relaxed. Attack was obviously all right with them, but only as long as they did not feel Draco was threatened. And the others laughed, and stopped looking threatened themselves.

"Oh, I'm *sure*," said Harry.

"Well, *I'm* sure we'd all adore a valiant speech. Everyone's going to get a turn with the notepad and the pointer in the end, anyway," Draco said, neatly letting everyone know there would be no leader. Then he presented the pointer to Harry with a flourish. "Come on then. You up for it?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Why not."

He took the pointer and stood up, fighting the sudden feeling of awkwardness and panic. This was important.

Draco took his place on the bed, and there were representatives from every house all together now.

Draco leered ridiculously around. The girls looked amused and Parvati, fully recovered now, gave him quite a creditable leer back. He slipped an arm loosely around Parvati's shoulders, and Harry crushed down a flicker of - something.

Draco was only teasing. Harry didn't want someone's arm around him as if he were a bloody girl. Harry didn't know what he wanted.

Still.

He pulled himself together. "I got a lot done with two people, when I was much younger than we are now. It's useless to talk about what we haven't got, and what we can't do. We have to pool our resources and achieve what we can."

Susan and Parvati were nodding, looking impressed, and the Ravenclaws were looking thoughtful and almost convinced.



Harry had to trust Draco to deliver the Slytherins.

"It makes sense to work outside the rules sometimes. And it makes sense to work together," Harry said slowly, trying to put into words what he had only just worked out, and not daring to get anything wrong. "The Sorting Hat was always talking about different strengths houses had. We have to combine them, so we can be stronger - so we can be more effective."

"So we can crush them." Blaise Zabini sounded pleased. He and Draco exchanged a swift, fierce look and then Draco looked back at Susan Bones.

"Of course, the strength of the Slytherins is cunning plots. But you'll have already noticed that." He reached over for a pillow, deftly stripped it of its case and pulled the case over his head. Then he wagged his hands. "Whoo," he said, very dry. "I'm a Dementor." Laughter all around.

"One of Draco's singularly cunning plots," Harry agreed solemnly. "Shame about the utter failure."

Draco pulled off the pillow case, smoothed down his ruffled hair and flashed Harry a smile.

"Ah, but that was because I didn't have all the necessary data," he said. "Which is why we need the Ravenclaws."

Mandy and Lisa looked up from their writing, and both smiled. Then Draco glanced over at Terry Boot, and Harry's eyes followed.

Terry looked interested. "Go on, Harry," he said. "Everybody's listening."

\* \* \*

"We didn't get all that much done," Harry murmured.

"This meeting wasn't about action. It was about establishment," Draco murmured back. "And I owe you big, Potter. That was *great*."

"Don't worry about it. You're not the only one with scores to settle." The meeting had ended at half past two in the morning, when bed had been decreed all around. The bed had been immediately and stridently declared to be the property of the girls, though Draco had looked very plaintive about the whole affair.

"It is my bed," he had pointed out in small, wistful tones.

"And so as the host, you'll give it up to the ladies who are forced by curfew to stay in your badly equipped room," Pansy had told him firmly. "If all the ladies will go on. Does your bed fit five girls?"

"I've never had the opportunity to find out," Draco had answered, his lip trembling. "My life has been sad and empty."

All the girls had fitted on, though there had been much giggling and kicking of legs. Draco had watched the entire proceeding with huge, tragic eyes. Meanwhile, Blaise Zabini took the two armchairs and made himself a comfortable bed.

"I have to sleep on the floor?" Draco had said, appalled. "Oh, the wages of virtue are bitter and cause back problems in later life."

"You can share with me if you like," Zabini'd offered.

"Ah - no. It would be a little cramped."

"Boot?"

Terry Boot had blinked. "The floor is fine."

"Well, either Crabbe or Goyle would break the chairs and kill me. And don't even *think* about it, Harry Potter."

"Don't worry," Harry had returned.

Zabini, propped up on one elbow, had given him a venomous look. Harry had scowled back at him, and then looked at Draco, who was watching them with a thoughtful look on his face. Crabbe and Goyle were behind him as they always were, one step behind and backing him up. He had turned and tilted his head, deliberately, in Harry's direction. Goyle had moved out and away from Draco, and positioned himself at Harry's elbow.

Harry and Zabini had just stared.

"For..." Zabini'd said irritably, and then rolled his eyes in Draco's direction. "You can share if you like, Potter," he said in tones that added 'and if being smothered with a pillow is your idea of a good night's sleep'.

"No thank you, Zabini," Harry had answered, very sweetly. "Though it was kind of you to offer."

Now the remainder of the group was stretched out on the floor. The bulk of Crabbe and Goyle, sleeping snoring mountains, provided a wall against Terry Boot, and indeed the rest of the room. Harry and Draco were talking in whispers.

"One thing," he said quietly. "I want Ron and Hermione at the next meeting."

It was dark, but Draco's voice indicated that his face was twisted in that peculiarly disdainful manner. "Granger of course," he answered readily. "But I don't need the Weasel."

"Well, I always need Ron," Harry told him in a low, determined voice. "And he has been very useful in the past, and I think he'll be useful again. And even if he wasn't - what use are Crabbe and Goyle?" He stopped, and thought of the insult to Ron implied there. "And Pansy," he added hastily.

When people had begun theorising and accusing, the only person besides Crabbe and Goyle who had remained quiet was Pansy. She had helped Harry, and she was loyal to Draco, and Harry was quite prepared to like her, but he did not think she had an analytical mind.

"That's different," Draco replied sharply. "They're *mine* -"

"And they're mine," Harry told him.

There was a pause. Harry heard the slight sound indicating that Draco had rolled onto his side, and when he spoke next his voice was closer to Harry's ear.

"Fine," he said crossly. "Have your nasty little friends."

"I will," Harry returned, and then felt a brush of warmth. Draco's hand must be lying curled at his side, and whenever Harry breathed there was the smallest contact between Draco's knuckles and Harry's hip.

It was nothing. It was barely contact at all.

Harry spoke quickly, desperate to distract himself and fighting to keep his voice even. "I knew you would understand," he said factually, letting slip things he had realised but not spoken aloud in his haste. "That was - something I missed. That you understood some things."

Draco sounded comfortable, on the point of sleep. His lazy voice was actually like a purr.

"Well, you understood about what I wanted for the meeting."

*Keep talking and don't think.* "I know how you think," Harry admitted, "and once I could see that, I wanted to do something to help. I feel better as long as I'm doing something."

"I know. And people trust you, they count on you to act and to act for the best. You reassure the others. I needed something to bring them together."

"It'd alienate the Slytherins, though, if you and I didn't -" *Understand each other.* "- get along."

"But we do. And we can create the right atmosphere of relaxation, and they can work together. It's politics."

Harry had understood all that before, but Draco's cool voice disturbed him a little. He was speaking as Lucius Malfoy's son, the son of the perfectly corrupt politician.

"I didn't want to use us getting along as politics," Draco whispered with sudden violence. "I thought it wouldn't have anything to *do* with that."

And Harry relaxed and felt ashamed, because Lucius Malfoy had never felt the slightest compunction about using people - *eleven year old innocents, his own son.* And he had remembered something he should not have forgotten.

"It's all right. You can use it if you like. I trust you."

He could hear the smile in Draco's voice. "I always said you were gullible."

"I'm not gullible."

"I hate to tell you, but the only other option is stupid."

"If I had a pillow, I'd hit you with it."

Draco poked him in the side. "Bring it on, Potter."

Harry turned on his side to protect himself and poke Draco back, but then one of his hands was on Draco's body and Draco's breath was warm on his face and *Harry, this way madness lies*.

"I need sleep, you know. Picking up *your* slack can tire a man out."

Draco's laugh was affectionate. Even though there were strange things going on in Harry's chest and breathing was this overly difficult task, and Draco's hand still just touching his side seemed like the universe playing tricks, he was happy.

"Good night, Harry."

\* \* \*

"*Malfoy asked you to his room and you didn't tell me?*"

Harry looked at Ron with some concern. He was pacing the cold floor of the Owlery and looked as if he might have an apoplectic fit.

"Of course I didn't," Hermione answered. "I'd already slapped him, and you would have killed him and ended up in a lot of trouble."

"I wouldn't have - well, fine, I would have killed him, and why not? You're my girlfriend!" Ron exploded. "People can't go around making, like, indecent proposals to *other people's girlfriends!*" After Ron had said 'indecent proposals' his ears had gone red. Harry thought he knew that, and that it was making him angrier. "Anyway," he added in truculent tones, "who'd miss him?"

"I would," Harry said mildly.

"Harry, mate," Ron said. "I know you had a rotten childhood, and I'm going to assume that it warped your mind, and so I forgive you when you say things that are mental. But *Hermione* -"

Hermione was looking out of one of the glass-less windows again, her eyes smarting from the wind. She turned back to Ron with a rather distraught air.

"Well, it turned out all right, didn't it?" she asked, obviously trying to focus. "You heard Harry. Malfoy wasn't trying to proposition me, he was trying to recruit me for this dangerous little vigilante group."

"Hermione, that's not fair," Harry said. "You know if Lupin hadn't set up the Young Order you would have been the first to think up some kind of organisation to let us help."

"That may be," Hermione returned seriously, "but Professor Lupin did set it up, and I see no point in setting up some kind of conspiratorial band. Professor Lupin is doing a wonderful job -"

"Of course he is!" Harry exclaimed. "But people are getting kidnapped, and Professor Lupin is a teacher, he can't sanction creeping around and breaking rules. And this - conspiratorial band, if you like - it could really help other houses to understand each other. We were all almost getting on last night."

Ron looked unmoved.

"I don't want to understand Malfoy," he said flatly. "I think it would bring me out in a rash. And this group is *Malfoy's* idea, and the headquarters is *Malfoy's* bedroom, and I don't want anything to do with it!"

"Ron, I know how you feel," Harry ground out. "I'm not asking you to like him. I'm asking you to give this a chance."

Ron's colour was rising again.

"Look, Harry... Hermione's right. We've got the Young Order. I don't need to get mixed up with Malfoy and I know he's your -" Ron made a face "- friend again, and you've made up with him after some fight that I'm sure was entirely his fault, and so I don't think you're entirely objective about this situation."

Harry sprang away from the wall.

"You're not, either," he snapped. "It wasn't his fault. You don't understand -"

"Please!" Hermione interrupted in a frayed voice. "Please, you two! Don't fight. I can't take it, not on top of everything else. Can't we just sit here and wait for this damn bird!" She stood there looking cold and tense and unhappy, her hair flying in wisps in the cold wind. Hermione hardly ever swore.

Ron sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, going over to stand by the window beside her.

"Fine," he said in a rough voice, but taking her hands gently and rubbing them between his own. "He's not worth it anyway."

"I think he is," Harry said in subdued tones.

Hermione made a sound a little bit like a laugh. "Harry, we *know* that," she told him. "Just - stop talking about it. For now."

"I will if you say you'll talk to Parvati," Harry pushed on. "Or Terry Boot. Or someone. Just think about it, think about giving it a try."

Hermione did not look pleased, but she nodded reluctantly. She and Ron stood together at the window, shivering slightly.

"It's freezing," Hermione said. "I hope the weather breaks for June."

*June coming already. And if the spy isn't caught, they either go out into the world as a trusted member of the real Order and betray people, or stay in Hogwarts with new people on the Young Council and Hogwarts gets decimated.*

Harry had thought that this was the perfect opportunity to try and talk Ron and Hermione around. It was a Saturday and most people were at Hogsmeade, and they were all waiting up at the Owlery on Dumbledore's orders.

All the teachers were so busy these days, and it was essential that someone get the Owl from Juno McGonagall as soon as it came. Hermione was taking the responsibility very seriously. In retrospect, possibly it was not the best time. Harry was a bit on edge about this too.

"If Professor McGonagall's sister says no..." Ron said at last, with his unfortunate habit of saying things people were trying not to think.

"She has to say yes!" Harry replied fiercely. "She wants justice for her sister, doesn't she?"

"It's just some old witches are very conservative," Ron warned. "And this is very experimental."

Hermione took refuge in explaining what she knew, her body easing as she spoke. "It's the same principle as the Priori Incantatus spell," she said earnestly, as if the problem would be solved if she could convince Ron and Harry. "Except instead of displaying the last spell produced from a wand, you are supposed to be able to see what wand cast the last spell on the object... or in this case the..." She stopped, and swallowed, and then said 'body' in a short, hurt way. "There's a margin for error," she said hastily, "But this could really lead us to the murderer. She has to see that."

A thought was taking shape in Harry's mind, dark and inevitable.

*That spell has to be performed, he thought, whether or not she does.* He couldn't ask Ron or Hermione to do that. Break the law, yes, perform experimental spells on Professor McGonagall's... no. But he would do it.

He and Draco could do it. If it had to be done.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by wingbeats from above. Two owls were flying in, and they settled on the window ledge where Ron and Hermione stood.

Perhaps it would be all right. Hermione was already untying the letters, and she would open the one addressed to Dumbledore and send the owl flying to St. Mungo's mortuary with proof that permission had been received from the next of kin.

Hermione looked agitated, pushing her hair back from her face in two sharp movements.

"Ron, Harry, they're both addressed to Dumbledore - what should I do?"

It was Harry who answered, absolutely sure. "Open them both. We have no time to waste."

Hermione opened the first with shaking hands. Ron held her shoulder, his knuckles white, but she did not seem to notice that his grip was too tight. She gave a little cry of relief as she scanned the contents.

"It's from Juno McGonagall - she said yes! It's all right. Ron, quick, get my bag, get out an envelope and a quill and some parchment -"

Harry never knew what made him say it. "Hermione - what's in the other letter?"

She opened it hastily, carelessly, as Ron strode back over to them with her bag in his hands. And then her fingers shook again and the letter dropped.

Ron dropped her bag as well. She knelt down and reached for the letter, her fingers scrabbling heedlessly through the straw and the owl droppings. When she looked up, her face was very white.

"What is it?" Harry asked. His mouth was dry.

Even her lips were white. "Someone took it," she said. "Someone took Professor McGonagall's body. They stole it right from St. Mungo's mortuary - God knows what they've done to it - they didn't want us to find out who did it and now we won't!"

Hermione stood up, her hair practically crackling, and the wild set look on her face that Harry had only ever seen a few times and that always alarmed him and made him feel as if he had underestimated her. Someone, her stance suggested, would pay for this.

This time he was in full, grim agreement. Someone had to.

Still, her words surprised him. "We should have had it done right away," she said furiously. "You-Know-Who and his people aren't staying within the law, are they? We should have known what would happen if we delayed. We shouldn't have cared about the stupid -"

For a panicked instant, Harry thought Hermione was going to cry. Then she began storming towards the door.

"Harry, where's Malfoy?" she demanded. "I'll join his stupid group! I'll do whatever it takes! Come on, let's go to Hogsmeade!"

She was down the stairs in a whirl of her cloak. Harry glanced over at Ron, who looked as bleak as Harry felt, but who still looked as if he needed persuading.

"Well," he said, "you're not going to let her go to meetings in Draco's room without you, are you?"

They went after her.

\* \* \*

They found Professor Dumbledore and Lupin and told them before they went anywhere. With that and their walk to Hogsmeade, Hermione calmed down. They were all used to absorbing shocks and going on by now.

Nothing made her waver. Harry was desperately proud of her.

They looked in several shops, and found the Slytherins in the Three Broomsticks. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be having pub lunches, Draco and Zabini had half-finished drinks and Pansy was eating a large chocolate sundae. In spite of everything, Harry smiled as he saw Draco trying to steal some of the sundae.

Pansy hit him on the knuckles with her spoon. "Draco, if you touch my ice-cream again I'll hex you," she warned. "I am a woman. It is chocolate. What part of this do you not understand?"

Hermione strode over to their table.

"Malfoy," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Pansy cast a disgusted look over her shoulder. "Oh look," she said. "It's a little pack of ravening Gryffindors. C'mon, Blaise, let's get a great big drink. Draco, don't touch my ice cream."

She and Zabini got up, pushing past them. Draco looked up, his eyes wide as if he had only just noticed them.

"Granger," he said. "Charmed, I'm sure. If you're here to inquire whether my offer is still open -"

"Draco, don't," said Harry.

"Someone stole Professor McGonagall's body," Hermione told him shortly. "We can't perform the spell. Tell me about this group of yours."

"Someone did what?" Draco's eyes were suddenly narrowed and cold.

"Stole it," Harry said. "And someone's going to pay."

Something lit in Draco's face that had even been missing from Hermione's rage, frightening and fierce and like looking into a mirror, suddenly tilted up towards you.

"Oh yes," he answered. He and Harry shared a smile, like a furious promise. Ron recalled them back to the pub and what had to be done now.

"They'll pay," he said grimly, taking Pansy's chair. "I'll join the group if Hermione does. I'll do what I have to do. But I don't like you, Malfoy, and I never will. And I don't think this is a good idea."

"Oh no, Weasel, you don't like me? How will I ever survive," Draco sneered. "Grant me the sunlight of your godly red-haired approval, or I will wither away and die."

"Sod off, Malfoy, because you are not funny."

Ron scowled and mashed Pansy's ice-cream with an angrily wielded spoon. Hermione remained standing up with her arms folded.

"Tell me about your group, Malfoy," she repeated.

Draco leaned forward. "It's not my group," he answered. "I'm not the leader. I just thought we should all conspire together to catch the enemy by any means necessary. Do you have any qualms about that - or about joining a group a Malfoy started?"

Ron looked at his intense face, and seemed unimpressed. He began moodily eating the chocolate sundae, but he looked resigned when Hermione spoke.

"Count me in," she said.

"I'm in if she is," Ron said steadily, spooning up another mouthful. Draco looked annoyed and Ron made sure it was a big one.



*At least we're doing something*, Harry thought. *It's bad but we're doing something*. He looked down at Draco, and Draco nodded.

Hermione seemed to deflate, her energy going. "I'll meet you in the library on Sunday to talk about our shared project," she said. "Ron, Harry, let's go."

It was time to go, especially since Zabini and Pansy were making their way back towards the table and Harry did not want to see his best friend die at the hands of Pansy Parkinson. For some reason he lingered as Hermione and Ron turned to go, looking down at that bowed, silvery-blond head.

"Maybe we could do something," he suggested. "Later."

Draco looked up at him, and after a moment he smiled. "I'm a little busy," he answered. "But soon."

"All right," Harry said reluctantly, and followed Ron and Hermione as they went. They were passing the threshold of the pub when they heard Pansy exclaim, "Draco, how could you?"

There was a sound very much like someone hitting someone else over the head with a spoon.

"Ow!" Draco exclaimed.

Ron looked happy.

\* \* \*

Harry arranged to meet Terry Boot in the library at the same time Hermione and Draco were meeting, anxious to see if they were co-operating.

He started laying out his parchment on a table near but not too near by, as Hermione walked up to the table Draco already had set up. Draco lifted his face to hers, his eyes dancing.

"Couldn't keep away?" he asked, a mocking caress in his voice.

"Save it, Malfoy," Hermione advised. "Harry explained. I expect I owe you an apology for misinterpreting your motives." Her tone indicated that she had no intention of offering any such apology.

"Oh, think nothing of it," Draco told her courteously. "Wishful thinking is a powerful influence on the mind."

"Please, don't flatter yourself. Can we get to work, Malfoy, or do I have to -"

Draco, who seemed to be having fun, smiled his most provoking smile. "Are you going to bitch-slap me again, Granger?"

"Maybe," Hermione said grimly.

He tossed his hair back. "Go ahead. I kind of like it."

"Malfoy!" Hermione went scarlet. She looked down at her parchment and apparently drew strength from it. "Malfoy, I promise you - there will always be countless people dying to slap you. Can we get to work now?"

Draco opened a large spell book, his face turning serious and absorbed. Harry looked over for another moment, and then Terry Boot came up to him with his bag slung over his shoulder. Harry looked away and down fast, terrified that his face had betrayed him. When he glanced up, Terry did not seem to have noticed anything. He took parchment and a quill from his bag and sat down opposite Harry, and seemed to be searching for something to say.

Harry had never been the type who mixed with lots of people, and all he knew about Terry was that he was shy and didn't like Quidditch. Normally he would have been at a loss for words.

He had been thinking, though, and he had something to accomplish.

"You're the Head Boy," he stated.

Terry blinked and rumpled his brown hair. Even without his reading glasses, Harry had never met anyone who looked more like a worried owl. "Yes," he said, his voice measured. "I have been for quite some time, you know."

"Yes, yes. But you're a Ravenclaw," Harry elaborated. "And you're the Head Boy. So you've got to have a certain authority there. Look... what Draco has been saying is true. We all have to start co-operating and mingling better. If the spy is a student, they're almost certainly using house prejudices. Nobody wants to think the spy is in their house, and it's much easier to distrust people you don't know. And if the spy is a teacher... we're in a situation where we have to work together. We absolutely have to."

*If Sirius and Lupin hadn't distrusted each other, Sirius would never have put too much faith in Wormtail. And this isn't a few people... this is a whole school.*

Terry still looked worried. "I understand what you're saying, Harry, but - well. We all know that house stereotypes don't always hold true. I mean, you could hardly call Draco's friend Crabbe cunning, and anyone would think Hermione belonged in Ravenclaw. But there are different - feelings in every house. Ravenclaws band together less than any of the other houses. We tend to decide things and act on them with individual judgements. I don't think we're the type armies are made of."

Harry looked over at Terry, and felt a flicker of resentment. *I see what Draco meant*, he thought. *He's intelligent. They must have a lot in common.*

He crushed it down because it was stupid. "Personal preferences or not," he said, "this is war. I'm talking sense. Draco's talking sense. You can see that, surely?"

"I can," Terry answered slowly. "I could last night. Draco is very astute."

"But we can't talk sense to an entire house. Draco especially won't be trusted. You say it depends on individual judgements, but you have to command a certain amount of respect. So - lay it out before them, and let them make their judgements."

Terry looked thoughtful. Harry looked over at Hermione and Draco, who seemed to be getting enthusiastic about some ancient runes together. Draco was smiling that small smile, the smile that was not for effect and that nobody was supposed to see.

*A spy killed my parents. Let them try - just let them try - to touch my friends.*

Terry made his decision. "I'll try."

Harry nodded. "Try to succeed."

\* \* \*

It was Monday when it happened and, fittingly enough, they were all in Potions. Professor Lupin, the nicest substitute teacher ever made, was giving them tips on how to handle the upcoming practical Potions NEWT.

"The most important thing," he advised, his grey eyes gleaming in Neville's direction, "is *not to panic*."

Neville laughed, looking somewhat shamefaced.

"The most important thing is to make sure Granger's working next to you, Longbottom," Draco said in an undertone.

Harry turned around and gave him a reproachful look. Draco made an agitated gesture.

"Well he does!" he hissed. "I've *seen* her helping him! That's *cheating*!"

"I've seen you play Quidditch," Harry reminded him.

"That's different," Draco whispered back. "This is *Potions*."

"Mr Malfoy, Mr Potter," said Lupin. "I couldn't be more pleased that you two don't look like stabbing each other at the next Young Order meeting, but really, your practical is in two weeks. I'm sure your conversation can keep."

"I'm sorry, sir," Draco replied, resting his chin on his fist and undoubtedly looking up at Lupin with huge, limpid eyes. "It was all his fault. He's a bad influence."

The Slytherins snickered. Harry was pleased to see Parvati and Lavender giggle as he made a laughing protest over the noise, and then the door opened and an under-sized first year Slytherin came running in.

"Draco!" said tiny Edmund Baddock. "I m-mean, Malfoy!"

Draco glanced around. "This had better be important, Baddock."

"It is!" Edmund's words were tumbling over each other. "It *is*, he's - he's back, Malfoy! He's *back*!"

There was a stunned pause. Then Blaise Zabini gave an incoherent whoop, stood up and vaulted

over his desk, displaying a flash of entirely non-uniform leather trousers, and then bolting out of the door.

"Mr Zabini," Lupin called after him mildly, "I'm sure those trousers aren't supposed to be -"

His voice was entirely lost in the sudden Slytherin racket. Crabbe got up, knocking his chair over and then stepping on it and breaking the back. He disentangled himself and made determinedly for the door, not looking back. All the others were flooding towards the door. Draco was in the lead.

They were all gone in under a minute.

"You may be excused," Lupin said in their wake. He turned and gave one of his tired, kind smiles to the others. "Come on. We can all go."

Harry made Ron and Hermione come with him quickly, although once they got into the corridors progress was difficult. Hogwarts seemed suddenly and insanely full of Slytherins, a racing, seething, brutally shoving mass of Slytherins all making for the Great Hall like lemmings for the cliffs.

Harry and the others just made it to the doors of the Great Hall when the first wave hit. Slytherins were slamming elbows into each other's stomachs to get there first, but the one who headed the rush turned out to be Pansy.

Pansy Parkinson, generally considered a hard-hearted cow, whose habitual expression was a scowl, and who now flung herself at Professor Snape and threw her arms around his neck.

"Professor Snape!" she exclaimed, "you're back! You're back! I *knew* you'd come back!" Then she kissed him on both cheeks and burst into tears.

"A woman voluntarily touched Professor Snape," Ron said in an awed voice. "That's it, I've seen everything. I can die now."

Professor Snape looked absolutely horrified. "Miss Parkinson, *please* control yourself," he said, in his most severe tones. "This exhibition is entirely uncalled for."

Pansy released him reluctantly, stepping back and stifling a sob against her hand. No student in the history of Hogwarts, Harry thought, could ever have looked so happy to be told off.

"Me next," said Blaise Zabini intrepidly.

"Nobody next," Professor Snape said sternly. He looked around at the pushing crowd of Slytherins. "You all appear to be missing lessons," he said. "I trust this does not happen frequently. Malfoy?"

Draco was standing right beside him, looking into his face. He was not even smiling. He simply looked absolutely relaxed, and glowing. It was stupid and girly, but Harry couldn't help looking at him and thinking, *beautiful*.

"Yes, sir," Draco said, his voice calm on the surface and bubbling underneath, as if he was just about to break out into delighted laughter.

Professor Snape's unpleasant, rasping voice was even more dry than usual. "Did you happen to look

up from your full-time occupation of hair care every now and then to check on the well-being of this house?"

"I did a month or so ago," Draco said earnestly, "but then I got a split end, Professor, and it required all my attention."

It was hard to tell since his face was set in those sardonic lines and behind that long, greasy hair, but Harry thought Professor Snape might have smiled just a little. "You can't take it with you, Malfoy."

Draco did smile then, his whole face lighting up. His voice was still pretending to be casual.

"Then, sir, I'm not going."

Pansy was still sobbing.

"Oh, for... You may have my handkerchief, Miss Parkinson," Snape said, taking it out of his pocket. "Return it to me, and cease this disgraceful display at once."

She nodded and smiled in a way that was equally extremely bright and ridiculously watery.

Then the teachers arrived, walking past Harry, Ron and Hermione towards Snape. Lupin had Sirius' arm in a firm grip and was frogmarching him in Snape's direction. He offered his other hand cordially to Snape.

"Professor Snape, I'm almost as relieved as your students to see you back safe," he said, and smiled.

Snape darted a dark, suspicious look at him, but he cautiously accepted Lupin's hand, and shook it briefly.

"And of course Professor Black is..." Lupin shook Sirius' arm encouragingly and perhaps a little too hard.

Sirius gave Snape a baleful look. "I'm... all right with the fact that you're... not dead," he said between his teeth.

Snape sneered back at him.

"I'm very pleased that my staff are all getting on so charmingly," said Dumbledore in his genial and gently ironic way, coming up to Snape. He offered his hand, and this hand Snape took without hesitation. "Severus," said Dumbledore. "It's splendid to have you back. We have all missed you. I will, of course, wish to talk to you about your doubtless extremely instructive travels later."

There were people here who were not in the Young Order, and who had not declared allegiance one way or the other. It was not safe.

"Tomorrow will do well," Dumbledore continued generously. "Now, I believe, your return calls for a celebration. What do your students think, Severus?"

"We're actually celebrating Snape coming back to teach us. This has to be rock bottom," Ron remarked, making an astonished face at his Butterbeer.

Madam Rosmerta was looking surprised and thrilled. Monday night, Harry expected, was usually slow in the Three Broomsticks, and now all of Hogwarts had descended upon it and demanded drinks.

Loud music had been struck up, and people were dancing. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had secured a little table. They had all ordered Butterbeers, but Harry had thought of another occasion in this pub, smiled ruefully at himself and ordered a mead.

"Harry, you're not eighteen yet!" Hermione hissed when Madam Rosmerta left. "You're breaking the law."

"I'll live with myself somehow," Harry said, and sipped his mead. Ginny laughed. She was sitting close by Harry on the bench, and Harry was glad she was there. She seemed honestly happy for the Slytherins, and that Snape had returned.

"Look at them," she said, gesturing. "They feel so much safer now, you can see it. I'm so glad."

Harry smiled his gratitude at her, and she smiled back. She obviously felt what he wanted to feel, just open joy, and he was glad that Snape wasn't dead, and he was so relieved for Draco, but... Well. He had always hated Snape and that didn't change, and besides...

He was being small and petty and absurd. But Draco had never smiled that rapt smile at *him*, and he had tried to speak to Draco as they were all going into the pub and Draco had not even noticed. Obviously, he was occupied - but then he had been occupied all weekend, too.

He was sitting on the hearth by a crackling fire, close to Snape's chair. There was a whole ring of Slytherins there, who occasionally went off to dance or to drink, but who always drifted back.

"I hope Professor Snape brought back some information," Hermione said quietly, and then shook her head and obviously tried to distract herself. "Would you look at that cow Pansy," she said. "I caught her buying drinks for first years."

Pansy, all cleaned up now and apparently dispensing threats to anyone who brought up the crying business, was walking over to Professor Snape's chair and trying to balance her large drink in the crush. Harry had to admit that her black dress was very tight and very short, which was what seemed to be upsetting Hermione.

She rested her drink against the mantelpiece and ruffled Draco's hair, which looked gold in the firelight. Draco pushed her hand away, but he beamed up at her.

Really, her dress was too tight and short. He saw Hermione's point entirely.

"All the Slytherins look ridiculous," Ron agreed. "Look at Blaise Zabini."

Blaise Zabini had apparently been drinking shots, and was now dancing enthusiastically with

everybody he could corner. Theodore Nott was looking traumatised.

"I still think it's nice to see people looking happy," Ginny insisted. "There's enough bad feeling around."

Harry finished his mead. "I agree with Ginny," he said firmly, and put a brotherly arm around her shoulders. Then he beckoned for another mead.

Everyone was relaxing, celebrating, there was nothing to do now and Harry was afraid to think. He drank the second as fast as he could.

Draco tilted his face up to Professor Snape's, still glowing, and he said something soft, but then everyone around them stilled and Harry realised that he must have said something serious. He leaned forward to try and hear better.

"Yes," Snape said in his carrying, harsh voice. "I'd heard. I was - almost overwhelmed by the news. Professor McGonagall was a very... worthy colleague, and it did nothing for my peace of mind to hear that she had been replaced by one I consider not only incompetent but dangerous."

His black eyes flicked over to Sirius, who was sitting at a table with Lupin. Sirius jumped up and everyone in the room tensed, but then Lupin quickly moved his chair so Sirius was pinned in between the table, the chair and the wall. Sirius snarled something in outraged protest.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," Lupin said, not moving. "Am I in your way?"

Sirius snarled something else and then sat back down and yelled for another Firewhiskey. Draco looked over at him, his eyes hard, and Harry had that feeling he had taken for granted for years - that he and Draco were on opposite sides.

He tried to catch Draco's eye, but could not. He felt a bit sick.

When he ordered his next mead, Ron decided he wanted one too. Harry cheered up slightly as they got into a bit of a competition and ordered Firewhiskey next.

Everyone was drinking a lot. Professor Snape had a really impressive collection of bottles in front of him, because every student in his house seemed set on buying him a drink. Eventually, Hermione intervened. "Ron," she said firmly, "you're drunk."

"No, no," Ron replied with great conviction, coming back with two more glasses of Firewhiskey. "I'm not, I'm completely -" He missed his stool when he sat down, and looked up from the floor with a wide-eyed, injured look. "Hermione," he said, after a moment and in tones of great astonishment, "I think perhaps I am drunk. You're always right."

Hermione put her arm around him and helped him back onto his stool, but did not let go. Ron, who was apparently an affectionate drunk - and who would have thought it - leaned in towards her and whispered something in her ear, then kissed her under it. She relaxed a little and turned to him, their faces warm and happy.

Harry pulled both the glasses of Firewhiskey towards himself.

Blaise Zabini had finally managed to persuade Draco onto the dance floor, though he kept glancing back to the group around Snape. Still, he seemed to be having fun, and he danced well, lithe and smooth and light as a cat, slipping out of Zabini's grasp like water but sparkling at him as he did so.

Then he detached himself gracefully and made his way back to the group just as Crabbe got up from the sofa by Snape's chair. Draco took possession, curling his legs up on the sofa and looking like a happy cat.

Harry looked away desperately, and then saw Ron and Hermione smiling and kissing, and looked away desperately again.

"I'm so happy that you and Malfoy have made up," came Ginny's soft voice, putting her hand in his. It was a nice gesture of affection, Harry thought. He looked at her with relief. "I know how unhappy you were when you were fighting. Did Malfoy say sorry?"

Her warmth and sympathy was nice, too. Her red hair was going in and out of focus, a bright blurry shape around her, but her face was kind.

"How d'you know I didn't?" Harry asked.

Ginny blinked. "I can't think why you'd have to," she said. "I know you. You'd never try to hurt anyone. I don't believe you could want to hurt Malfoy. And of course he knows that, too. Anyone who knows you can see what you're like."

"Oh, Ginny..."

The enormity of her misplaced faith made Harry absolutely unable to contradict her. He didn't even want to. He *wanted* to be like that, wanted Draco to know that, wanted Draco to look at him with shining belief in his eyes, even if there was nothing else there.

"Harry, are you upset about something?" Ginny asked. There was such concern on her face. Harry soaked it up. The whole world seemed a bit blurry, and he was desperate for some comfort. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he murmured, and leaned forward without exactly meaning to and touched her lips with his own.

She leaned forward and melted into the kiss instantly, which he supposed was good. Her hands moved lightly to rest against his shoulder and his ribs, and he realised that he had forgotten to touch her, and her eyes fluttered shut, a red fringe of lashes against her freckled cheeks, and he realised that he had forgotten to do that too.

He shifted the awkward angle of the kiss, and found himself looking past her ear. Draco was still curled up on that sofa, and he was looking straight at Harry at last. The glow was gone from his face, and he was staring blankly.

His eyes were cool grey and still, and the world came back into focus. Harry's hand came up, tilting Ginny's chin. He kept his fingers against her jaw, holding her in place, and he locked gazes with Draco.



The expression on Draco's face was unreadable but he was *there*, looking at Harry, paying attention. The fire was still playing on his hair and making it seem golden, but his eyes were as they always were, wide open and intent, and Harry was kissing harder and deeper, and...

Everything was shattered by Sirius trying to sing the Puddlemere United team chant. Harry rocked back, shocked. *What have I done?*

And Ginny gazed up at him, her mouth looking almost bruised and her eyes huge. And Draco looked away without any fuss, turning his head to talk to Pansy.

"They're the men in purple, who no-one can withstand!" roared Sirius. "We're the men in purple, we always get our man!"

"Yes, Sirius, very nice," Lupin said patiently. "I think we should go home now. So you can still face your students in the morning," he added in an undertone. He levered Sirius out of his chair, trying to bear the taller man, but then Sirius staggered almost into Harry's table. Harry tried to move, but he was on the wrong side of the bench and Ginny got there first, propping Sirius up as fast as she could.

"Ginny," Lupin said gratefully, "thanks so much. Would it be awful of me to drag you away? I think I need some help getting him home. I promise I won't keep you too long."

Ginny cast Harry a distressed look. Harry nodded encouragement with extreme vigour, so she slipped off the bench and went.

This exit seemed to be the cue for the other teachers to round up what students they could. The Slytherins were notably stubborn about going, but most of the students - below seventh year and thus definitely underage - from the other houses were rounded up. Harry relaxed, fairly sure that Ginny would not be allowed to come back but swept up and sent to bed with the others.

*What had Draco thought of that?*

Oh, alcohol was a bad thing. He could see that now. There was an arm against Harry's shoulder and a hand over his eyes.

"Guess who."

Harry pushed the hand away and grinned. "Draco," he said, turning his head and reaching a hand up to touch the inside of the arm still against his shoulder.

Draco smiled amusedly down at him. Harry was eye-level with the pulse point at the base of Draco's throat. He looked hastily away and over at Ron, who had disentangled himself from Hermione and was looking appalled by the fact that Harry was touching Malfoy and probably getting all kinds of dungeon germs.

"Did we ask you to join us?" he said.

"Like I want to," Draco answered, his tone still light and playful. "I simply want to borrow Harry. I need him." He lowered his voice and spoke to Harry. "Hey," he said. "I know you don't like him and

everything... but Professor Snape looks done in, and drunk out of his mind, and all of ours are having fun. Would you mind helping me out with him?"

"Sure, of course," Harry told him.

Draco moved away, which was a good thing, because he had been warm against Harry's back, and Harry was confused enough.

He waited outside the ring of Slytherins as Draco manoeuvred Snape out of his chair and past them, to a chorus of protests and farewells.

"I'll be back," Draco promised over his shoulder. "Buy me a drink and save me a dance."

"Who should save you a dance?" called Zabini.

Draco winked. "Everyone, of course. Who else?"

Harry grabbed Snape's other arm as they went out the door.

"What an oaf that Black is," Snape remarked loudly. "Like godfather, like godson."

It came as no great surprise that Snape was a nasty drunk.

"Don't worry, sir," Draco said cheerfully. "We'll all be humming the Puddlemere United song behind his back for weeks after this. You'll see, it will be fun."

Snape brightened. Harry set his jaw and pushed on. Snape, despite the fact he looked stringy as an underfed vulture, was actually kind of heavy. Harry was taking this as a cosmic punishment. You kissed Ginny Weasley, you ended up carrying Snape for all eternity. Or something like that.

They were nearly at the gates of Hogwarts when Snape stumbled and, despite all their efforts, fell hard.

He looked up at Draco through narrowed black eyes.

"This had - this'd better never be a story you tell around Slytherin House," he said, slurring his words. "Or it'll be house points. Dimin-diminishes respect, seeing your teacher -"

Draco took his arm, gently. "Don't worry, I still respect you more than anybody, Professor Snape. Except my father," he added. "You're my role models," he added, encouragingly. "Can you stand up now?"

Something clouded Snape's hook-featured face. "Lucius Malfoy," he said, with a venom he usually reserved for Harry. "Draco, you mustn't follow the example of your father. Or me." His mouth twisted on its normal bitter lines.

Draco knelt down and tried to ease him up. "But I want to," he said, soothingly. "Of course I do. Who else is any kind of decent example? It's just you and Father."

Snape's lolling head hit Draco's shoulder, but he did get up. "No," he said in a thick voice. "You're

better than that."

Then he glared over at Harry through his greasy locks, sidetracked.

"What are *you* looking at, Potter? What are you even doing here?"

"Believe me, I'm wondering that myself," Harry replied, and grabbed Snape's other arm again.

Snape was practically unconscious by the time they got him down to the dungeons, and he could not even mumble out a last insult as they bundled him into his room and onto his bed. It was a spartan room, and the bed was the only piece of furniture in it.

Harry and Draco stood looking down at him.

"Are you, um, going to undress him?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"Um, no, no I don't think so," Draco said, sounding about equally horrified at the thought. "I told you, I respect the man. I want to still respect him in the morning." He shot Harry a laughing look. "*You* could do it," he suggested brightly. "Might help with that crisis of yours."

"Yes," Harry said, "by making sure that I never want to look at another human being again."

"He'll be fine," Draco decided. "Let's go."

They made their way back to Hogsmeade in the dark, and as they went Harry realised that this was the first time he had been alone with Draco since they'd made up.

"I want to -" he began, when Draco interrupted him.

"So, Ginny Weasley?" he said. Harry realised, with a sinking feeling, that he was going to make light of the whole thing. "Cute redheaded solution to the crisis. I highly approve."

"Ginny," Harry said, carefully. "She's -"

"She's very pretty," Draco filled in. "But if it's not serious -"

"Of course it's not serious!"

"Well, there's still Morag. And oh, you were getting on well with Terry Boot, weren't -"

Harry whirled on Draco. "Draco, don't!"

"I was only speculating," Draco told him defensively. "I happen to think Ginny Weasley is a very fanciable young thing."

At that point, Ron and Hermione appeared, on their way home. Draco glanced at Ron apprehensively, and looked quite prepared to use Harry as a body shield. Neither of them seemed to have heard.

"Harry, come back with us," Hermione said, looking a little anxious.

"Yes, you probably should," Draco agreed. "Slytherins will be the only ones left. Thanks for -"

"I'm not *going*," Harry snapped. "I want to talk to Draco."

Draco looked poised for flight. "We can talk later."

"We're going to talk now," Harry said.

"Well..." Hermione looked uncertain. Ron blinked at them.

Draco waved a hand. "Go on," he said in an imperious voice. Harry was distantly amazed when they went.

Then Draco began to walk, fast, towards Hogsmeade.

"What do you have to say?" he asked in a voice gone suddenly very casual. Harry looked over at the taut line of his jaw.

"You've got to stop doing this," he said bleakly.

"Doing what?" Draco inquired.

"You know what," Harry snapped.

Draco kept walking and Harry felt a completely unjustifiable surge of rage, and he grabbed Draco's arm and spun him around. Draco faced him, his eyes wide and cold with sudden fury. He tried to wrench his arm away but Harry hung on, and he tried to move away but Harry blocked him, and then he shoved with his other arm and Harry shoved back. There was a brief breathless tussle for a moment.

"Stop and *listen*," snarled Harry.

"No, damn it! I don't know what you're talking about," Draco yelled. "I'm not -"

"You've got to stop testing me!" Harry shouted. "You've got to stop not trusting me!"

Draco stilled and Harry got under his guard, forcing his chin up.

"You don't even look at me anymore," he continued, more softly. "You smile and then you look away, or you forget and look and then remember and look away faster."

"I'm looking at you now," Draco said in a strained voice. "You haven't changed. Good to know. Stop talking like a lunatic."

"I'm not," Harry snapped. "You know what I'm talking about. We had a fight and we only just made up and you don't have a free hour all weekend? You always did before."

They were off the path now, walking almost blind and shouting against the night wind. Harry didn't give a damn.

Draco lifted his chin. "I'm busy, and the world does not revolve around you, Harry Potter, despite what you've always believed. Besides, the fight wasn't *my* fault -"

"No!" Harry shouted back. "It was mine, but I explained, and you said it was all right. So why can't you let it be all right, Draco? Do you think I'm stupid? You pretend that it's all right and then you keep testing me. The accidental brush of a hand at night, your hand staying on my shoulder, all the stupid teasing about Hermione, talking about special company and the little trick with your hand over my eyes. I promised! So why don't you let your guard down for a change and *believe* me!"

"Why should I?" Draco snarled, fighting to get away again. "Why should I when you do things like kissing Ginny Weasley when you're *looking*... what am I supposed to do about that? That was bloody disturbing! How am I supposed to act if I don't know what to *do*?"

Harry leaned in furiously, trying to make him understand. "I don't know what to do either!" he yelled. "Do you think I do, how could you think I have any idea what I'm doing when I make horrible mistakes like -"

"Let me go," Draco said, his voice suddenly clear and very thin. Harry realised in a way that was confused at first then fast became precise and the only thing that mattered in the world, that Draco's face was very close. His eyes were cold but so focused, on Harry and only him, like a cornered predator. "Let me go," Draco repeated in thin ringing tones. "You promised, so let me go!"

Harry let go and Draco broke away, just one step but taking it as fast as he could and then rubbing his mouth with the back of his fist for no reason Harry could see. His chest was moving up and down hard.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I promised. So I let go."

"I should have bloody thumped you," Draco said balefully.

"But you didn't," Harry pointed out. "You trusted me to let go when you said. So why do I have to push you right to the edge to see if you trust me or not?" he demanded. "Why can't you just - trust me all the time?"

"I'm *trying*!" Draco shouted. He calmed down a little after that, and looked up at Harry properly. "It's not easy," he explained, that thin cornered note in his voice again. "People have their own agendas, I can't just *be sure*."

"What if you are?"

A corner of Draco's mouth twisted. "Screw you, Potter. Then I'm stupid." He paused. "Fantastic proposition, anyway. 'Trust me because I make horrible mistakes all the time.' "

"This is how normal people behave, Draco," Harry explained, and made a superior face at him. "I understand it's hard for you."

Draco made a half-hearted attempt to hit him. "Can I go back to my party now?" he asked plaintively. "It's cold, you know. This shirt is silk. If you think it keeps out the wind, you are more

stupid than even I had previously supposed."

"Can you just trust me?" Harry asked.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I do, Harry. You have no idea how I do," he said in a bored voice. "For you are Harry Potter, brave and righteous saviour of the wizarding world. Who is there who doubts his nobility and truth? They will answer to the people, and the people will look upon them with scorn and bid them begone, and also make hurtful personal comments."

"I knew it all along."

Draco began to walk towards the path. "Naturally you did," he said. "That's why we had to have a screaming match in the middle of the night. Because you're so confident about everything in the whole world."

"Scenes are a thing we do together," Harry said, as they found the path.

"I'd rather eat ice-cream," Draco said. "Can we do that instead?"

"All right. How does tomorrow sound to you?"

Draco put his hands in his pockets. "Fine."

They were coming up to the Three Broomsticks now, and there was light and an awful lot of noise streaming for it. Draco cocked his head towards it and suddenly looked horrified.

"Oh no, it's the song," he said. "Maybe I don't want to go inside. No, I think I'll come back to the school with you."

"What song?" Harry asked.

"No song," Draco replied hurriedly. "How about that school, Harry? Come with me. I think you'll like it. It's castle shaped."

The tune was familiar. It actually reminded Harry of that malicious little jingle Draco had thought up in fifth year when Ron had had his ill-fated stint as a Keeper. As he recalled, it had ended up getting turned around on him when Ron made a lucky catch.

The familiar tune coalesced into almost-familiar words. Something mildly obscene and ending with the triumphant chorus of 'Malfoy is our king!'

"Ah, I see you've remembered," Draco said in a mock-chipper voice. "Yes, yes, my lovely housemates changed the song, yes they embarrass me with it almost every time they get drunk, yes I am an object of public derision. Why do all my cunning plots boomerang back on me?"

"I think that's kind of in the nature of a boomerang," Harry answered.

"No," Draco corrected him. "A warrior's trusty boomerang is supposed to fly out, slay his enemies, and then return safely to his hand."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe you need to get better at throwing boomerangs."

Draco opened the door a little, and more light and noise flooded in. "I have," he answered, grinning. "Hadh't you noticed? I've just stopped aiming them at you and yours."

*"He throws tantrums, he gets seasick*

*He does impressions of Professor Flitwick*

*That's why Slytherins all sing*

*Malfoy is our king!"*

Pansy opened the door all the way, face flushed. "Draco," she said loudly and cheerfully. "We're singing your song. Come on in!"

"I hate this song," Draco grumbled at her. He turned to Harry. "I should get some people and walk back with you -"

Just then, Lavender and Parvati walked out.

"Nah, I'll go with them," Harry said. "Have fun." He paused. "We're okay? Really?"

Draco reached out, then caught himself, laughed and let his hand fall. The lights of the inn outlined his hair and blurred his face.

"Yes," he said, his voice sure. Then he said, "Goodnight, Harry," and shut the door. Harry stayed outside for a moment, ignoring Parvati and Lavender's call for him to follow. It was just - Draco's wide, almost savagely distrustful gaze, and the stupid malicious little song he'd made up, and the malice hadn't changed, he knew that much. It was something about the feel of him, and being able to scream out bleak things in the night wind. No matter how stupid it was, he was certain.

*I want that.*

# Chapter Sixteen: Disaster Beckons

*Someone to need you too much  
Someone to know you too well  
Someone to pull you up short  
And put you through hell*

"All right, Young Council, to order. There was an amazing spate of new plans last week," Lupin said, with an unreadable look around.

Harry was suddenly certain that Professor Lupin was about to mention conspiratorial meetings in the dungeons, and give out a thousand years of detention.

Instead, he said: "How are they working out? The nighttime roll call?"

"We've got the lists up in every common room," Hermione informed him, beaming. "We haven't had a disappearance since we set them up."

"And the wards around the emergency supplies?"

"The new spells are up and nasty," Draco said with some satisfaction. He had had them all up all night sorting through Restricted Section books they had procured using the Invisibility Cloak and Silencing spells, and Hermione had had a shouting match with him over the ethics of testing them out on animals. He had then suggested Hufflepuff first-years.

"I had no doubt of the latter, Mr Malfoy," Lupin told him.

Draco straightened from his slouch and gave him a winningly innocent look. Lupin raised his eyebrows and returned to his papers.

"How about the emergency alarm idea?"

"Ah," said Harry, and grinned. "You'll like this, Professor. We've got the ghosts of each house to agree to be guards. They stand on watch in the common room every night, and if they see someone who shouldn't be there, or a student reports multiple disappearances, then they go through the walls shrieking and alerting everyone. They say they can make themselves heard throughout the castle, and once we hear it we go into our common rooms and take the roll. Then we all assemble in the Great Hall."

He was proud of that one. He remembered Peeves giving the alarm on certain other unfortunate occasions. In which of course Harry had been an unfortunate victim of circumstances, and the alarm had been completely unwarranted and unfair.

"Ingenious," Lupin murmured. "Also explains why I found the Fat Friar shouting into a vase. I was quite worried about that, I have no idea what we'd do with a ghost having nervous breakdowns."

He rolled up his parchment and gave them all a smile.



"Miss Granger, I hear that all the first years are living in terror of your organisational skills. Mr Malfoy, there's a distressing rumour that a toad in your possession somehow turned into a roast chicken. Mr Potter, the fact that I thought that my bedroom was haunted by a banshee is probably down to your guards practising in my corridor. The meeting is concluded," Lupin said. "I couldn't be prouder of any of you."

Hannah Abbott was blushing with pleasure. Hermione's eyes were shining. Draco caught Harry's eye and grinned.

"You can all go. Except you, Harry, I need a word," Lupin told him in an undertone. Harry waited as the others filed out. Lupin leaned forward, suddenly more casual and familiar, and as he did so Harry realised he was looking even more frayed than his robes. Four years ago, his hair had been greying, and now it was silver streaked with brown. Lupin wasn't even forty yet.

"The Ministry has ruled that the display of Pensieve-recorded thoughts to the Young Order - or the real Order, come to that - would be illegal," he said quietly.

Harry's mouth fell open.

"What? But I gave *permission!*" he protested. "I told them it was all right! They're my thoughts, why can't I -"

"There is nothing I can do about it. Professor Dumbledore has endorsed the decision," Lupin told him. He shrugged and leaned back, fingers pressing against his temples. "As I understand it," he said with a small smile, "it's much like nudity. It is your body, but it is still illegal to display it in public. Your thoughts are just as personal, and as avidly protected by the law."

Harry was still outraged, but he was also distracted by the sudden, terrible thought that in that case he had sort of been voyeuristic towards Dumbledore. Moreover, there was an awful five-year-old part of him giggling that a teacher had just said nudity.

"However, again like nudity, it is entirely permissible to display it in private to an interested individual or group," Lupin said thoughtfully.

The five-year-old Harry Potter cackled.

Harry got a stranglehold on his inner child. "I'm sorry, sir?"

"If you were to ask for the Pensieve, while promising not to show it to the Young Order, it would be returned to you. They are your thoughts," Lupin said. "Naturally, we would trust you to keep it entirely secure."

"Oh," said Harry. "Oh. Yes, I could do that."

"I hear that a few interhouse sleepovers have been taking place lately," Lupin remarked. "Now that's what I like to see. Co-operation."

He stood up, and picked up his rolls.

"Please understand, Harry, that I am encouraging you to keep strictly within the letter of the law," he said. A corner of his mouth turned up. "I've never approved of students getting caught in mischief."

Harry couldn't control his broad grin. "I understand. Thank you, Professor."

Lupin nodded. "Well, I have to be off. Professor Snape is holding a teachers' meeting in his office to discuss his - adventures abroad."

Harry followed him out. He'd expected that the others would be gone by now, but most people were still hanging around, looking curiously at the spectacle.

Ron was on the floor, his face green, and Hermione was kneeling beside him with her hand on his back.

"He was eavesdropping," Pansy told the spectators flatly.

"So was she!" Ron exclaimed. "Ohhh. Hermione, I think..."

"Pansy is a lady," Draco asserted. "I'm sure she was just passing on her way somewhere else."

Pansy and Draco exchanged smirks. "That's right," Pansy said. "While I was passing - in the spirit of all this new interhouse co-operation - I offered Weasley a cigarette."

Most people looked vaguely puzzled, and while Pansy was explaining and waving her packet of Marlboro Lights around the place, Harry and Hermione seized Ron by the arms and made their escape. He sagged in their grip, and almost fell as they turned the corner and Hermione smacked Ron on the back of the head.

"Ron Weasley! That's a filthy habit."

"Oh God, don't," Ron moaned. "I don't know what it was she gave me. I knew I shouldn't have tried it. I think I'm going to be sick. Slytherin bitch."

"Don't be sick," Harry urged. "And don't be prejudiced."

"I am not prejudiced," Ron said with dignity. "It is not my fault that most of them are complete bastards."

"Most of them?" Harry said, pleased and surprised.

Ron considered. "There might be a few decent ones," he conceded. "I quite like that Blaise Zabini. He's a friendly chap."

Harry felt his mind stop working for a brief, merciful moment. He met Hermione's eyes over Ron's head.

"That's great, Ron," he said weakly.

"I told you I wasn't prejudiced," Ron told him in a smug voice.

"Yeah - yeah, good for you," Harry assured him, and then shook himself out of the horrible daze. "Look, Ron, are you feeling any better? Lupin just told me when and where Snape's telling the teachers about what happened to him."

"He did?" Hermione asked, lifting her head sharply.

Harry nodded. "He might also have recommended that I have an orgy," he added thoughtfully. "I think we'll stick with the first plan, though."

\* \* \*

Crowding together under the Invisibility Cloak had been much easier when they were eleven. They made their crabwise way down to the dungeons with great difficulty. Harry kept his hands in his pockets in spite of the balance problem this created, because no matter what crisis he was undergoing he was not anxious to get lucky with Ron or Hermione. He shook his head to clear the disturbing images, and then hissed: "Ron, d'you have the Extendable Ears?"

"One for each of us," Ron muttered back. "I've been deliberately poisoned by a scheming madwoman, I'm not stupid."

Even though it was bright outside, it was pitch dark in the dungeons. Harry privately thought it was a wonder that Draco and the others hadn't gone near-sighted, and then it occurred to him that this was the corridor they had found McGonagall and he went cold - and then Ron tripped over something, and they all went flying.

"Good God, the barbarians have stormed the village," drawled a familiar voice. "Take our women and our cattle, only spare our lives. I think a Weasley just trod on me."

"Draco, for heaven's sake!" Harry hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"We're eavesdropping on Professor Snape's meeting," Pansy's voice whispered from the darkness.

"Just like you lot," Ron observed, in the sour tones of one who is still feeling nauseous. "Creeping around spying on people. It's disgusting."

"What are you doing here then, Weasley?" Zabini asked.

"That's different," Ron said. "Professor Lupin practically gave us permission. This is - teacher-supported spying."

"Professor Snape *did* give us permission," Draco observed in a superior voice. "This is practically a Slytherin field trip."

The dark shapes were becoming clearer as Harry's eyesight adjusted. Zabini had his ear pressed to the wall and Pansy had a hand on Draco's arm for no reason he could see.

"How'd you get past Greg and Vince anyway?" Pansy asked suddenly.

"Well," said Harry. "We're sneaky like that."

Hermione was already hiding the Cloak under her robes. Harry saw Draco tilt his head towards her, but he didn't say anything until Ron produced the Extendable Ears and started passing them around.

"We're listening too," he said flatly then. "Or I scream."

"Oh, threats, is it?" Ron demanded, and then he gave up when Hermione nudged him. Zabini and Pansy both put their hands out, and he glared at Pansy and gave an Ear to Zabini. They immediately curled together, pushing their ears to the Ear, and it was possibly this kind of behaviour that had made Harry think Zabini was just as heterosexual as the next man. The next man being Draco, who was glaring at his friends.

"Excuse me, one of you should be sharing with me," he hissed.

Pansy shrugged. "You're the one who likes one of them," she pointed out. "Don't look at me. I wouldn't spit on them if they were on fire, and that involves less physical contact."

"Believe me, Parkinson, the idea of physical contact with you makes me feel sicker than your poison sticks," Ron said hotly, and Pansy was beginning a sneering retort when Draco interrupted.

"Come here and share an Ear with me, Granger," he said winningly.

"She will not be the one sharing an Ear with you!" Ron exclaimed, and everybody made frantic shushing motions.

"Gosh, Weasley," Draco drawled. "I don't know what to say. This is so sudden. Of course, you're not really my type -"

Ron backed away from Draco so fast he almost tripped over Hermione's foot.

"Will you hush!" Pansy snapped.

"Gryffindors, ladies and gentleman, masters of stealth and cunning," Draco said. "This is a corridor, the Silencing Charm is not guaranteed to be effective! For the love of - Harry, would you get over here and share your stupid Ear, then? Honestly!" He shot Ron a look Harry was pretty much certain was venomous, and then dropped to his knees.

Harry very carefully had no thoughts whatsoever, and knelt too. He put his ear to the Extendable Ear, and concentrated hard on the sound that came blaring out to him.

"- If we're talking about suspicion," Snape's sneering voice said, "we might do well to examine the fact that the Gryffindors have lost fewer students than any other house."

"Maybe," Sirius snarled back, "that's because we're better at guarding ourselves than any other house."

"Oh yes," said Snape. "I myself have always been deeply impressed by Harry Potter's brilliant 'let's all plunge into reckless danger and break a few laws' method of self-protection."

"The man has a point," Draco murmured in a teasing tone.

Harry felt the breath from Draco's mouth on his face, and Draco's hair tickling his forehead. He focused all his attention on the voices.

"You've always had a spite against Harry!" Sirius exclaimed.

"That is not true," Dumbledore's voice interrupted peaceably. "Professor Snape has always been most concerned about Harry's wellbeing. He has watched over him as assiduously as a father."

There was combined and loud protest at this. Harry could just picture Dumbledore's smile.

"That's right, of course," Snape said. "He's the son I never had, and thus never got to expose on a hillside for the wolves to feast upon."

"He's *James'* son," Sirius hissed. "And you're not fit to wipe his boots!"

"Professors," Dumbledore said. "I don't believe we are here to discuss the character flaws of a student who is, fortunately, still with us. Nor do I think that a little professional courtesy would be too much to ask for. We are all here to hear Professor Snape's report, not to listen to you two bickering."

"Let's face it, we could all do that in the staff room," Lupin put in. "More tea?"

"Two sugars, thank you, Remus," Dumbledore said. "Might we have the pleasure of hearing your report, Severus?"

There was a pause. Harry did not like pauses. Pauses made him think about things beside the voices. Draco smelled like - well, actually, Harry didn't recognise it, like a person he supposed, or maybe like expensive shampoo because he went through bottles of the stuff. The point was that he smelled good, and he was close and warm and it was wrong and unfair how much Harry wanted to do... something about that.

He clutched the Extendable Ear as if it was a lifeline into a world where he would not want to molest his friends.

This was *important*. He had no time to be stupid.

"It was the *Captus* charm as Professor Lupin suspected," Snape said in an altogether different voice, and Harry sat upright and suddenly had no problem focusing his attention. "He's been putting them into a Captus sphere."

Harry cast his mind back to what Draco had said at a Young Order meeting.

*It's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans Voldemort can keep in his pocket, which Dementors can patrol and nobody can ever escape from.*

"Are you sure?" asked a voice that sounded like Professor Flitwick's.

"I've seen it," Snape answered tightly. "The Dark Lord keeps it with him at all times. I tried everything I could think of, but I never got a moment alone with it and I eventually roused suspicion

against myself. You know I'm supposed to be a spy for them here, but they won't tell me who the other spy is, and they watch me all the time."

"They don't just watch him." That was Madam Pomfrey's voice. "Headmaster, those curses have taken it out of him. He needs to be in the infirmary and he insists on not taking proper time to recuperate -"

"That's not relevant," Snape said crisply. "The point is that the *Captus* sphere is being used. Those disappearing are not dead, and there has to be a way to free them."

"A rescue team," Sirius began intrepidly.

"Some kind of spell that can reach across distances," Lupin said thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Professor Flitwick, "I've always thought -"

"I mean, if physical objects can be made to Apparate or if we could get Snape to set up a Portkey -" spoke up a voice like Professor Vector's.

"It's a rough sphere, the colour of a lapis lazuli," Snape continued in a dry voice, and then he stopped. "Set up a Portkey? What have I been telling you about -"

The voices rose and mingled with each other into argument.

"Have we put a Silencing Charm on this room?" Dumbledore inquired mildly. There was a silence.

"Oh no, oh *please*," Draco moaned softly, pushing in closer and pressing his ear to the Extendable Ear, but that meant that he was leaning further into Harry and so was effectively moaning into Harry's ear.

He had to be doing this on purpose, he absolutely had to be, so Harry looked at him in outrage, and saw he wasn't. He was intent on the conversation inside, his eyes half-closed and his head turned towards the wall and he was oh, God, so close that the edge of his cheek had brushed Harry's and Harry could feel his own skin heating up and he wondered for a moment if he could possibly lick Draco's throat and then claim it was a platonic gesture.

"*Silencio*," said Professor Flitwick.

"Oh, hell," said Draco, and then looked over at Harry and moved sharply back. With the distraction that was Draco almost in his lap removed, he could think properly again. The *Captus* sphere. They were going to have to take another trip to the Restricted Section.

"Well, it's good news that they're not dead," Hermione said. She looked tired, he noticed, and Ron still looked a bit sick. They had been up too late most nights this week.

"Yeah," said Pansy, leaning back against the wall. "But what can we do about it? If even Professor Snape can't..."

She looked tired too, Harry thought. Of course she did: of course they all were. Even Zabini's sly face was unmistakably worn, and the big boots Pansy probably thought made her look tough just

made her look sort of fragile.

There was a delicate moment of balance, of almost-unity, there in the dark corridor, simply because they were tired and desperate and they didn't exactly distrust each other anymore.

Harry felt a brief flicker of triumph. All that effort had been worth it, he thought, and looked over to share the triumph with Draco. Draco did not appear to have noticed the moment. He was climbing to his feet and now he was less close, Harry thought he might look paler than usual.

Pale or not, his face was set. "Meeting in my room tonight," he said shortly.

"All right," Hermione agreed. "But if we're having another one, I need to go get some NEWTs studying done now. Thank heavens we don't have Potions on and I can catch up on my Arithmancy."

"Oh, Granger, what a thrilling life you lead," Pansy said. "I'm going on an extended cigarette break." She smirked suddenly. "Want another, Weasley?"

Ron shut his eyes. "I am going to be sick," he announced in a level voice. "Then I am going to go to sleep."

"Weasley, I am desperately envious of your glamour and charm," Draco sneered. "How even this Arithmancy vixen was lucky enough to win you for her very own leaves me at a loss."

"Don't pretend to knock Arithmancy," Harry said. "I've seen your colour-coded notes."

Draco looked disconcerted. Pansy lit up, and then coughed a bit and hit herself on the chest.

"The man has a point," she remarked after a minute. "I know about the theory books you didn't really have to read, too."

"Et tu, Pansy," Draco murmured.

Ron was grinning. "You *nerd*, Malfoy."

"I'm not a nerd, I'm well-rounded," Draco snapped.

Harry laughed. "I bet you anything that you're going to use this free class to study, too. Admit it. Embrace the notes."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Actually, I thought we might go get that ice-cream we were talking about a few days ago. But if your heart is set on notes, go study by all means. I'm sure Pansy will be happy to come eat chocolate ice-cream with me."

Harry stood up.

"I think I could be persuaded to have ice-cream," he said. "You know. Not that I'm not dedicated to studying," he added, glancing at Hermione's disapproving face.

"Please stop talking about food," Ron begged. "Hermione, she's smoking at me. I think I really might be sick."

"I could escort you into the Slytherin bathrooms," Zabini offered courteously. "They're closer."

"No thanks," Ron replied, looking apprehensive that he might catch something Slytherin.

"No thank you," Hermione replied, looking apprehensive that something Slytherin might catch him. "Harry, I really think you should study..."

"I will, Hermione, I will," Harry promised. "I just need the sugar. For energy," he offered. "Which I will then devote to studying. Er, obviously."

Draco grinned his quick, wicked grin. "What's the matter, Granger?" he asked. "Don't you trust us?"

Zabini was glowering at Harry, Pansy was enveloping herself in a cloud of smoke, Ron looked like he might be sick at any moment and in any direction, and Hermione was looking very anxious.

"We'll be back soon," Harry promised, and grabbed Draco's arm and escaped.

\* \* \*

"This is a coffee shop," Draco argued. "You're supposed to order coffee."

"You're supposed to order a coffee, Draco, not the coffee menu."

"Don't quibble, Harry, it's the sign of a small mind." Draco snapped his menu shut. "My order stands," he told the waitress firmly. "A cappuccino, an espresso and a latte, please."

"I thought we were getting ice-cream," Harry grumbled. "Chocolate ice-cream, please."

"I was getting to the ice-cream," Draco informed him. "I'd like mocha."

"And the crowd is *shocked*," Harry said, grinning at him. To his surprise, the waitress giggled. He looked up at her and, to his further astonishment, she winked.

"Got it," she said. "Nice jeans, by the way."

She walked off while Harry was still working out that she had not, in fact, been talking to Draco. He looked over at Draco and mouthed, 'Me?'

Draco beamed at him. "You," he confirmed brightly. "She was pretty, didn't you think? And she's older. I think," he said with great deliberation, "that you should crisis her."

"Crisis is not a verb," Harry told him blankly.

Draco waved a sugar packet dismissively. "You know what I mean. Get her to use her sophistication and nubile body to clear up your boyish naivete and confusion! You know you want to!"

Harry blinked. "I think you should stop reading those Muggle romance novels."

"Stop changing the subject," Draco said haughtily. "Besides, I told you that I only read them to laugh at the imbecilic Muggle authors. I think you should crisis her right now!"



"It's not kind to laugh at the romance writers, they can't defend themselves."

"I am not kind, and I think that it's funnier to mock people when they're helpless," Draco said. "When they're crying is even better. Now crisis her like a desperate stoat in heat!"

"Keep your voice down, Draco, or she is going to hear you!" Harry exclaimed, and avoided the curious eyes of some couple who looked uncomfortable, unable to talk to each other and distracted by Draco's rising voice.

Draco threw a sugar packet at him, and apparently gave it up.

"I told you those jeans were your size," he added absently. "I am a fashion genius. Oh yes, and I'm *not* a nerd."

"I didn't say you were," Harry pointed out.

Draco glared. "It was implied. Implied in front of a *Weasley*. Just because I have some intellectual pursuits, unlike other people who are complete brainless sports fanatics, also sitting at this table, their name rhymes with 'otter'."

The waitress came back with a tray full of Draco's coffee, for which Draco rewarded her with his slow, bright smile. She smiled at Harry again and Harry seriously began to wonder if she had vision problems.

"I'm not a brainless sports fanatic," Harry corrected him. "I have a lot on my mind. This whole defeating evil thing is just something you've taken up: it's been my job since I was eleven. I don't have time for poetry."

"Because you have no soul," Draco said placidly, obviously reduced to a state of nirvana by all the coffee. He began to stir each cup, one by one. "I mean. One hobby. Besides Quidditch. Defeating evil does not count. Go on. Name one. I dare you."

"Er..." said Harry, and ate a spoonful of chocolate ice-cream to put off the evil moment. "I like, um. I collect Chocolate Frog cards!" he said with relief.

Draco stared at him, and then took a sip of one of his coffees, very slowly, as if he was going to need every drop and had to ration.

"Harry," he said at last, in an insinuating tone.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Harrrrrry."

The low, coaxing tones of anyone's voice were not something that could be immediately and horribly attractive.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"May I borrow your glasses?"

Harry handed them over before he realised what a very stupid thing he had just done. He squinted and blamed it on Draco, whose face was now a pale blur with wavy glasses on its nose.

Draco had the voice down.

"Er," he said. "I'm, er, Harry Potter. And my intellect hasn't really progressed from the age of twelve. I really like, um, Quidditch, and also, evil is bad. Hermione's really more into the brainy stuff. Thank you for your time."

"Fine," said Harry, and did his best at affecting a drawl. "I'm Draco Malfoy. I think I'm cool, but I have colour-coded notes, and I think I'm self-possessed, but I throw almost daily tantrums, and I think I'm God's gift to women, but the waitress is eyeing up my clearly more toned and muscular friend. I suppose I should have paid more attention to Quidditch, which I actually really like but am acting snobbish about just now, because I am also a horrible, horrible snob."

Draco tossed another sugar packet.

"I'm, er, just an ordinary boy, like every other boy," he countered. "Sorry, who did you say you wanted that autograph made out to? Okay, great. You know who're nasty? Prejudiced people! I think they should all be ostracised and then possibly killed, because, we are better than they are. Look! There's evil! Should I alert the proper authorities? No, for I am Harry Potter, and it is my sacred duty to vanquish it! I am the bane of the powers of darkness!"

This chocolate ice-cream was probably better when you weren't choking on it and laughing.

"I once made a speech about cheating as an art form," Harry drawled, "and I have a friend with the notes to prove it. I have a mental list of students who can be counted on to cry if I'm mean to them, and I talk too much - hey -"

Draco had given up on the sugar packets, and started throwing paper napkins. Harry ducked.

"You have to calm down, Sirius!" Lupin said behind them. "How can we get anything done if -"

"He started it!" Sirius interrupted, striding ahead of Lupin with his black robes flaring. "I'm not - hello, Harry!" He looked bright and pleased for a moment, and then his expression changed as he glanced over at Draco. "Here with your friend, I see," he noted.

"How nice," said Lupin, walking more sedately behind Sirius and catching his elbow. "Not all that law-abiding, but very nice. Hello, boys. Mr Malfoy, Professor Snape wants to talk to you and Miss Parkinson and Mr Zabini at the earliest opportunity. I'm going to pretend I didn't see this truancy."

"I'm sure it was all that Slytherin brat's idea," Sirius said in a not-quite-under-tone aside to Lupin.

"Yeah," Harry said loudly, "because as we all know, Gryffindors *never* break the rules."

Lupin laughed, then smiled at Draco and turned away to order two coffees to go. Sirius still stood by their table, looking suspiciously down at Draco. Draco bridled under his eyes and tapped his fingers against one of his coffee cups.

Then he began to sing, quite softly. "We're the men in purple," he declared, "we always get our man..."

Outrage bloomed on Sirius' face a split second after Harry began to sing quietly back. "That's why Slytherins all sing," he reminded Draco, and Draco broke off to make a face at him.

"*Traitor*," he exclaimed, and kicked Harry in the shin. It being Draco, it hurt quite a lot.

"Ow," Harry said cheerfully. "Everything OK, Siri- Professor Black?"

Sirius got that blank look he always wore when someone called him Professor Black, as if he could not imagine who they meant, and then he mustered up a smile for Harry as he always did.

"Yes, fine, fine," he said, glaring at Draco and looking unconvinced on this subject. "Come and see me sometime, won't you, Harry? I hear you and young Ginny Weasley -" Harry winced. Sirius's smile grew roguish. "Nothing to be embarrassed about, Harry -"

"Your curiosity about the students' love lives might be, though," Lupin remarked, handing Sirius his coffee. "People might start to think you have none of your own."

"*Moony*," Sirius exclaimed in a horrified voice.

"Don't snigger, Mr Malfoy," Lupin added. "You'll be old and grey yourself one day."

Draco tossed his head. "I won't," he said, and smirked. "I'll be ash blond."

Sirius gave Draco an exasperated and still-suspicious look, then Harry a worried one, and then stalked out of the shop. Lupin told them goodbye and then followed with a resigned air.

Draco glared after Sirius, and then lounged back, very deliberately, into his chair.

"I'm Professor Black," he said in a low voice. "It's never my fault if I lose my temper and act like a complete idiot. I do exactly what I want to do, because I'm better than everyone, and I'm certainly not completely socially maladjusted because of my twelve years of jailtime in which I could only get touch from Dementors..."

Harry frowned at him, and then picked up one of the napkins and put it on his head.

"I'm Professor *Snape*," he declared. "I hate children, and sunsets, and butterflies and kittens. I have bitterness oozing out of my hair follicles."

Draco put his head to one side.

"Point taken," he conceded. "Now Harry, for God's sake take that napkin off your head before the pretty waitress sees."

\* \* \*

"I don't really want to talk about it," Harry said, squirming.

"Want? Want? Want does not come into it, Potter," Draco told him, making a nasty face at him. "When you refuse to crisis saucy young waitresses, your friends have to take matters into their own hands. We have to investigate the strange corners of your psyche, or condemn you to a life of bitter solitude. Now come on, there have to be some crushes."

"Yes, Cho, I told you!" Harry said in exasperation.

Draco had insisted on taking the long way back, and walking around the lake, and Harry would have had absolutely no objection to that if Draco's sole goal in life had not appeared to be embarrassing Harry horribly.

"Yes, *and?*" Draco inquired.

"Cho Chang," Harry repeated stubbornly, sticking to what he knew. "For almost three years. I'm the faithful type."

"You're the stubborn stalker type," Draco corrected him. "And that is truly sad. Come on, Harry, please! You were fifteen for a whole year! There has to be someone else. We need an array here. A crush on a neighbour, a teacher, a Weasley, your aunt. I promise not to judge you. Not even if it's horribly unnatural, not even if it's a toad or Ron Weasley."

"Hey, Ron's not that bad," Harry protested.

Draco pointed a dramatic finger. "Aha!"

"No!" said Harry. "He's been my mate for years. That would be like having a crush on Hermione!"

"Aha!"

"Stop saying that!" Harry yelled.

It was disturbing, the unholy light in Draco's eyes when he thought he was making a breakthrough. He also had to stop pointing at innocent people.

"I need a drink," Draco announced, rolling his eyes and producing a hip flask from his jeans.

"That's coffee, isn't it? You already had four cups."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I fail to see your point." He tipped the flask back.

"Besides, it's not that strange," Harry muttered. "Plenty of people didn't have crushes when they were fifteen. Ron didn't. And what d'you mean, teachers?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Every girl in Hogwarts wanted some special tuition with Professor Lockhart, remember?"

"Urgh, yeah," Harry said. "But, I mean - you never had a crush on a teacher, did you?"

He glanced over at Draco, and was amazed to see him going faintly pink.

"Aha," he said, mildly.

"Shut up, you," said Draco, going just a tinge pinker. "I was thirteen."

"Advanced of you," Harry observed. "Who was it, then?" The flush was making its way down his cheekbones, growing brighter. Harry hoped he was not about to hear something disgusting, like Professor Trelawney.

"It was just for a little while," Draco prevaricated.

"If we're going to go over every detail of my life, I think you can share a little too."

Draco gave his coffee flask a hunted look. "You are not permitted to repeat this," he informed him. "Professor Lupin."

Then he took another swig of the coffee. Harry stopped and stared at him.

"*What?*" he said. "But you're not - I mean, are you -" Draco gave him a single look, and then choked on his coffee. Harry watched, still in a state of shock, as Draco continued to choke and bent double. Eventually he became a bit concerned, and touched Draco's shoulder.

"You're not dying, are you?" he asked.

Draco looked up, his eyes watering. "Yes," he croaked.

"Oh," said Harry. "Er. Any last requests?"

"How can you be so stupid?" demanded Draco, his voice still rasping slightly. He straightened up. "I mean, if you didn't - Harry, you cannot go around randomly kissing boys without knowing their preferences! Someone is going to thump you. Someone should - oh, dear God," he said as another undoubtedly insane thought occurred to him. "You haven't kissed Weasley, have you?"

"*No!*" Harry almost shouted. "I haven't been kissing anyone!"

Draco gave him a pointed look.

"Except for - um, the people you already know about," said Harry, feeling himself go hot under the collar. He felt this was very unfair, since it was Draco who had been whipping out the revelations and waving them around. "Professor Lupin?" he said. "Professor *Lupin*? *Why*? Not that I don't like him," he added hastily. "Great man. One of the best."

"It was just a tiny little crush," Draco said dismissively. "He treated the Slytherins like everyone else. That's rare, you know. And he was intelligent, and a good teacher, and funny." He paused, then smirked and licked his lips. "And I liked his voice, and the way his hair fell into his eyes. Horrible clothes, though."

"All right," said Harry weakly, trying to fit some pieces back together.

"It was just one of those things. Then I got a crush on Pansy and forgot all about it."

"All right - no, wait, look, Pansy's a girl -"

"Oh, well spotted," Draco said. "You know, it is perfectly possible to like *both* -"

"I know, I know," Harry told him.

"Oh, you do know?" Draco asked, making a gesture that looked something like an overly dramatic flail. "Well, good, because I was just about to start from scratch and explain to you how babies are made."

"I'm not stupid," Harry said. "I just didn't spend my childhood writing little love notes to Lupin."

"I bet you still think it's a question of storks. I bet this whole crisis is founded on terminal bird confusion."

Harry pushed his hair back with a certain amount of agitation. Draco was gesturing and talking too fast, and this was the most surreal conversation he had ever had.

"But you talk about girls," he pointed out suddenly.

Draco lifted his eyebrows. "Naturally I do. I like girls, girls are wonderful, and also it seemed more appropriate. For instance, you enjoy Quidditch and collecting Chocolate Frog cards. You discuss Quidditch with me, but not the whole card thing, because I am not an avid collector. Similarly, I might discuss Quidditch with you, but Chocolate Frog cards with Zabini. If you follow me."

Harry frowned. "I do, but it's giving me these horrible images," he said. "Why did you never tell me?"

"I thought you *knew*!" Draco exclaimed. "It's not a secret or anything, I was being *polite*, I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, I was being *mannerly*. You never asked about the relationship I had before Christmas when I mentioned it, I assumed you'd heard the gossip."

"Please not Professor Lupin," Harry said, horrorstruck.

Draco made a face at him. "Harry, please! No, of course not. Terry Boot."

Harry was starting to get a headache. "What, him too?"

"Well," Draco stopped. "I'm not sure, actually. I might just have been an experiment, to tell you the truth. He said he'd never done anything like that before. Look, this is... not pleasant."

Draco ran a hand through his hair, and Harry looked at him with concern. The wind had already ruffled it, but the gesture was always a sign of extreme inner turmoil.

"I'm sorry," he told him, his voice low. "I didn't mean to - you don't have to tell me."

Draco gave him a small sideways smile, and hit his shoulder against Harry's.

"No, it's all right," he said. "He got a little sentimental about it, and it was all rather messy. And there wasn't much spark there, near the end. I don't like people to be stupid, that's all. It doesn't

bother me."

"I see," Harry answered slowly. He leaned back against Draco's shoulder, a little. That was comforting.

"Does this bother you?" Draco asked. "I mean, I know you're going through a crisis and everything, but you might well feel un—"

"No!" Harry said quickly. "No, no, it doesn't bother me. No, it's fine, absolutely, I'm just surprised. Even if I wasn't - even if I hadn't - er. No, of course not." Another horrible thought occurred to him. "Um. Draco, do you mind if I ask -"

Draco looked inspired. It filled Harry with dread.

"This might help you with your crisis, mightn't it," he speculated. "Ask away. I'm being supportive. Anything you like."

"All right," Harry said awkwardly. "Did you ever - collect Chocolate Frog cards with Blaise Zabini?"

"A few times," Draco answered. "In sixth year."

*A friend who things happened with once or twice*, Draco had said. Harry had presumed it was Morag whatshername.

"So, how'd you - I mean -"

"Well, like I said, there was the little crush on Professor Lupin," Draco began.

"Please skip ahead," Harry urged.

"Then Pansy and I fancied each other, and eventually we got around to going out, and that fell apart just before the end of fifth year. That summer I was looking for some support against the Dark Lord from the old families - just discreet questions, you understand, and there was a boy from Durmstrang who was a bit older than me. Sixth year Zabini and I messed about a few times, and then that summer I met a girl from Beauxbatons who was a daughter of one of my mother's friends. Then there was Terry, and that happens to be all five."

Draco looked triumphantly at Harry, as if he expected Harry to become enlightened and instantly pack his bags for Durmstrang or something.

"Two girls and three boys," Harry said. "That's... more boys than girls."

"Nice arithmetic. Well done. These things just happen," Draco told him. "It's not a battle plan or anything. It's not like it matters all that much."

"Right," said Harry.

For something that didn't matter all that much, it felt a bit like his head might fall off with shock. He squinted at the choppy waters of the lake, and blamed it in an obscure and vicious way.

"I can't believe you didn't know," Draco remarked, as if all that was settled now. "Why on earth did you do it, then? Weren't you afraid that I'd go mental and thump you?"

Of all the questions. Why on earth had he done it, as if he hadn't been asking himself that since it happened. Because he had been happy, and he hadn't had to think, and he had been at a point so far away from all this confusion, and the worries and fears they all had to deal with these days, that now he could not even seem to reach back and know exactly why.

"Nah," said Harry. "I could take you."

"You *wish*," Draco told him. "Don't you dare doubt the legendary prowess in battle of the Malfoy clan. Might I remind you that I vanquished you utterly in that Muggle duel a few months ago -"

"Yes, but I beat you in no less than two fights in fifth year," Harry argued. "I can take you to the *cleaners*."

"The first time did not count, one of the Weasley brood was helping," Draco returned indignantly. "And the second time we were stopped, and it counts as a draw."

They turned away from the lake, and back to Hogwarts. Harry tried not to think about all this new stuff, tried to just relax and be happy as he'd been in the teashop. Everything was difficult enough, and most of the time they all had to think so much about survival that happiness went by the board.

"A draw? Ha," he said. "I recall distinctly that I challenged you to a rematch, and you never took me up on it. Scared, Malfoy?"

For now, he was just with Draco.

"A Malfoy knows not fear," Draco replied haughtily, and then grinned. "Well, more or less."

"A bit more when it comes to giant spiders," Harry observed.

"I need to go see Professor Snape," Draco told him. "And you are a bad person."

Harry, in keeping with his theme, mentioned the entire Forbidden Forest and indeed Hagrid himself. Draco retaliated with a comment about Dementors, and Harry felt forced to remark on how a certain person here had volunteered to go first with Hippogriffs, and a certain person had hung back in terror and then been slashed like a silly idiot.

Then they were back at Hogwarts, and Draco was gone.

\* \* \*

"I don't see how anyone could know that a little stick was going to be poisonous. I think it could have happened to anyone," Ron argued. "Don't you think, Harry?"

"Um, yeah," said Harry.

So - this new knowledge, did it make it better or worse? Draco had not stormed off because he was repelled by the idea of boys, but because he was not at all enthusiastic about the idea of Harry.



"Anybody with even a basic knowledge of Muggle Studies would have known," Hermione disagreed. "You've visited my house, Ron, you've seen my father smoking a pipe. And you should have known better than to take anything from that cow Pansy Parkinson. Am I right, Harry?"

"I suppose so," Harry answered.

Well, Draco had always been at pains to point out that Harry dressed badly and had horrible hair. He had glasses he kept breaking and a dirty great scar on his forehead and it was all hardly the kind of thing that sent girls into a frenzy of lust, he supposed, or boys who liked boys. Or boys who were having it off left, right and centre and fancying Lupin.

"I thought we were all supposed to play happy families now," Ron said. "I was trying to cooperate like you both asked, and I ended up poisoned. It's like I always said, you can't trust Slytherins an inch."

"Yes, that makes sense," said Harry.

So - Terry Boot. Quiet and intelligent, and he liked books. Draco would like that, Harry supposed, but then you didn't get off with people just because you both liked reading or Hermione and Madam Pince would have become an item years ago.

The thing was that it seemed wrong to think of boys as - well, attractive. Harry knew how it was supposed to go, had been taught by things Sirius and Dumbledore and everyone had said. One day he was going to be like his parents, and girls would be pretty and he would marry the one he liked best and his parents' tragedy would be redeemed and he would be happy as they were supposed to be.

He knew how to tell if girls were attractive, but it seemed off, all wrong, to be speculating on whether boys were. He knew when they were handsome, but actually adding that up to... He knew how to tell if girls were attractive, but he couldn't seem to care about that. He could not think of whether a boy was, but there was just something about Draco's smirk or his nose or his neck that he couldn't seem to help trying not to do without.

Well, what did it matter why Draco had liked Terry Boot.

He became aware that Ron and Hermione were staring at him.

"Sorry," he said. "Did I say something wrong?"

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"I don't see why we had to go trailing all over the school just so you could yell at me," Ron grumbled to Hermione. "You can do it just as well in the common room. Ginny takes it down and reads it to Mum later."

"Hush," Hermione said, and stopped by the door to the Charms classroom.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked quietly.

"I heard Professor Vector telling Blaise Zabini Snape wanted him to come here," Hermione whispered. "If Snape is anxious enough to pass messages to the Slytherins through other teachers, I want to hear what he has to say."

Harry thought it over, then nodded. If it was important, of course they had to hear it. It was as simple as that.

When he heard Pansy's voice breaking as she spoke, though, he glanced over at Ron and saw his own guilty unease written large there.

"Sir, please, you can't," she said. "M-my brother said people don't speak well of you. And we all know they're torturing you - you can't go back. They'll kill you, and then you'll be no good to anyone."

She quavered badly on those last hard words.

"She has a point, sir. Is it worth it?" asked Zabini.

Snape's voice was a harsh rasp. Harry remembered the cruel words he'd heard that voice speak, and how he had hated that voice from the first time he'd heard it say anything.

"They have my students trapped there," he said. "There's a chance I can get to them. There is no other choice."

"What about us?" Zabini asked.

"What about Draco?" Pansy demanded. "He can't go on acting like a Head of house, it's ridiculous, things are falling apart and we can't trust -"

"I'm fine. I'm handling it," Draco said sharply, sounding insulted. It was so like Draco, to be offended that people did not think he was omnipotent. "Why should he stay here and watch us all disappear too? He can't do anything about it here."

"Draco is quite correct," Snape observed, and he sounded unpleasant and grudging, and proud. "I have to be where I can be of most use to you all."

"We need you *here*," Pansy said, her voice somehow hard and distraught at once. "Sir, you're going to *die* -"

"This is a war," Draco interrupted in a furious voice Harry thought indicated he was scared and upset too.

He and Hermione were straining to hear more when Ron pulled away from the door, and looked at both of them.

"She's - I think she's going to cry," he said, in a troubled way. "We shouldn't be listening to this."

Hermione wavered. "He might have something else to tell them -"

"I don't care, I'm not eavesdropping on girls crying," Ron said flatly. He stepped back from the

door, and Hermione glanced up at him and then reluctantly followed. Harry stayed by the door, hesitating. He did not want to spy on anybody, but Snape leaving was important news, and Draco would be entirely unscrupulous if he thought keeping secrets would be best for Slytherin.

He had to think of everybody else. This was too important.

His moral dilemma was solved when Ron, still looking distressed, spoke too loudly.

"Snape can be bloody awful," he said. "Maybe it's for the best if he goes."

Inside the room, everything went still. Harry stepped back from the door an instant before it flew open, and Pansy Parkinson strode out. She did not look as if she was going to cry. She looked absolutely enraged.

"Why don't you say that to his face?" she demanded, and hit Ron in the nose.

"Ow!" Ron shouted. "You *bitch*!"

Hermione's face went cold and she looked at Draco, who had come to stand in the doorway.

"I thought you were supporting interhouse harmony?" she pointed out. "What are you going to do about this?"

Draco's face was just a touch too pale already. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Hermione's accusing face, at Pansy with her dark hair flying and at Ron with blood seeping between his fingers.

"Well," he said, stepping purposefully towards Ron, "I could break it for him."

Harry stepped between them without even thinking about it.

"Don't you dare," he snapped.

And the protective instinct for his threatened friends, the new confused outrage because Snape was leaving and Harry had never liked him but the Slytherins needed him, and the thoughts that had not stopped tumbling around his head since Draco's confession, turned into fury.

Draco lifted his cold grey eyes to Harry's face, and said deliberately, "Don't tell me what to do, Potter."

Then he shoved Harry out of the way.

Or he tried to. He tried to knock him sideways, but Harry turned, caught the blow on one shoulder and pushed the other shoulder, hard, into Draco's chest.

"Then don't threaten my friends!"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "I'll do more than threaten," he promised, and hit Harry on the mouth. Harry dimly registered that Draco was only this vicious when he was scared, in the same sort of way he noticed the blood seeping into his mouth. Most of his mind was echoing the roaring in his ears as he charged and knocked Draco against the wall.

*I don't like people to be stupid, that's all.*

Weeks of being ashamed and embarrassed and picturing Draco's horror, and all the time....

"I think you should just shut up," Harry snarled, and swung at Draco, pushed back against the stone wall with his face flushed and just begging to be mauled.

Draco ducked and Harry's knuckles split against the wall. Before he recovered from the shock of pain, Draco grabbed his shirt as he ducked and tried to pull him off balance.

*It's not like it matters all that much.*

Harry let himself go, hearing his shirt rip, and grabbed Draco as he went and threw him down under him. Then he hit Draco in the eye.

"No, Harry!" Hermione said.

"Go, Harry!" Ron yelled.

"Don't interfere, Pansy." That was Zabini.

"What is the meaning of this?" Professor Snape.

Like the blood at the back of his throat, the voices were unimportant and distant. What mattered was Draco, scared and desperate and actually angry with Harry as well, lip curled back from his teeth. He tried to swing at Harry and missed, but Harry's glasses went askew as he dodged the blow and then the world was a blur. He concentrated on the pale blur as Draco struggled and squirmed ferociously under him, keeping him pinned even when Draco lunged up and slammed his forehead against Harry's. He punched him in the ribs and tried to gain a purchase on his shirt so he could hold him in place and hit him properly.

*Why on earth did you do it?*

"Stop this at *once!* Get Mr Potter off him!"

The harsh, small sound Draco made when Harry slammed his shoulders back down against the floor seemed much more important, but it was the voice that caused the outside interference.

Hands grabbed Harry and pulled him away, fighting to get out of their grasp and back to Draco. Draco caught him a blow in the stomach as he was pulled back.

Draco tried to jump at him, but Ron grabbed his shirt as he surged up.

"No you *don't*, Malfoy," he said.

Draco snarled something incoherent and imperious, and Hermione hurried away from Harry to lend Ron a hand.

"Control yourself, Mr Malfoy!" rapped out Snape, letting go of Harry and stepping in between them. Draco blinked and subsided, stopping the active attempt to get away from Ron and Hermione. Snape

whirled on Harry. "As for *you*, Potter! You and your little cronies were not only eavesdropping on a private meeting, but you decided with your usual brilliance to make matters worse by attacking a fellow student unprovoked!"

"Yeah, I just punched myself in the nose, did I?" Ron demanded, adding belatedly, "... Sir."

Snape raised his eyebrows. "Did you, Mr Weasley?" he inquired scathingly. "Well, you always were clumsy."

He was such a petty, nasty creature. Harry had always hated him, and he spluttered in outrage along with Ron, and he almost hated all the Slytherins for drawing proudly to Snape's side.

"I think that'll be forty points from Gryffindor," Snape continued with satisfaction. "I suppose you two had better be getting along to the infirmary, though I feel it would be a salutary lesson for Mr Potter if he learned that his actions actually have consequences."

"D'you think I care about house points *now*?" Harry asked furiously. "Don't be pathetic!"

"And suddenly it's fifty points," Snape observed. "Mr Zabini, Miss Parkinson, you can let Mr Potter go now. One of his lackeys should probably bring a shirt with more buttons on it to the infirmary, too."

Harry put his glasses on firmly and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring. Draco shrugged out of Ron and Hermione's hands with a great show of disdain, and proceeded to utterly ignore his own dishevelled clothing in favour of smoothing his hair.

"You should go first, Mr Malfoy," Snape urged. "Mr Potter can certainly wait around here, in order to prevent a repeat of this savage attack."

There was a pink swelling around Draco's eye. He paused while Pansy did her best to haul him off immediately, and looked at Harry, Ron and Hermione.

"We're still on for tonight," he told them, and stalked off.

\* \* \*

Harry intended to sneak down early and talk to Draco but Ron, who had been wandering around the place triumphantly relating tales of vicious Slytherin harpies and psychotic Slytherin attackers, caught him as he tried to slip out.

"I thought it'd be best to go down early, so there wouldn't be a scene in front of, er, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws," said Harry.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "I'll get Hermione."

So they all went down together, and the only effect of getting there early was that Draco's hair was still wet from a shower, and he looked cross.

"What a pleasant surprise," he said, flinging open the door. "I always love being caught in a state of deshabelle by Gryffindors."

Apparently being caught in a T-shirt, socks and tracksuit bottoms was an enormous comedown for a Malfoy. He scowled at them horribly and returned to vigorously towelling his hair.

Harry didn't think he looked too bad.

It took him a few moments to realise that Pansy was also in the room, entirely unembarrassed about being seen in a flannel nightshirt and eating a serving of chocolate mousse that looked like it was intended for a family. He blinked at her, and she gave him a comprehensive gesture with her spoon.

"Let me make myself clear," Draco said indistinctly through the towel. "We are all going to be absolutely, perfectly, beautifully polite to each other tonight. I bear no grudges. I plan to be the soul of courtesy. Do you understand me?"

He emerged from the towel, with his hair in soggy spikes, and gave them all a venomous look, settling on Ron.

"I'm always polite," Ron snapped. "Compared to you, anyway."

"Excellent, then," Draco said. "My room is your room, Weasley. Only don't touch the bed, or the books, or any of my clothes. It would be such a bother to have them disinfected."

Ron did not look like he was burning with the desire to handle any of Draco's possessions, but he was giving the chocolate mousse a speculative look.

"I could eat," he offered.

Pansy gave him a dark look. "Shame you didn't bring any food, then," she remarked in a stony voice.

Ron seemed to give up in the face of this incurable Slytherin rudeness, and stood protectively beside Hermione. He only gave the mousse a few furtive glances.

Hermione still sounded suspicious. "So you two aren't going to get into another punching match."

"No," said Harry.

"Because Draco would win," Pansy put in, not quite under her breath.

"Harry would win," Ron corrected her in a low voice.

She made the spoon gesture again. "Bite me, Weasley, you oaf."

"Of course not," Draco answered Hermione airily. "A fight clears the air tremendously. Men do it all the time. And we are men. Manly men. Have you seen my hairbrush?"

Draco's careful civility lasted all the time he was drying and brushing his hair, and then Crabbe and Goyle arrived. He sat behind them as the others all filed in, using their bulk to shut out everyone else, making that familiar unit of Malfoy-and-his-thugs that had existed since first year.

It had never really occurred to Harry that they were a comfort to Draco, and he felt a brief

humiliating moment of envy.

He forgot about that when the Ravenclaws came in. Terry Boot gave Draco a shy smile when he came in, and even though Draco looked balefully through him for a moment before remembering that he was a host, Harry actually recognised that brief flash of possessive feeling.

God, he was jealous. This was *all* so humiliating.

He experimented with the idea of being angry with Terry, but the idea of hitting Draco was much more appealing, and this had to say something about how annoying Draco was or how twisted Harry was or quite possibly both.

He felt once more like he should have realised all this before. On the other hand, Ron had always been furiously affected by Draco too, and if Ron fancied Draco something desperate he was hiding it astonishingly well.

Harry informed himself that he was being pathetic, and collected his wits enough to start explaining to everyone about the viewing of the Pensieve.

"Quiet," Draco said authoritatively. "We can't start yet. Where's -" It was then that Blaise Zabini came rushing in, his face pale and open for once. He gasped out, "They're gone. All the emergency supplies. They're just - gone. The spy has taken them."

Harry remembered when Dumbledore and Lupin had insisted on stockpiling the emergency supplies. It was at the start of sixth year, even before the first disappearances at Hogwarts, and the idea that they might need supplies, that they might be besieged by the enemy at safe, unPlottable Hogwarts had seemed so unlikely that it seemed a waste of time. Hogwarts seemed so unsafe these days that it had become a comfort to know that the supplies were there, and Harry had not even realised that until he looked around and saw all the dismayed faces.

Parvati, beside him, made a soft sound of distress, and he spoke to try and comfort her. To try and comfort all of them.

"This might be a good thing," he said.

They looked at him with expectant hope, because they had no-one else to turn to. He was the Boy Who Lived, after all, and he was supposed to have put a stop to this sixteen years ago.

"What use are the supplies to us? I mean, we're being picked off anyway, it's unlikely we'll get to starve to death even if there is a siege," said Harry, and then realised he could have been slightly more tactful when Mandy and Lisa looked like they might faint in unison. Well, that was how things were, and he could not sugarcoat it for them.

"But he's betrayed his hand," he went on. "I mean - he must have some secret means of going around and out of the castle, or accomplices, or something. He can't go around with tons of food stuffed up his jumper."

"Unless it's Professor Hagrid," Zabini said brightly.

"What a helpful comment, Zabini," Draco retorted. "I can see that we're falling back on the plan of defeating the Dark Lord with our dark and mystical knowledge of personal remarks. Carry on, Harry."

Harry nodded. "I know all the secret passages of Hogwarts, and I know when people are using them," he went on.

Now several people were regarding him in an awed fashion. He felt like a complete fraud for having the Marauders' Map while people thought he had arcane powers.

"And how do you know that?" Draco asked sharply.

"Been spying on all of us?" Blaise added, with just the faintest hint of insinuation. Trust the Slytherins.

Harry looked at Draco.

"I have a... special map," he said carefully, and then continued. "So either they've built new passages - and I think we'd all have noticed - or they've got some other method of transporting all these people and things."

"Maybe they're using the Chamber of Secrets," Terry Boot proposed. "How did Slytherin's monster get around? There could be secret passageways."

Harry had always thought that Terry contributed intelligently to discussions before, but as Draco nodded it occurred to him that he was actually an enormous, horrible show-off who did nothing but try to impress people with his cleverness.

"No," he said, a little triumphantly. "The Chamber can only be opened by a Parselmouth, and the basilisk used the pipes, snakes don't need secret passages..." He trailed off, and everybody looked at him.

"You're a Parselmouth," Pansy pointed out bluntly. "Should we put you on that list?"

"Leave it, Pansy," Draco ordered. "People who have been taken over by the Dark Lord can speak Parseltongue, can't they?"

"Yes," Harry said slowly. "But that's not what I meant. Voldemort can speak to snakes and they do what he wants. If it was snakes spying, it'd never show up on the Map."

There was a buzz of noise, Draco's voice rising clear above it.

"What *is* this map? And how exactly are you suggesting that armless snakes are carrying piles of supplies away?"

"They could do it," Harry argued. "Piecemeal."

Hannah Abbot's voice cracked as she spoke.

"Are you saying that the people have been carried off piecemeal too?"



"No!" Ron exclaimed, looking terrified that she would cry. "We know that they're alive in a -"

"Belt up, Weasley," Pansy snarled.

"Well said, Pansy," Draco chimed in, giving Ron a poisonous glare. "How do you think snakes are kidnapping people, Harry?"

"I know it sounds stupid," Harry said crossly. "But they could. They could all be working together, there could be cobras - or they could be making sure the coast is clear and everyone is asleep before they show people the way in. The point is that they could be doing it! It needn't be a human spy at all. It needn't be one of us at all."

He did not believe that.

It seemed like such far too easy and painless a solution, when once before it had been someone trusted and loved, and there had been betrayal as well as disaster. But he saw everybody else looked suddenly bright, and that was good. That was all he had intended.

"So what can we do?" Draco asked. "Lay down snake traps? Can snakes be trapped?"

Harry felt suddenly tired. "You don't need to do anything," he replied. "Leave it to me."

# Chapter Seventeen: We All Fall

*No we can't be friends  
Not while I'm still so obsessed  
I want to ask where I went wrong  
But don't say anything at all*

The next day, Harry chose the corridor with the stone witch in it to do the job. It was fairly isolated and quiet, and he had the spare badge from Lupin, supplies Madam Pomfrey had given him, and Hagrid's huge cage.

All he had to do was look at the Slytherin badge, and concentrate.

"Er," he said, and that was a very peculiar sound in Parseltongue. "Come here, snakes. I want you all to come here. Any snakes near or around Hogwarts - come here at *once!*"

He heard some faint questions, and comments of wonder, and simple acquiescence. When the first small grass snake slithered into the cage, he felt a twinge of accomplishment. He had felt so useless and frustrated for too long. He would never have allowed it to bring him down if he had felt he could do something, anything, to stop it all. But for almost a year now, Hogwarts had been slowly bleeding to death, and it had become nothing but a background of depression because nobody knew what to *do* about it. If it was possible that it was the snakes, and this would stop them...

"Go on, come here," Harry said persuasively, the syllables sliding and hissing over his tongue.

"Oh baby, talk dirty to me."

Harry jumped, spun around and rolled his eyes in Draco's direction. Draco grinned and leaned against the wall of the corridor.

"You almost gave me a heart attack," Harry told him, and for a moment speaking English seemed strange.

"We Slytherins are masters of cunning and subterfuge," Draco said, sounding absently proud. "Look, I thought we should talk."

"Er. Right, probably," Harry answered, and added quietly panicking to his list of things he should do after he had collected all the snakes. He shifted his gaze from Draco's face to the badge on his chest, and added, "Come," once for good measure.

Draco coughed. "That's a little distracting," he commented.

More snakes were slithering into the cage, coiling together until he lost count of them.

"Well, I'm sorry, but this happens to be important," Harry said, more sharply than he'd intended.

"I know that," Draco said coldly.

"And you're not helping," Harry added. "Couldn't we talk about whatever it is later?"

"Oh, certainly!" Draco exclaimed, his voice growing sharper. "What time would suit your convenience?"

"Look, this isn't for *me*," Harry told him. "If it was for me - if it could be, then I'd make time for you. But I have to do something for everybody now. You have to understand."

"No, not really," Draco said reflectively. "What could I know about responsibility? I'm not a hero, after all."

"Don't be a brat!" Harry snapped. "I know you're upset about Snape -"

"Don't shove your nose into my business," Draco ordered, eyes narrowing at the mention of Snape. "Fine. So sorry to have bothered you. I'll be running along now." He turned around and stalked off.

"Draco!" Harry yelled after him, but Draco did not turn around. Harry gave the snakes a glare of exasperation, and then crushed it down.

"Come on," he said, looking at the badge in his hand again.

It was an extra call for good measure, but he thought that he had them all now. The cage was a glistening, coiled mass.

It was their only idea, and these could be the spies, or the scouts for the spy.

Harry remembered, when he was eleven, freeing a snake from the zoo.

Well, times were different now.

He picked up the poison, and began to pour it in.

\* \* \*

Harry had forgotten that Draco had guard duty that night, and he told himself that he'd talk to him tomorrow.

The next morning, Draco, Crabbe and Goyle skipped breakfast, and the empty place at the teachers' table made it clear why.

Harry had not known it would be so soon.

He had to go and see Draco. Draco would be in class, and he could take him aside afterwards and tell him that... well, tell him nothing that would make him feel any better, but at least Harry would see that Draco was all right.

Of course Draco would be all right.

Harry did not want to speak to Hermione, who was clearly in the midst of some furious calculation about how Snape's absence would affect them, or to Ron, who was watching a red-eyed Pansy

Parkinson apprehensively. Slytherins possessing tear ducts seemed to have come as a nasty shock to Ron, and he looked as if he was afraid she was going to explode. He certainly didn't want to look at the teachers' table, where Sirius was being very cheerful indeed.

He just glared at his porridge, and then ate it.

Draco was not at any of his classes. Harry thought about going to the Slytherin rooms, but he didn't know how tactful it would be to insist upon disturbing all the apparently distraught Slytherins, and he certainly wasn't going to do the invisibility cloak thing - he was on thin ice after the eavesdropping already.

Which left him feeling bad and, worse, *useless*, and sulking on the stairs to the boys' dormitory with a book of defence spells.

He thought they were going to be useless, but he also thought he might accidentally score an Outstanding in his Defence Against the Dark Arts NEWT.

He was reading the chapter on cursed tombs when he heard Draco's voice in the common room below, imperiously asking where he was.

He got up at once and went downstairs.

Draco was standing with his back to him, and there was a distinctly unpleasant atmosphere, as if he had just insulted someone or at least worn a particularly disdainful expression. The atmosphere did not appear to be affecting Colin Creevey, who had looked up brightly from his chair and was walking over to Draco.

"Hello," he said, blithely confident as if Draco had not mocked him or ignored him continuously over six years, "Look, Malfoy, I'm making a collage of the Young Council, so I'm sure you won't mind -"

He lifted his camera.

"Yes I would," Draco snapped, just as the camera clicked.

There was a flash of light, and Colin said, "I'm not sure if I got the angle right - could you -"

Draco reached out, and pulled the camera strap over Colin's head. He spoke slowly.

"I told you not to point that thing at me."

There was the unmistakable, crunching sound of the camera breaking. Colin's expression changed into an one of wounded horror. Draco tilted his head, as if he was quite enjoying the sight and wanted to get it at a different angle.

The rest of the Gryffindors were sitting in shocked immobility as Draco added smugly, "Let that be a lesson to you."

Harry found his voice.

"Draco," he said loudly. "What the *hell* do you think you're *doing*?"

Draco turned, letting the camera fall. Colin's desolate gaze followed it.

"Oh, Harry," he said in a bored voice. "There you are."

"Outside," Harry snapped. "Now. And then you're coming back in here and apologising."

He grabbed Draco's arm and hauled him towards and then out of the exit. As they both scrambled outside, Draco yanked his arm away.

"Don't order me around like a naughty child!" he snapped, sounding outraged. "And don't you dare touch me."

He could not believe the *nerve* of him.

"Don't bloody well make me hit you again," Harry snarled.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Make you?" he asked sharply. "Funny, I don't recall spreading my arms wide open and saying 'Please, Potter, take your best shot'. I would have been quite happy if you hadn't fought back at all. Hitting me was all your own idea."

"And it'll be my idea one more time if I ever see you bullying anyone like that again!"

"If you're so concerned about that annoying little Mudblood, tell him not to bother me again," Draco snapped.

"I will not, and you won't use that word again," Harry raged. "You can't treat people like that!"

"You're strangely mistaken," Draco informed him. "I just did."

His mouth had a mean little twist to it, and Harry was angry because it was familiar, because he *knew* this was what Draco was like and this was why he had disliked Malfoy so much, and he still...

"You're going to apologise," he said flatly.

"You can go to hell," Draco returned furiously. "I'm not one of your devoted little followers. I won't scurry off to obey your orders."

"And I'm not one of your Slytherins! You don't care about anybody else, but I do, I have to!" Harry yelled back. "I don't think that kind of behaviour is funny, and I won't let you away with anything. And that's why you're angry, isn't it?"

Draco regarded him stonily.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Harry pushed him. "Because you're so used to people dropping everything for you, to being in control."

"Oh yes," Draco said, his voice rising. "I'm always so in control of everything. I'm so glad you've noticed that the whole world is arranged according to my wishes -"

"You want to be! You want to be just like your father and able to manipulate everyone and command respect and if people don't do just what you want them to you think it's not respect and you lash out because you're afraid!"

"I'm not afraid!" Draco yelled, and shoved him. "And don't talk about my father."

"I'll do whatever I think is right! And I won't bother to consult you about it. I know what you're trying to do, acting like your father -"

"I said shut up!" Draco snarled.

"And I said no! I don't care as long as what you're doing is helping people. But if you're just going to be a malicious little *bully* -"

"I'll be whatever I like. You're not telling me what to do. I'm not here to do everything you want. What does he matter, anyway?"

"What does he - he's a person!"

Draco's lip curled. "He's not interesting, and he's not useful, and he was in my way."

"Oh, like Crabbe and Goyle are so interesting and useful," Harry sneered. "Nobody deserves being tormented, you little git, so you can go in there and apologise at once!"

He pushed Draco again. Draco was staring up at him, pale eyes narrowed and pale face malevolent.

"You *wish*," he said, and knocked Harry back against the other wall, so hard that Harry's head cracked against it and Harry saw stars.

When he could focus again, Draco was gone.

He stormed back to the common room, and met a startled-looking Ron and Hermione as he made his way towards the dormitories.

"Harry, what's the matter?" Hermione asked.

"Bloody Malfoy," he snarled. "What else?"

As he stalked up the stairs, he heard Ron say, "Just like old times."

\* \* \*

Harry seethed throughout the next day, in which Draco and his thugs were once again conspicuously absent.

It was sheer stupidity for Draco to be missing meals and classes. What good would it do Snape? What good would it do anybody? But Draco didn't think of that, he just wanted to indulge himself and sulk

somewhere, it was all about him, his father and his teacher and his revenge, and what did he care about anybody else.

Someone should teach him a lesson.

He broke a quill while he was thinking that, and Lupin and Hermione gave him a concerned look. He mumbled some kind of apology and dug out another one.

Someone should just punch his stupid, bigoted head in, throw him down and make him *sorry* and...

"Two in one class, Harry?" Lupin asked.

Harry looked at the mangled quill in his hand. "Must be a bad batch," he snapped. Stupid shoddy workmanship.

He felt - itchy, uncomfortable in his own skin. Draco deserved to be punched for what he'd done to Colin, and he needed to be comforted because Snape was gone, and Harry still wanted to ask him questions about that stupid issue he shouldn't even be bothered about.

Terry Boot caught him as he was going out of dinner, which he had more sort of stabbed with his fork than actually eaten.

"Hi there," he said.

"Hello," Harry said coldly, looking at him. He was oddly satisfied to see that he was taller than Terry.

"How'd the snake thing go?" Terry asked.

He didn't talk like he was clever, either. And his eyes were quite small. Harry had to stop this.

"OK," Harry answered curtly.

"Well, it was a good idea, anyway," Terry said absently. "Look, about - ah, Malfoy -" He looked worried and disturbed, and rumpled back his hair.

"I really don't want to talk about him," Harry informed Terry, and walked off.

He sat on the edge of his armchair in the common room later, and turned what Terry had said over in his head and fretted over it. What had he meant, *it was a good idea, anyway?*

Neville was talking somewhere about putting Devil's Snare in the cellars. Harry blinked and tried to pay attention.

"Harry."

Someone touched his knee to get his attention, and he started.

It was Parvati, curled on the armchair next to him and looking fetching in pink pyjamas and infringing on his personal space.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I saw what happened with Colin yesterday," she said, tentatively. She was twisting her black plait of hair as if she felt awkward, and it was very unlike confident Parvati to hesitate about anything. He supposed she was wondering how to phrase 'your friend is a nasty little git who should be smacked in the head'.

"It was awful," he said. "So was he. I know, I shouldn't have given him the password. We're changing it."

"Well," Parvati said, and hesitated again. "Well. Yes. Good."

She studied a stray thread on her sleeve, her eyes dropping so as not to meet his. Her lips looked as if she had something pink and glossy on them, even though she was dressed for bedtime.

Harry wondered suddenly if she had ever kissed Draco.

"Is there something you want to say, Parvati?" he snapped.

She lifted her dark eyes to his. "I don't think much of Slytherins," she said directly. "But Malfoy, he's always been OK to me." She laughed slightly. "I know the same can't be said for other people, and it was probably because he fancied me a bit -"

"I'm very happy for you two. Do you have a *point*, Parvati?"

Parvati looked puzzled. "It's nothing like that, Harry," she said. "He's not really my type. I'm just saying - I think he's OK, and he's your friend. Don't you think you're being a bit hard on him?"

Hermione had always said that Parvati and Lavender were a bit dim. He suddenly and fervently believed her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did you just say that you think *I'm* not being fair to him? He comes into our common room and commits vandalism and acts like a nasty little bully begging to have his lights punched out, and *I'm* not being fair?"

Parvati bit her lip. "I'm not saying that," she said. "It's just that - Harry, he's lost his two best friends."

"*What?*"

Harry was aware that Neville's voice had broken off, and people had turned around to look at them. He ignored them all and fixed his eyes on Parvati.

"What?" he asked, in a lower, more reasonable voice.

Parvati blinked. "I thought he would've told you."

"Nobody told me anything," Harry replied, trying to keep his voice level. Nobody ever talked much about the disappearances. It was pointless, dwelling on something none of them could change. You tried to ignore it, tried to move on, because there was nothing else to do, and damn it, he'd talked



about Crabbe and Goyle and Draco must have thought he knew.

"Crabbe and Goyle disappeared the night before last," Parvati said, hugging her knees to her chest. "I think it was just after Snape left."

"Oh, no," Harry said, feeling sick. "I - look, I have to -" He left her then, getting up and out as fast as he could. He should probably have thanked her, but it didn't occur to him until he was going down the staircase to the Great Hall and he was not turning back then.

That was what Terry had meant. If there had been more disappearances, it hadn't been the snakes after all.

Harry muttered a curse under his breath and knocked on the wall in front of the Slytherin entrance. After a moment, a muffled voice said:

"Who's there?"

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

Harry heard a brief debate conducted on the other side of the wall, and something that sounded like 'bloody Potter again'. Eventually the entrance opened, and two suspicious-looking first years regarded Harry.

"Thanks," he said, pushing past them and then recalling his duty as a prefect. "Also, you're much too young to be cursing like that," he added absently.

They snorted and he moved on, through a common room full of Slytherins who more or less ignored him and then flinging the door of Draco's room open.

Draco was sitting on the pushed-together armchairs by his fire. He had his arms around Pansy Parkinson, and she was crying on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Harry said at once.

Pansy jerked her head up, and blinked back the tears fiercely as if her eyes were not puffy and red, and he would be completely deceived. She let go of her tight hold on Draco's ratty grey T-shirt.

Draco disentangled himself from her, and walked over towards the door.

"Do you want something?" he asked warily. He looked ashen and strung too tightly.

"No," Harry said.

Draco's mouth stretched in a straight line, as if he was attempting a polite smile but could not manage it.

"Well then," he said. "If you'll excuse me -"

"I just heard," Harry blurted. "I didn't know before. I'm really sorry."

Draco's mouth moved again, but again his attempt to smile failed.

Harry looked at him and felt absolutely helpless and stupid. He had no idea of what to say. Draco just stood there looking tired and ill, and he'd looked like that yesterday too, and Harry had been too angry to notice.

He stared some more. "Your hair looks terrible," he said at last.

Draco stared at him as if he had never seen anyone quite so stupid in his life, and Harry privately agreed with him.

"There are more important things than hair," Draco said, his voice sounding strange. Pansy giggled from the sofa, a touch hysterically.

"That's it," she said faintly. "We're all going to die."

The corner of Draco's mouth turned up just a little. "Well done, Harry. You broke her," he said. "My hair looks terrible, indeed. Are you coming in, then?"

Harry did so.

"Don't close the door, I'm just going out," Pansy told him. She looked sagging and exhausted on the chairs where Draco had left her.

Draco went over and sat beside her again, putting one hand on her bowed back.

"You don't have to go anywhere," he said, his voice strained. Harry thought he was trying to sound gentle.

Pansy hunched one shoulder in what approximated a shrug.

"I want to," she answered. "I have to go plan my outfit for tomorrow."

Draco nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose we can't all be natural beauties."

"Get bent, Draco, even Harry Potter thinks your hair looks awful," Pansy said. Harry was starting to feel very self-conscious about that hair comment, but Pansy did not look as if her leader had been horribly insulted and she would have vengeance. She offered Harry a grudging half-smile as she went out.

Draco barely spared Harry a look as he got up from the chair, and wandered around his room, almost aimlessly. He looked smaller than he should have, out of place without the bulwarks of Crabbe and Goyle to retreat to. He looked small and pale and too thin, scruffy clothes sloughing off him and hair a tangled, tired-looking mess.

Harry reminded himself that it wouldn't really be wise to touch him.

"I'm so sorry, Draco," he said instead, and put his hands in his pockets in order to effectively resist temptation.

Draco turned and looked at him. His eyes were bleak.

"Are you," he said flatly. "Why's that? You didn't like them much."

"I didn't want them to be taken!"

"Well, no," Draco conceded. "But if you had to choose who would be taken, and who would be saved..."

He looked around the room blankly, and then went and sat on the bed. His fingers closed tight around the bedstead.

"It doesn't matter whether I liked them or not," Harry said, and risked a step towards him. "I know you liked them. And so I'm sorry."

Draco let go of the bedstead, and drew his knees up to his chest.

"Father had me tutored when I was younger," he informed Harry in a distant voice. Harry tried not to say anything horribly banal like, I hear the homeschooling system has its advantages, and nodded instead.

"They have study session groups for most wizarding children," Draco explained. "But Father didn't want me to mix with anyone undesirable at an impressionable age. I mean, traitors like the Weasleys were attending the groups too. So I got taught at home."

Harry felt obscurely that he should speak up for the Weasleys, but Draco had his cheek laid against his arm, and he kept talking in that very tired voice, and Harry did not think he'd hear him if he did speak.

"Father thought I should have some companions when I was about eight," Draco continued. "So he told some of his political friends to send their children over on some days that summer. Some of them were older and some were younger, and - I don't play particularly well with others." There was a gleam of wry humour in Draco's eyes. "You might have noticed that," he added.

There was something about the wounded curve of his mouth that made Harry come and sit beside him on the bed, a careful distance away.

"Maybe once or twice," he said.

"I might have had the occasional tantrum," Draco admitted further. "And then they didn't like me, and so I called them names. And there were these two stupid hulking boys, and *everybody* teased them, and I did too, and - they just didn't go away. Everyone else went away after I called them names. I suppose their fathers told them not to, and they... they were very stubborn when they got one idea fixed in their heads. They stood there and took it, and when I went away they followed and I hit them, and they took that too. And I didn't have anybody else, and they didn't have anybody else either, and then I sometimes tossed them a few sweets or told them what to do so the others wouldn't tease them so much, and they liked me. For something as small as that. They didn't want to go away. They wanted to stay and be with me."

He looked very far away, and sounded a little bit proud. As if nobody had ever wanted to be with him before that, as if Crabbe and Goyle had been granting him an honour.

"They were doing what their fathers wanted them to do," Draco said, his eyes wide and glittering, "but after that summer, they did what I wanted them to do. I never had to trick them or talk them round or do anything. It didn't matter what I did. They liked me. And they were different, too, everyone always talked as if they were the same person in two bodies but they *weren't*. Crabbe was this complete secret romantic and I laughed at him about it and Goyle was afraid of the dark when we were younger."

Draco pushed away from the edge of the bed and flung himself down on the centre of it, staring up at the ceiling with blank eyes. Harry looked at one of Draco's hands, lying on the pillow with his fingers curled inwards.

"They were different," Draco insisted, as if Harry was arguing. "And I told them we were changing sides and I didn't even explain why and they were on my side. They left their families and they didn't even ask me why. They trusted me, I could rely on them, they would never have gone away and left me -"

His voice cracked, a painful distraught sound, and Harry looked up from his hand. Draco's face was turned in towards the pillows, hair falling into it, and he only saw a twisted glimpse.

"Draco, don't," he said wretchedly, and threw himself down beside Draco, put a hand on his back and held on.

Draco's face was curved in towards him now, and he could feel him swallow and try to put himself back together.

"They were *mine*," he said, his breath damp and hot against the side of Harry's neck, "And I let this happen to them, they changed sides for me and I couldn't even protect them -"

"It's not your fault," Harry said fiercely into his hair. "Nobody can protect anyone from that. You couldn't have done anything, Draco, don't -"

Draco was trembling violently and Harry held on tighter, curving his arm protectively around him but also trying to keep his distance, lifting his other hand to brush Draco's hair out of his eyes and keep them a few inches apart.

"They were *mine*," he repeated, almost angrily. "There's nobody else and I don't know what to do!" He drew in, lips and eyelashes damp against the side of Harry's face, and Harry caught his breath as he felt Draco's fingertips settle against his ribs, and Draco said, "I -"

His eyes flickered open, and Harry looked at him. They were so close that Harry's glasses were pressing into the bridge of Draco's nose. Draco's breathing was suddenly like that of a panicked animal's.

He shoved Harry savagely away from him, and Harry almost fell off the bed. Draco threw himself off the other edge, and onto the floor, drawing up against the wall with his knees against his chest again and his eyes, slitted and suspicious, glaring at Harry over his linked arms.

"I don't trust you either," he spat. "I'm perfectly aware that your friendship isn't some beautiful undemanding thing. Everybody wants something, and I'm too *tired!*"

Harry sat up, breathing hard.

"Draco," he said, "what on earth are you talking about? If you think -"

"Oh, don't be a hypocrite, Potter," Draco said, still raging in that small, precise voice with his arms around his knees. "My father taught me better than that. *You* didn't want to be my friend when we were younger. *You* didn't like me particularly when I broke that Mudblood's camera."

Harry got off the bed, since it seemed inappropriate to stay there, and he stood looking across the bed over at Draco.

"What, is this some sort of test?" he asked helplessly. "Look, I don't have to approve of everything you do to want to be your friend! And I'm not going to - to throw you off or anything if you do something I don't like! This isn't *supposed* to be a test, that's not how it works -"

"Sure it's not," Draco said, his mouth twisting. "Doesn't matter whether you want to admit it or not, Harry. Everyone's bought and sold. I know that much. And I'm tired of it all, I'm sick of it, I want to go home and I want - I wish -"

Draco leaned his head against his arms, and all Harry could see was that bowed blond head and the huddled figure against the wall.

"Draco," he said. "Please -"

Draco's voice cracked out like a whip.

"Go *away!*" he snarled. "Don't do this. I can't - Leave me *alone!*"

Harry hesitated. "Can't I -"

"Please!" Draco said it like an insult. "*Go!*"

Harry went. He didn't want to go, could hardly bear the idea of leaving Draco alone like that, but he could not stay when Draco asked him like that.

He got back and found Ron and Hermione sitting by the fire. The firelight was bright on Ron's red hair, and Harry came towards them with a huge sense of relief. They both smiled at him hesitantly as he came in. Ron had a game of Exploding Snap set up on the table that he was probably trying to persuade Hermione to play, and Hermione had an open book in her lap.

"What is it?" Ron asked, looking up into his face. "Did you have another fight with Malfoy?"

"No," said Harry. "Yes. Sort of."

To give Ron credit, he only grimaced slightly as he said, "Sorry to hear that."

The snakes weren't the culprits, and Crabbe and Goyle were gone, and Draco was sitting bitterly

alone in the dungeons.

"I," Harry began. "I mean. Just so you know. You guys. I. That is."

Hermione closed the book, and looked up at him with confused eyes. "Yes, Harry?"

"Well. You know," Harry said awkwardly, and leaned down and caught her up in a hug. It was the first hug with her that he had actually gone in for first, and he could hear the pleased, uncertain sound of surprise she made against his chest. Then she put her arms around his neck and held on for a minute. Her frizzy hair was in his face, and he held on tight.

"Yes, I know," she told him.

He let go of her, and laughed uncertainly. "You were always the smart one."

She settled back on the chair and smiled up at him. "It was never hard."

Ron glanced up apprehensively as Harry leaned against his chair.

"I don't think we should hug," he said quickly. "I think we're too manly."

"Boys," Hermione remarked in her old resigned way, and Harry punched Ron in the shoulder.

"Want to play Exploding Snap?" Ron asked.

Harry did.

\* \* \*

Draco was back in his classes the next day, but he wasn't speaking to anyone. He sat beside Pansy or Blaise Zabini, and shied away from speaking to them. Hagrid tried to talk to him after Care of Magical Creatures, and Draco muttered a few words and then walked away very fast.

He clearly did not want to be bothered. The thing to do was respect his boundaries and his wishes, and wait until he was ready to accept some comfort. Much comfort that Harry could give him, of course, but that was not the point.

The sensible thing to do was leave him alone.

So Harry did so all day, and didn't even look at the Slytherin tables during meals. He talked with Neville and Dean instead, as Neville tried to describe and Dean tried to draw for him the plan of setting Devil's Snare in the pipes, enough to let water through but stop anything else. He speculated steadfastly with them about plumbing for a couple of hours after dinner, and then Neville decided to broach the plan to everybody else.

It was halfway through Neville's explanation to the other Gryffindors that he broke and made an excuse, and went to go find Draco.

He almost tripped over Draco when he got to the bottom of the stairs. Draco was lying on his stomach playing marbles.

"Nice walking," Draco remarked. "Practise often?"

"That was easier than I expected," Harry told him.

Draco propped himself up on one elbow. "What was, exactly?"

Harry looked down at him. "Finding you."

"Oh," said Draco, and then with what appeared to Harry to be supreme irrelevancy, he went on: "This is what I was doing when I was twelve."

He took a marble from the pile beside his elbow, and then rolled it towards the set in front of him. The marble hit one other marble, which went red, and rebounded off it to directly hit three more. They all went red, blooming suddenly as blood from a cut on the floor, and Harry looked down at them and then sat on the floor.

Draco's face was on a level with his, and he could not possibly have become thinner within a day, but that ferociously restrained look of pain made his cheekbones look horribly sharp. His eyes were wide and tragic and furious with the world.

Harry repressed the urge to reach out.

"Wizard marbles," Draco said, sounding vaguely pleased with himself. "You try to kill as many as you can. And you can only kill the other marbles if the centre of yours hits the centre of each marble. Four is pretty good, but I was up to seven when I was thirteen."

"Er," Harry said. "I think collecting Chocolate Frog cards is a good bit less murderous sounding."

"It's a game of skill," Draco told him, offended. "And wanting to kill stuff."

"That's so you," Harry said, and laughed at him a little bit. "Because you are, of course, a terrible person."

"I stopped playing it, obviously," Draco informed him, "because I, unlike you, am terribly mature and sophisticated."

"I still collect Chocolate Frog cards," Harry informed him back, "because I, unlike you, do not give up."

Draco rolled another marble, and got five this time. He looked briefly smug.

"Tell you one thing I'm giving up," he announced. "After all this is done, I shall stop being nice to people. I hate it. In fifth year, I used to make lists about all the people I was going to be absolutely horrible to and how I was going to do it and exactly what I would say."

Harry reached out for a marble, and Draco slapped his hand away and gave him a stern look.

"I assume I was on the list."

"Forty-five times," Draco replied promptly. "My vengeance will be terrible and complete."

"Oh," said Harry. "This is still going to happen?"

"Yes," Draco said in a very definite tone.

"I thought since we're friends and everything -"

"Terrible and complete," Draco repeated. "No cowardly shirking, Harry. Your life, should you not choose the better part of valour and flee the country, will be an epic misery." Harry linked his arms around his knees and mimicked Draco's lofty tones.

"I defy you and all your fearsome threats, Draco Malfoy. You can be as nasty as you like, I'm not going anywhere."

"That's fine," Draco said calmly. "Then I shall exact vengeance on all my enemies, and also friends, and also strange passerbys I don't like the look of, and then I shall spend the rest of my life in comfort, hated and feared by all and pausing only to read a few books and occasionally sit on the balcony and look like a sun god."

"A sun god," Harry repeated sceptically. "Draco. You might freckle."

"Forty-six times on the list. Keep talking. Make my day." Draco raised an eyebrow, and paused like a challenge. Harry just about managed not to take it up, and Draco said wearily, as if Harry had been bothering him about it for so long he surrendered, "I bought Creevey a new bloody camera, if that makes you *happy*."

"Did you do it to make me happy?"

Draco sneered. "No, I'm just a giver." He flicked another marble, and only got two.

"Did you get him the same camera? He really liked it."

"I did not," Draco said, his lip curling. "I got him a better one. A Malfoy does not go into a shop and ask for substandard goods." He brightened. "Actually, I got myself one too. The shopkeeper let me see a book about photography, I think it might be quite interesting. Do you know that magical photographers don't exist, except for the papers? Think about scenery photographs with rivers still running."

"Maybe you and Colin can start a club," Harry said.

"Forty-seven," Draco told him. "I take no pleasure in this, you know. Well... maybe a tiny bit."

He levered himself up, white T-shirt stretching just a little on his shoulders, and then he got into a sitting position. Then he fished a folded piece of parchment from his pocket, and flicked it across at Harry.

"I got a letter from my mother yesterday," he remarked. "You can read the first bit of it. If you like."

"Er, all right," said Harry, wondering if this was part of a fiendish plan to make him crisis Narcissa Malfoy.



Not that 'crisis' was a verb.

He unfolded the letter, and read it to himself.

*'Dear Draco,' the letter read, 'Your last received with great interest. Ths nothing like tradition. If you have made up with Harry Potter by the time you receive this Owl, please give him my regards. If not, please do not send me a Howler. I do not think they are appropriate missives from a child to his respected parent, and the last one scared the house elves.'*

Harry lowered the letter, smiled and offered it back to Draco.

"I take it the last letter was along the lines of Why I Hate That Sod Potter, Volume IV, Part VII?" he asked.

Draco lifted his chin. "More or less, perhaps," he admitted. "I wrote the Owl back when we were fighting. Naturally, she only replied yesterday - and naturally, I wrote back to her right away again." His lip curled, possibly at himself. "I just - wanted to show you it. I lose my temper sometimes," he went on, "but it doesn't mean that I hate you forever or anything."

Harry squinted. "Is this a really roundabout apology for hitting me, Draco?"

"Maybe," Draco admitted loftily.

"All right, then," Harry said. "I'm sorry I hit you back."

Draco reached over, and pulled the letter back from Harry's hand. "I'm not planning on apologising to that Muggleborn Creevey, mind," he said. "I have my pride."

"I don't see what your pride has to do with him being Muggleborn," Harry stated, trying to leave it at that. "He and his brother can't help it."

Draco looked mildly surprised. "He has a brother? I *thought* he sometimes looked shorter than other times."

"Yes, he has a brother," Harry said. "Honestly, Draco."

"Oh, please," Draco sneered. "Name one fifth-year Slytherin. Just one. Go on."

"Er," Harry said. "Er. Is that Chaser, whatshisname, er, is he in fifth year?"

Draco made a creditable attempt at cackling.

"I admit it," Harry said with dignity. "I'm a little absentminded."

"You mean you're self-centred," Draco corrected him.

"I'm sorry, kettle, I *think* I just heard you calling me black."

"And you're oblivious," Draco went on blithely. "And you're just not really a nice person."

"I think I'm all right some of the time," Harry replied.

Draco smirked. "Ah, but not when push comes to shove."

He did what was necessary, what would be best for people in the end, when people like Ron turned away from the door - when push came to shove. And Draco was always pushing and shoving him to that point, and it amazed him how much he wanted to be pushed and shoved as long as it was Draco.

As long as he could push and shove back.

"Maybe not," he admitted. "I don't think nice people save the world."

"They don't get to be my friends, either," Draco remarked, as if he saw the two things as of fairly equal importance.

"Well, it's all quite lucky, then," said Harry, and thought about pouring the poison in for those snakes.

"As for the Muggleborn," Draco said, slowly. "Before we started mixing our blood with Muggle blood, wizards were safer, you know. And we used to be able to breed abilities, before the mongrel strain came in."

"I think that marriages shouldn't actually be arranged in breeding kennels," Harry said, giving Draco a look. "My mother was Muggleborn, you know."

"I know, Harry, but don't worry about it, the Potters were a very good family," Draco comforted him absently. "Natural Animagi were born in the old days, the books say. And Metamorphmagism ran in my mother's family, before so many of the wizarding families mixed their blood with Muggles, and the gene pool became too small and the line became weaker. There was only one Metamorphmagus in my generation, and she's half Muggle. She won't be breeding any more."

"I've met her," Harry said, thinking of the girl in the Order of the Phoenix. "She's nice, actually. And I'd feel much more comfortable if you didn't say the word 'breeding' ever again."

"Yes, but, Harry," Draco said with that bright-eyed fervour that Harry liked to see, even when he thought Draco was talking complete and utter rubbish. "We were creatures of myth once, we were incredibly powerful and we held the whole world in our hands, and then we were debased by Muggle blood and betrayed by Muggle talk and *burned*." He sent another marble spinning, and struck six marbles. Red flared among them. "Something to think about," he added, glancing at Harry.

Harry stole one of his marbles, and flicked it at Draco himself.

"Something else to think about," he said. "How exactly is any of that Colin's fault?"

"Well, it's not," Draco admitted grudgingly. "I just happen to think he's a twerp."

Harry laughed out loud. "*You're* a twerp," he said, affectionately.

"Perhaps," Draco said haughtily, leaning over and gathering up his marbles, "but I *could* have been a Metamorphmagus. Imagine that, I could have looked like anyone. I could have been the sex god of Hogwarts. I could've had *anybody* I wanted."

"I'm not saying you couldn't use some help," Harry agreed innocently. "Parvati Patil was just telling me how much you weren't her type."

"Well, no, Harry," Draco said, giving him that 'Potter, you hopelessly dim bulb' look. "She had a crush on you back in fourth year. I can't imagine that anyone who ever had a crush on you might have a crush on me, we couldn't be more different physical types. Unless of course," he said thoughtfully, "one of us was Millicent Bulstrode."

"Bags not me," Harry said. "Wait, Parvati had a crush on me?"

Draco resumed his prone position on the floor, and began eyeing the rearranged marbles with in a predatory fashion.

"She couldn't stop yapping about the Yule Ball and how you'd chosen her," he informed him. "Harry, you oblivious git, you do not deserve to have a love life. What does a person have to do to get your attention?" He glanced up, a wicked glint in his eye. "Aside from playing a Seeker against you, apparently."

To his horror, Harry felt himself start to go red.

"That's not true," he said. "I don't - it's not - I've never noticed a Hufflepuff Seeker at all."

"Didn't you?" Draco asked. "Not to stir up painful memories, but Cedric Diggory wasn't bad."

"Draco!" Harry exclaimed. "Did you have a crush on *everybody* when you were younger?"

"Might have," Draco conceded grandly, hitting four marbles as his ears went a bit pink. "Except for that Fleur Delacour. Couldn't see what everybody else saw in her, to tell you the truth. I absolutely hate blondes."

Harry flattened his hair absentmindedly. "Are you telling me," he said slowly, "that Veela allure is less powerful than your personal vanity?"

"Don't judge me," Draco said.

"I'm just a little frightened, that's all."

"Catch me sharing personal reminiscences with you again."

"I didn't fancy Fleur either," Harry said. "I was stuck on Cho at the time, of course. I didn't even notice that Parvati fancied me at the Yule Ball."

He stretched out beside Draco, and tried to align his eyesight with Draco's and see how he was hitting the marbles.

"Shortly after the Yule Ball commenced, she did not," Draco announced. "Because you are, and it

pains me to have to repeat this, an oblivious git."

"At least I didn't go dressed as a vicar," Harry pointed out.

Draco wrinkled his forehead. "I did not go - I cannot believe you even noticed - I'll have you know that I look very debonair in black velvet."

"Like a very debonair vicar, maybe."

"Don't try to give me fashion tips, Harry. It's like the blind leading those with Omnioculars. And my robes, debonair as they were, also came second on my list since I had to persuade Crabbe out of these frightful things with Marvin the Mad Muggle lining and into Goyle's - spare -"

Draco fell silent. Harry leaned over, and touched Draco's back briefly.

"Draco," he said. "I really am so sorry."

"Yes, well," Draco said distantly, and got to his feet and began to brush himself off. "I should really be going."

"Going? Where?" Harry asked.

He had noticed, but he had not put together, the facts that Draco was wearing white jeans and a tight white T-shirt, and his hair had that softer look again.

"First Friday of June," Draco said. "Club night. God knows we could all do with some relaxation."

"Oh," said Harry. "Don't - do anything stupid."

"What, like ignore an attractive girl who fancies me all night long? More your province than mine," Draco said, winking. "Honestly, Harry, you can be so stupid. Here," he added abruptly, and put his marbles in Harry's hands. "Take these. I think you should learn how to play."

"Thank you," said Harry, looking down at them.

Draco shrugged, and closed Harry's fingers over the marbles. "It's nothing," he said. "I seem to recall you giving me a present once before, for no reason. I also seem to recall not saying thank you."

He looked white and silver in the dim light. Harry got to his feet.

"Well," he said. "Yeah. Mannerless brat."

Draco laughed. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said, and then turned and made his way down to the dungeons.

Harry went slowly up to the Gryffindor common room, where Ron was looking at Harry's copy of *Flying with the Cannons*.

"Oi," he said. "Did you know someone's been writing all over your book?" He squinted at the

marbles. "Those wizarding marbles?"

"Er, yeah," Harry said.

"Mum didn't allow us to play with them," Ron commented. "She said that families like - you know, the dark wizards - used to play marbles with tiny shrunken Muggle heads."

"I don't think that's true, Ron," Harry said. "Surely you'd bowl with heads, or something."

"Could've been true," Ron said, looking obstinately determined to cling to this tale of his childhood. "It could have been."

Hermione came over to them, reaching up her hand to lean against Ron's shoulder.

"What's the matter, Harry?" she asked, looking concerned. "Weren't you going to see Malfoy?"

"Well... yes," Harry answered. "But it was club night."

"Was it," Hermione said, and her eyes narrowed. "And you're just going to sit home and mope, are you?"

"I thought I might learn to play marbles."

"You must get so bored, Harry," Hermione proceeded, regardless. "You should get out and meet some people."

"Some people who go to my school, d'you mean?"

Hermione waved this quibbling aside with her hand. "You know what I mean," she said. "Lots of people tag along on this club night. It's great fun."

"Hey, it could be," Ron agreed, brightening.

"Hermione," Harry said. "I really don't think..."

\* \* \*

Two hours later, he was still trying. "I'm, er, just not sure..."

"Oh come on, Harry," Ron said encouragingly. "I promise you, it'll be fun."

As Harry looked apprehensively around, it didn't seem much like fun. The club beneath the Three Broomsticks was smoky and crowded, the darkness broken intermittently by circles of garish colour. Bodies were twining around each other in revealing robes or non-existent Muggle clothes.

Harry wasn't sure this was his scene at all. It seemed more for couples, or - those who were desperate for any kind of body contact.

Harry didn't think he was quite there yet.

Ron and Hermione were looking at him expectantly, their hands joined, apparently waiting for him to jump for joy and leap into the dance fray.

"I'll get a drink," he mumbled, beginning to make his way through the crowd. He had barely gone a few steps when he saw him.

Draco was sitting at the end of the bar, lounging on a bar stool, his fair hair slightly dishevelled and hanging above his empty glass. He looked faintly amused and deep in thought.

Harry brightened and moved through the crowd towards him.

He did not get very far before it happened. Blaise and Pansy both appeared by Draco's side, taking his arms. Draco glanced up and laughed at them, his lips moving in a brief remark Harry couldn't catch.

They were both grinning, trying to drag him off the stool. He was shaking his head, smiling at them, his face lit up and his manner easy.

*That's not the way he's supposed to be with other Slytherins. That's the way he's supposed to be with me.*

Blaise was speaking into Draco's ear. Harry watched the movement of his lips so very close to Draco's skin.

Draco leaned towards them, appearing ready to be convinced.

Pansy, less forbidding than usual in a small black dress with an unguarded grin, tugged on his arm. Finally Draco let them pull him up and followed them onto the dance floor. He was absolutely at his ease, as he was when he was happy. He was smiling brilliantly as he greeted a couple of fifth years, probably ordering them to get him a drink with that absolutely Draco-like lack of awareness that he was doing something appalling.

And he was dancing, not noticing or perhaps not caring about the gazes sliding over him. Not even noticing the idiot staring at him, utterly still in the middle of the dance floor. He danced with smooth practised grace, moving as if he loved to, shaking his hair back and smiling a shade wickedly.

His hair and T-shirt were glaring white in this light, red and blue colours shimmering on them as he moved.

Slytherins danced closer than anyone.

Pansy and Blaise were on either side of him, moving up against him, all of them moving in slow and almost lascivious sync.

Draco was laughing again, flirting shamelessly, letting Pansy fix his collar and trail her fingertips along his neck, letting Blaise slide a hand over his hip. Occasionally he let his face near one of theirs, let his cheek graze theirs and his ruffled hair brush their skin, and then leaned back watching how it affected them.

He had been trying to distance himself from Harry for weeks.

Harry knew he was just having fun, of the carelessly cruel kind he preferred. Harry knew it meant nothing.

Harry felt sick.

It didn't feel like emotion. It felt like he was actually ill, like some disease had taken hold of his stomach and in his throat was a dull ache, the precursor of vomiting. There was jealousy, dark violent irrational jealousy that made him want to hurt one of them as he watched Blaise Zabini watch Draco. There was desire and despair, and then moving through him like a cold wind there was this... bleak realisation.

Harry moved backwards, moved clumsily through the crowds as if he was not in control of his own body. He turned his eyes from that pale face, saw the rest of the world blur as he stumbled through the throng, shoving his way out of the heated cluster half-blind to reach an exit and oh, the clarity of the cool night air.

Harry sank onto the edge of the pavement, his face in his hands. His head was spinning as if he had drunk too much, the air was *thick* and there was this intense pang centred in the middle of his chest and...

"Harry."

The cold, clear voice was unmistakable. Harry shivered at the way it said his name and shuddered because, please no, he couldn't deal with this now.

He lifted his head again, the world still swimming around him. Draco was standing under a streetlamp, the only white streak against a black empty world.

He looked thin as a blade in his white clothes and that white light. His eyes were still glittering with alcohol and excitement, his dishevelled locks were tumbling into his face, and his neck and arms were gleaming with light sweat.

Harry watched with dumb misery as Draco stepped out of the light towards him, flicking hair out of his face. He stared at the too-thin line of Draco's wrist.

"Are you all right?" Draco's voice was almost kind. "Have those wanton Gryffindors let you drink too much? You look like hell."

"I feel like hell." Harry's voice was dry in his own ears. "But I haven't been drinking."

Draco's shadow fell on Harry now. It was almost like a touch.

"Then what -" He made a small, exasperated noise in the back of his throat. "Look, you're not being stupid, are you? Because - not that it's any of your business - I don't have anything going on with Pansy or Zabini. Come back in, I might even dance with you."

There was an easing of that gnawing jealousy. It didn't really help.

"I can't come back in."

Draco's tone was irritated now. "Why not? Look, you promised that - that *it* wouldn't change anything. You said we'd be friends like before, so why can't you -"

"Because it can't be that way!"

Harry had almost shouted. His voice rang off the brick wall: Draco absorbed it with that chilly indifference he assumed when he was hurt.

"Oh." He paused, and his voice grew subtly sharper. "So that's the way you want it. Because you -"

Harry felt the urge to punch Draco again, shove him up against a brick wall and hit him for being such an idiot.

"Because I *love* you," he snarled, and then froze in horror. He had to hand it to Draco, Harry thought distantly. He didn't exclaim anything or run. He didn't even say the 'What?' which staves off the inevitable by pretending you haven't heard what you didn't want to hear.

He simply stood there, hands in his pockets, face in the shadow. Harry couldn't guess what he was thinking.

And then Harry heard a soft sound from Draco's lips, and realised with incredulous horror that he was laughing.

His head jerked up and he stared in outrage.

Draco's eyes were cold, but gleaming with an odd kind of amusement.

He said, "Harry Potter, you need a good shag."

\* \* \*

Harry never knew why his eyes didn't fall out of their sockets.

"... what?" he asked in helpless disbelief.

"I said, you need a good shag," Draco repeated coolly. "But you won't be getting one from me. Honestly, Potter. You *love* me."

His attempt to keep his voice light and mildly entertained failed in that last scathing sentence. Harry was almost grateful for this small piece of cruelty. He lifted his chin and looked Draco in the eye.

"I do," he said quietly.

Draco shook his head. "Try not to be such a Gryffindor. It's bloody obvious, Potter. You've conceived a bit of lust for someone entirely unexpected. Fine, it doesn't matter. It happens to all of us. What's not fine is this absurd Gryffindor insistence that what you feel has to be pure, that Harry Potter can't feel a twinge of nasty little lust, that you have to call it by a ridiculous name -"



"It's not ridiculous!" Harry snapped.

He was on his feet with no clear idea of how he had got there.

"You don't have to like it," he stormed. "You don't have to return it. But don't you *dare* try to tell me what I feel."

Draco's eyes narrowed.

"Then stop telling me about your pathetic delusions."

"I'm not deluded!" He stepped up to Draco, furious, and Draco stepped back. "All right, I'm not experienced like you," Harry spat. "I don't know everything about lust. But I do know that I -"

"I don't want to hear it!" Draco rapped out.

Harry stepped forward again, and Draco shoved him back.

"It does matter," Harry said in a low voice. "You matter to me."

He and Draco were circling each other suddenly, voices wary, as if they were about to attack.

"You're bloody insane," Draco answered quietly.

"Just let me -"

Draco stopped moving, his eyes like ice.

"No. Let me tell you something. I don't care what kind of sentimentality you're spouting. What you're talking about is - just about wanting something. People say it to get what they want. It's a cliché spoken for a purpose... and it means absolutely nothing. And that means, Harry," he pushed him once more, almost carelessly, "that this friendship means nothing."

Draco stepped to the door, and Harry saw in spite of his light tone that his face was twisted with fury.

"Don't speak to me again," he ordered, and left.

\* \* \*

Hermione lay tossing in the darkness, unable to sleep.

Oh God, how was she going to tell Harry?

She was tired and she'd had a little drink, and the soft sounds of sleeping around her were making her feel even more tired, but her mind kept running on what they had seen. She had been scanning the smoky club anxiously for Harry, and Ron had been leaning against her, already a little tipsy. She smiled fondly into the darkness in spite of herself. Ron was absolutely horrible at holding his drink.

"Don't look," Ron had been saying in a protective way, as if Hermione's virgin eyes needed to be

shielded from the spectacle of a massively drunk and apparently shameless Pansy Parkinson with her legs around Ted Nott's waist and her tongue down his throat. A lot of Slytherins seemed desperately drunk and ready to grab people tonight. Fairly standard club night, Hermione remembered thinking.

And then they had seen it.

Draco Malfoy had been striding across the dance floor, shoving people out of his way. He elbowed one fifth year Slytherin in the head, and did not seem to notice, and then he stopped in front of Blaise Zabini.

Blaise stopped dancing, and looked at him.

Malfoy stood looking at him, consideringly, the coloured lights making weird patterns on his bizarrely pale hair. Then he had pushed him against a wall, and tilted Blaise's face up to his.

"Erk," Ron said, in horror and disbelief.

There was something very purposeful in it, Malfoy's hand under Blaise's chin, the other hand braced against the wall and keeping Blaise pinned. His mouth had opened over Blaise's and Blaise had responded enthusiastically, tongues and teeth and Blaise rubbing against him and angling his face so the kiss could deepen.

"I can't look," Ron said. "Hermione, don't look."

They had both stood staring. Blaise had put both arms around Malfoy's neck and Malfoy dipped his head down lower, with another direct purposeful kiss taking Blaise's mouth again. Blaise had tried to get his leg between Malfoy's.

"Look at what Malfoy's doing!" Ron exploded. "Only don't," he added hastily. "Can you imagine that? Does Harry know he likes to do that?"

*Not from personal experience, I hope,* Hermione had thought.

She had looked around the room for Harry desperately again, and had been devoutly thankful not to see him.

Ron had carried on ranting. "What if he fancies *Harry*?" he demanded, and brightened. "I hope he tries something."

"Ron! Don't say that!" Hermione cried.

"Harry would knock him down," Ron said with satisfaction.

"Oh yes, he might do that," Hermione agreed somewhat desperately. *And fall down on top of him,* she added privately.

They had seen Malfoy and Blaise leave shortly afterwards, and they had not returned. A close questioning of everyone had produced the fact that Harry had gone out looking ill before the incident, and presumably returned home.

Hermione had been extremely grateful for a moment, and then it had occurred to her that they would obviously have to tell him. She would have to tell him, since Ron could be trusted to do it with a perfect absence of tact.

She dreaded to think of what would happen next. If Harry hadn't realised and he had an epiphany, or if he had and he was jealous or thought he had a chance or... Oh, it didn't bear thinking about!

Hermione had to toss for a long time more before she finally went to sleep.

When she woke up again, it was still night. She wondered if a particularly bad dream had woken her, but she had the impression that it had been something in the real world.

She could hear absolutely nothing.

Hermione listened very carefully, and then was about to settle back to sleep when an idea occurred to her.

It suddenly seemed very cold in her bed.

She could hear nothing. Not the sound of shifting bodies under blankets, or the sound of Mavis's snores.

"Mavis?" she said, tentatively, and hated her own voice for sounding so uncertain. "Parvati?

Lavender?"

Her hand was trembling as she reached out and pulled back her curtains, and then she screamed.

The moonlight spilled into the room and showed her everything. Every bed but hers was empty. She was all alone in the dormitory. They had all been taken.

Hermione screamed again, unable to help it, and then she felt slow cold dread rising in her chest.

Very faintly, she could hear wailing supernatural voices echoing her own screams. She counted them methodically in some part of her mind as the rest of her huddled helplessly under the blankets and shook.

The ghosts of every single house were screaming out their losses.

# Chapter Eighteen: Condemned

*We are the children of Paradise  
On our own now since the fall  
All the things that are worth having  
Were never ours to keep  
I've been alone so long  
That I just don't know what to do  
And I don't want to lose you*

Ginny worked it out in her dreams, tossing her head on the pillow and trying to see through a tangle of hair and slumber. Someone was screaming, and it was Hermione, and it was then she realised it was real.

She threw herself out of bed before she had quite thrown herself out of sleep, and she did not feel fully aware until the moment when she burst into the seventh year dormitory. Every bed was empty, covers lying rumpled and abandoned, except for the one in which Hermione was huddling, her mouth still open in that cry of panic.

Hermione was one of the people Ginny would have unhesitatingly counted on in a crisis, and she was so frightened that for a moment she had simply broken to pieces. *This cannot go on.*

Ginny rushed over to the bed and clutched Hermione's arms. Hermione blinked at her and hugged her in a convulsive movement, so Ginny felt enveloped by trembling limbs and frizzy hair. Hermione's whisper came through the clenched teeth of returning control as her hands desperately clasped Ginny's shoulders.

"Oh, Ginny, Ginny, I thought - I thought I might be the only one left in the castle -" Nothing less could have scared Hermione like this.

"I'm here," Ginny panted, determined. "You're safe."

The knob on the door turned and for a single terrible instant, they clung to each other. Then Ginny pushed Hermione back and strode towards the door. She did not even notice until she was halfway to the door that she had had her wand tightly clutched in her hand all this time, and when she did she only thought: *Good. That will come in handy.*

When the door opened and a shadowy figure moved towards her, her mind was empty of spells. She was still working on protective fury.

Ginny whirled her wand up and struck the figure on the face. It reeled back.

"What the hell... Ginny, why'd you do that?"

Ginny was poised for another attack, but at the injured demand she focused, and almost dropped her wand.

"Ron?"

"Yes," Ron said reproachfully.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," Ginny began, when she realised that Ron had just seen Hermione and all the emptiness around her and that as far as he was concerned the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

"Ron," Hermione said in a ragged voice she obviously meant to sound normal and collected, "Ron, thank God."

She pushed herself off the bed and ran to him, and he folded her in a swift, tight hug. They both held on, pressed up against each other, until Hermione mustered up enough self-control to lean back and ask shakily:

"Who else is...?"

"A lot of people," Ron said, his hand pressed hard against her back, as if only spanning the firm space between her shoulder-blades could properly assure him of her presence. "When we heard the screams we looked around the room and -"

"Not Dean!" Ginny exclaimed, on another twist of panic. "Is Dean -"

Ron blinked. "No, he's there, but Neville -" He swallowed. "Neville isn't. Harry and Dean are checking out the rest of the boys' dormitories, Harry said he would follow me up -"

Ginny felt a ferocious longing for the ordinary, for the safe world she had been born into. She wanted to go to Ron and ask if his reddened nose was all right, because she was sure she could at least fix a nose, but all this...

"How did you get here?" she asked, helplessly. "This is the girls' dormitory."

Ron's jaw tightened and his hand flexed against Hermione's back. Ginny saw that his fingernails were torn and the fingertips looked red.

"I grabbed hold of the chinks in the stone when the stairs went out from under me," he explained. "I could hear you screaming. I had to come."

Hermione extricated herself, trying to smooth back her hair. "That was nice, Ron, but what we really need to do is get organised," she said, and Ginny saw the shift in her expression as she forced herself into briskness.

"Right," Ginny said. "What can I do?"

There was another sound, and then the door slammed open and Ginny saw a Firebolt being thrown to the floor as someone stalked by her.

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

Ginny's mind collapsed with relief as she looked at Harry. She should have known that he would come to save Hermione.

Hermione began to explain at once. Ron was looking at the Firebolt on the floor and muttering, "Why didn't I think of that? Should have brought a *broom*."

Harry might have thought to bring a broom, but he had not brought anything else. He was wearing neither glasses nor a pyjama top on this summery night, and when Ginny went up to him and leaned against him she felt the reassuring warmth of his skin on her naked wrist.

"Harry, we were so frightened," she told him.

"Ginny, you almost broke my nose," Ron exclaimed.

Ginny did not look at him, too busy clinging to safety. Harry looked every inch the boy hero now, with his black hair hanging rumpled in his face, his wide bare shoulders braced and his unfocused eyes narrowed and determined. Ginny held on with every ounce of strength she had left.

"What do we do now?"

\* \* \*

Harry was at his best in times of crisis, Hermione noticed absently as she took the roll and tried not to think about the terrifying scarcity of people. It was only when he was forced into inactivity that he went stir-crazy. Now he was angry, and acting.

Sirius was having some kind of fit of fury at fate, even while he was attempting to console a crying second year. Harry was prowling around looking in control of the situation, which was much more effectively reassuring.

"Get your wands," Hermione heard him say in his grim, sleep-scratchy voice. "If there's something happening out there, we all need to be armed. We need to be able to fight: that's the most important thing."

"When do we go into the Great Hall?" Dennis Creevey asked nervously. He was looking badly traumatised and worried. His brother was nowhere to be seen, and he had a girlfriend in Hufflepuff. "Can't I just go check -"

Harry wheeled on him.

"We all have people we're worried about in other houses," he snapped. "We can go when the roll call is done. Does everyone have their *wands*?"

Hermione finished the roll call, and tried not to let her sick panic show on her face. There were less than half the people who should be here. She was trying not to think about the exact figures, but her carefully trained memory refused to fail her now.

Seventy-eight people in Gryffindor at the start of the year, slowly draining over the year to sixty-four. And now there were... Hermione clamped down on the stupid panic that had made her so useless earlier, tried not to let herself think it but could not help it. Thirty students left. Thirty.

Ron had her hand in a bone-crushing grip. She pulled her fingers gently away.

"Honestly, I'm all right," she assured him with a faint smile. She had to be calm now, she had to think and remain self-possessed.

Harry and Sirius went to check the dormitories one last time before they left for the Great Hall. Hermione was walking round the room with Ron, trying to dispense soothing Head Girl smiles at the younger people.

She and Ron were close by the portrait of the Fat Lady when they heard someone speak outside it, and saw the portrait begin to swing slowly inwards.

*No more panic!* Hermione ordered herself, and was right beside Ron when he placed himself in the entrance and pointed his wand.

"Who's there?"

"Oh, put away the magic stick before you hurt yourself with it, Weasley," sneered an instantly familiar voice.

Malfoy was still in his ridiculous all-white nightclub clothes, considerably rumpled, and even the faint light made the sweat on his cheeks and forehead gleam.

"What d'you want, Malfoy?" demanded Ron, eyeing him with concentrated hostility. Hermione thought she had never seen Malfoy look quite so mean as at this moment, when he spat out his question as if he wanted it to be an insult.

"Has Harry been taken?"

"Like you care," Ron exclaimed, but Hermione leaned into him with a warning pressure.

"No," she said slowly. "No, he's all right."

Even in the shadows, she saw a certain tension going out of Malfoy's frame. The curl to his mouth stopped looking quite so nasty.

"Good," he responded, equally slowly. "Good. I - that's good. I think..." He raised his chin and spoke even more deliberately as he took a few steps backward. "I think I'll be going now. You don't actually need to tell Harry I was here."

Before Malfoy could leave or Hermione could work out what she thought of this, Harry pushed past them.

*Well, that's torn it,* Hermione thought crossly.

Harry was squinting without his glasses, his face looking naked and strangely older, and he walked directly into Malfoy's personal space even though Malfoy initially backed up a step. It was as if he had the right to take hold of Malfoy's arm and stand inches apart even when Malfoy was tightly-drawn as a bowstring at the contact. Hermione leaned further into Ron and was too tired for any more alarm as she thought, *So Harry's realised, then.*

It was just one thing after another, and if Malfoy was planning to mess Harry around at this time of

crisis she was planning to rip out his tongue and feed it to him.

"Draco," Harry said, sounding calm and factual. "Thank God, I was going out of my mind. Why are you here?"

She saw the thin curl of Malfoy's mouth again and hastily spoke to forestall him.

"He came to see if you were all right," she announced, and she was going to think about that later, if she ever had the time again.

Malfoy gave her a look as if she had just killed and eaten his owl.

"Really?" Harry demanded, blinking and incredulous.

Malfoy stared up at him in defiant silence. Hermione looked at the tensed muscles of Harry's arms and back and was sure for one terrified instant that she was going to witness something as horrifying as Harry taking Malfoy into his arms, making sure that he was there, holding on or...

*God*, she thought with the sudden stupid desire to laugh. *It will strike Ron blind.*

Malfoy was still tense and glaring, and he fought back against Harry's simple grip on his arm and refused with strained silent outrage to move an inch further in.

"Thanks," Harry said, almost under his breath.

"Go to hell," Malfoy snarled, casting a vicious look at Ron and Hermione. "We've taken roll call and the others are in the Great Hall with Blaise watching them. I wouldn't have left them for -"

"I know. Neither would I," Harry said. "How many of your people were taken?"

"We've got twenty-seven left," Malfoy told him bleakly. "There's nobody left in my year but me, Blaise and Morag."

There was a pause. "Not Pansy," Harry said. Malfoy was silent. "Draco, I'm sorry."

Hermione was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable here in the threshold, watching them outlined in the light so they almost looked like a drama of shadow play, intruding on emotions she had no part in. She was not, however, planning to let Malfoy distract Harry much longer.

"We've got no time to be sorry," Malfoy said harshly.

Harry hesitated, then gave a curt nod. "We've got thirty-one left," he said, which surprised Hermione. She hadn't known he'd been counting.

Malfoy stared, and rubbed the back of one free hand against his eyes. "Then we can presume it's much the same all around the school," he said. "Nobody can stay in the dormitories."

"No, of course not," Harry said. "If we all slept in the Great Hall with guards, I thought -"

"It's an idea," Draco returned. "Look - I have to get back."



"Me too," said Harry. "We'll be down soon." He let go of Malfoy's arm, and before Malfoy dropped it Hermione saw the red mark of fingers on the pale skin above Malfoy's elbow. Harry hesitated. "Draco. I'm glad you're safe."

Malfoy looked at him, eyes narrowed. Hermione thought it was definitely an indicator of character that when Malfoy had no reason for making another kind of expression, his face returned to a faintly nasty look.

Finally he nodded. "Go put some clothes on, Harry. Or else the Hufflepuffs might molest you."

How typical of Malfoy to be making tasteless jokes at a time like this. Harry grinned and turned away when Malfoy did, and Hermione looked at Harry coming towards them and Malfoy retreating with relief.

Harry still looked tired and grim, but a little eased.

"Come on. Let's go," he said.

\* \* \*

Even the night sky in the Great Hall was overcast and starless. Students were crying quietly in the shadows, and they were all huddled together so closely they looked as if they were all one house. They were so diminished they could practically only make up one house, Harry realised savagely.

The only bright spot in the entire night was just after they were all assembled, when Pansy and Zacharias Smith came stumbling in, in a state of panic and undress. Pansy took in the remnant of her house with panic draining out of her face and being replaced with something like despair. She went up to Draco, and even at a time like this Harry saw what a natural pair they were with a pang.

She stood, barefoot with the straps of her dress pushed down to her elbows and the top of her bra showing, and stared at Draco with uncertainty as if she did not know if she was permitted to reach out publicly. She put out one hand and Draco crushed her against his chest. Harry saw his hand curl almost too tight around her neck, and Pansy's half-startled, half-pained expression.

"Don't ever do anything like that to me again," he said brusquely, and then pushed her away and turned his back on her, facing the other Slytherins.

Pansy folded her arms over her chest, breathing deeply. Harry saw Zabini go up to her and put his arm around her, leaning his forehead against hers, and she smiled. In spite of the incredibly petty and irrational jealousy, he was glad she was safe. So many were not. Dennis Creevey had not been able to find his girlfriend, and the double loss had left him white and shaken. He clung to Harry's side almost as tenaciously as Ginny, and Harry took him by the shoulder.

"What's happened to them?" he whispered. Harry was not going to be stupid and useless enough to say, *I don't know*.

"They're not dead," he said fiercely. "And we're going to get them back."

"I know you are," answered Ginny, who had gone totally to pieces. Harry wished she wouldn't:

when he had come into the Gryffindor girls' dormitories she had been standing combatively, wand raised, and he had felt a leap of hope in his chest that she would be another ally to count on. He supposed she was only strong in that first flash of panic.

He felt embarrassed and as if he was giving her the wrong idea by letting her cling to him, but he could hardly shove her away. He stood with his arm awkwardly around her and looked beseechingly at Hermione.

"Poor Dean," Hermione said in a discreetly audible undertone to Ron. "He was still good friends with -" she swallowed and went on "- Parvati, he looks shattered."

Ginny's head came up off Harry's shoulder. She looked towards Dean, and so did Harry. Hermione was right, Dean looked alone and frightened. Harry wondered what on earth he could say to him.

"Excuse me, Harry," Ginny said in an extremely determined voice, and set off in Dean's direction. Harry saw the smile break over Dean's face as she came.

He moved over to Hermione and spoke in her ear.

"You're a genius," he murmured, wondering how she could have known appealing to Ginny's sympathy would work.

A smile flickered over Hermione's face. "Only compared to you two," she said, pressing Ron's arm. They nudged her on both sides.

People were calming down a little now, still afraid but ready to listen to reason. Lupin was on the floor with five eleven year olds from different houses apparently all trying to climb onto his lap, and dispensing chocolate as if he had set up a stall. He had snapped at Sirius until Sirius became cooler, and stopped saying things like 'Give the children knives'.

Now Sirius came over to Harry and gave him a swift clumsy hug, sideways so they could pretend they were used to gestures of physical affection. Sirius held on fiercely all the same, and Harry leaned his head down on Sirius' shoulder so he could pretend he wasn't as tall as Sirius, he was still thirteen and Sirius was going to be his salvation.

"Did I mention 'thank God you're all right'?" Sirius asked roughly.

"Nah. Thought you might've considered it implicit in 'here, Harry, *you* take a knife at least'," Harry said, giving him a sidelong grin.

"Thank God you're all right," said Sirius, ruffling his hair and letting him go. Ruffling Harry's hair was kind of like pouring water on the ocean, but he appreciated the gesture. He started to explain his idea about sleeping with guards in the Great Hall to Sirius, and Sirius became immediately enthused.

So when Dumbledore appeared, his hat floppy, with a bobble on it and yet clearly still a wizard's hat, Harry thought they were all in a mood to listen and plan. He refused to let himself panic. They were going to fight this.

Dumbledore's face was grave and lined under the floppy hat. Harry had never seen him look so old and sorrowful before.

"I have loved this school, and believed in every student in it," he said. Harry almost smiled when he felt Hermione stiffen beside him, and saw Draco's chin lift in the crowd of Slytherins, and realised that Dumbledore was using the past tense.

"It has lasted for hundreds of years, and it grieves me very much that I have lived to see this day. Still, we have to face facts. Hogwarts is no longer secure. We have no idea what is piercing our defences, and we are being decimated."

An eleven year old girl began to sob, quietly, into Lupin's chest. Harry was frozen with disbelief.

"Students with magical families will be allowed to go home, unless they are considered in particular danger. Their families have at least as good a chance of protecting them as we do, and they will no longer live in a place which seems to be Voldemort's main target. Those with Muggle families, no families or those at especial risk will be sent off with teachers or members of the Order, and every effort will be made to keep them safe -"

They had all known Dumbledore was serious as soon as he started speaking. It was only as he went on, detailing plans in his new, dull voice, that they all began to realise this was actually happening.

Hogwarts, introduction and monument to magic, Harry's only certain refuge, was disintegrating. He looked around for the murmurs of dissent, but everyone was far too awed by Dumbledore to question him. Everyone only looked more scared that Dumbledore could consider this necessary, and even the Slytherins who did not admire Dumbledore like the others only looked mutinous. Sirius looked uncertain, as did the other teachers. Lupin had never been one for open defiance.

Nobody was going to speak. Nobody was going to *protest*.

"You can't do this!" Harry exclaimed, and everyone turned and stared. He tried not to pay attention to them, walking forward and concentrating only on Dumbledore.

"We're going to just give up?" he demanded. "You want me to walk away?"

"My dear Harry," Dumbledore said, blinking but not looking surprised, "if you have another suggestion to offer, I am sure we would all be delighted to hear it."

Harry saw to his growing panic that people looked at Harry as if he might have another suggestion to offer, some sort of solution and salvation. It only made him angrier.

"No, but we can't do *this*!" he almost shouted. "If we all split apart, we'll be decimated. It took us long enough to start working together - you want us to form an army if all you're teaching us to do is run?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes were dim. "I do not want you to be an army," he said at last. "You are all children. I want you to survive."

"I don't want to be a child. I'm *not* a child," Harry snarled. "I want to fight."

"I want to fight with him," Ron put in loyally, and then looked down when Dumbledore glanced at him.

"I think Harry is right," Draco struck in. "Showing an enemy weakness can't be considered a clever tactic."

Harry's heart was starting to beat faster with hope, when he saw the quiet sadness on Dumbledore's face had not changed.

"None of you can decide the fate of Hogwarts. That is my responsibility," he said. "I will not have my students placed in this danger, which none of us seem able to recognise, let alone defeat."

Harry's hands curled involuntarily into fists. He felt like this was a personal challenge.

"People are being taken outside Hogwarts too," he said loudly. "We'll still be -"

"On nothing like the same scale!" Dumbledore told him with an authoritative lift in his voice. "I believe this is the best action to take, for all of your protection. It grieves me that some of you disagree and that I must say goodbye to you all, but that cannot change a decision I have made for your welfare."

"The day after tomorrow, you will all be sent away. Hogwarts will be shut down."

\* \* \*

Harry sat up with Hermione and Ron until the small hours of the morning, crowded into a small corner of the Great Hall. Ron was with Harry, upset and determined to fight, but Hermione kept rubbing uneasily at her elbows while she tried to sit still with folded arms.

"The younger ones shouldn't be here," she said. "Perhaps Dumbledore has a point -"

"We could stay, though," Ron told her violently.

"We faced a lot when we were that age," Harry said. "I wouldn't want to run."

Hermione's face fell as they both looked at her. "I just keep thinking about not doing the NEWTs," she admitted thinly. "It's so stupid, I know, after all this, but... I wish I could have done them."

Eventually Ron nodded off, still sitting up against the wall, and Hermione gave Harry an apologetic look and curled up against him. He looked at her head against Ron's chest and hated a world where Hermione could not even do her NEWTs.

There was no way he was getting to sleep. He was simmering with outrage. He levered himself up on one elbow and looked around the Great Hall. Ginny was asleep, with Dean's head in her lap. Dennis Creevey looked as if he had cried himself to sleep. Lupin had been one of the first to go to sleep, curling up on the floor with the simple ease of one used to being exhausted to the point of sleeping anywhere. Sirius was on his back and snoring.

Draco, Pansy, Zabini and - Harry thought - a couple of sixth-year Slytherins were missing. Harry felt a flash of fear and grabbed for his pocket. As he'd shrugged on a shirt over his pyjama bottoms, he

had snatched up the Marauder's Map.

Irrationally, Harry had never quite been able to forgive the Map for the time he and Ron had watched it for four nights, taking turns to sleep, and then it had showed them nothing unusual on the night Hufflepuff lost three people. He did not use it often these days. It came in useful now to assure him that the Slytherins were still in Hogwarts and presumably safe, having run off to do - something in the Runes classroom. Harry was sure it was none of his business.

Harry almost had a heart attack when he realised that Draco's name was not actually among those in the Runes classroom. He searched the Map frantically until he saw his name, alone in the corridor with the one-eyed witch.

The corridor with the one-eyed witch, which led to Hogsmeade. What was Draco *doing*?

Harry struggled out of the sleeping bag Dumbledore had conjured, cursing. What if Draco had some sort of fondly-imagined-to-be-cunning scheme like running away and starting an underground guerrilla group? What if he planned to live in the secret corridor on a stash of Butterbeer, lying in wait for the enemy of Hogwarts to show himself?

It was a distinct letdown to find Draco nowhere near the statue of the one-eyed witch, sitting down against the wall and morosely nursing a bottle of tequila.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked, squinting at Draco irritably. He scratched his neck, feeling the scrape of stubble under his fingers and wishing he was asleep, about to wake up and find Neville and Seamus back and everything normal, and nothing awaiting him but a shave and a companionable breakfast.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "I was looking for some privacy, actually," he said in a detached tone. "Well, alas for that lost dream." He gestured with the tequila bottle, which looked overlarge and about to fall from the thin line of his hand and wrist. "Are you going to sit down?"

Harry wearily did so, leaning against the wall and carefully not touching Draco at all. He did not want to do anything to upset the delicate truce that seemed to be in place, the only good thing to have come from this attack.

"Are you going to drink all that?"

"Why?" Draco inquired. "D'you want some?"

Harry was about to tell Draco not to be so stupid. "Yeah, all right," he said tiredly. What harm could it do? What else could possibly happen, when Hogwarts was being closed and they were being shipped off like children?

Draco snickered softly and passed it over. Harry tipped up the bottle and saw the amber liquid slosh against the glass as it rose, then felt it burn in his mouth. He coughed for a moment, and then passed it back.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"Professor Black's private stash," Draco answered promptly. "Teach him to have unlocked drinks cabinets around impressionable youths. The others have another. Tell me, will you try to protect me when he comes to kill me? If it got right down to it, who would you choose?"

Harry stared stonily at the wall. "I would try to get between you."

"As the pacifist said when they asked him what he'd do if a soldier was raping his sister," Draco remarked in an amused tone.

Harry was looking at the wall, trying not to think about Hogwarts collapsing. It was a bastion against Voldemort they should not sacrifice, especially not at the whim of one man. He was ready to fight Dumbledore, if he could only figure out how.

Panic and anger had been driving him all night, and had now melded together to form buzzing energy just underneath his skin. He wanted to fight, he wanted to - something. He was angry at Dumbledore, and the world.

Draco coughed, smirked and shifted the bottle from hand to hand, then tilted it up and drank some more. Harry looked at the smooth motion of his throat as he swallowed. He was angry with Draco too, because Draco was not helping matters. It complicated everything that he thought he would feel better if he was sure he and Draco were together on this, if he could lean over and press his mouth against the curve of Draco's lips.

"I'm weak, that's the problem," Draco said conversationally, as if they had been talking.

Harry frowned. "What?"

"I'm weak," Draco repeated, the curl of his mouth unpleasant. "I always knew that. I can pretend I'm able to do what my father would want for only so long. I'm able to be clever in little ways that make no difference. I can make them band together but I can't save them. I tried to learn strategy, persuade everyone, but what good was it?"

His look of spite was inverted, as if he felt so frustrated he wanted to bully himself.

"A lot of Slytherins wouldn't be with us without you," Harry pointed out, confused enough to be mild.

"What good is that, now everyone's being shipped back to their families?" His face was sharp with fury and Harry thrilled to it just a little, as if they were two thrumming strings on a musical instrument. "I *needed* this place! It was all useless. I'm nothing like you, Harry the *hero* -"

He spat out the word with his old hatred, and Harry's restless nerves were stung.

"I'm not a hero," he snapped. "What have you seen me achieve lately?"

"You're not afraid," Draco snapped back. "I saw you in there. You're not afraid, you're in control without trying to be, because you're made like that. Harry the hero, precious perfect Potter -"

"Shut *up*, Draco!" Harry snarled.

"I'm not like that. My father always knew it. You knew it, that time on the train -"

"When we were eleven -"

"My father didn't need approval. My father never needed anyone."

Draco looked furiously at the wall, and it was only because Harry understood the fury that he restrained himself from saying something sharp on the subject of Lucius Malfoy.

He knew what it was like to want the perfect father.

"How much of that tequila did you drink, Draco?" he asked.

"Far too much," Draco said, gesturing with the bottle and with grave conviction. Harry leaned over and looked into Draco's eyes. The pupils were dilated, rings around them so slim that he would not have been able to make out the colour if he had not known already. It was so like Draco to insist on wandering off and becoming bitterly drunk on his own, clutching his dignity jealously to himself.

"Well... what are you trying to say?" he asked absently, reaching over to try and pry Draco's fingers gently from the bottle.

Draco equally gently, but quite firmly, resisted this attempt.

"I am saying that you act like an idiot," he announced.

"So you're not actually saying anything very new, then," Harry observed.

"You act like an idiot or worse, and I try to be strong but I fail like I constantly do, and I'm weak and ridiculous but there it is. You don't even need to - I don't even want you to let me try." Draco was looking steadily at the stone, his voice brittle with anger as he went on: "The embarrassing truth of the matter is that I don't... do well without you."

Draco's face and voice were filled with so much resentment that it took Harry a while to understand what he was saying.

"Oh," he said.

Draco scowled. "I told you I was weak. And I'll have you know this is probably the fear talking."

"Or the tequila," Harry reminded him.

"Oh, don't try to make me feel better."

Harry wondered if Draco actually thought an alcohol problem would be better for him than the capacity to feel affection for other people, and then told himself that he should stop asking silly questions.

He also noticed that Draco was slurring a bit.

Draco squinted. "And don't think for a *minute*, Potter, that - that -"

"What?" Harry asked after a pause.

He glanced back at Draco, and saw that he had slumped against the wall. His head was tilted in Harry's direction, eyes shut and lips parted.

Harry put an arm around him to stop him from falling sideways. He sighed, the exasperated sound heard by no-one in the corridor.

"You stupid bastard," he said, touched and reassured and still thrumming with restless anger. "I can't do without you either."

\* \* \*

Harry caught a few hours of sleep against the wall, and then went off in the grey hours of the morning to dispose of the tequila bottle. Sirius caught him creeping down the staircase.

"Harry!" he said, and then looked at the bottle.

Harry followed his eyes. "Er," he said. "I can explain..."

"No need," Sirius told him. "It's been a stressful night, but Harry, all you had to do was ask. My drinks cabinet is your drinks cabinet - what else are godfathers for?"

'Not this' was all Harry seemed able to come up with. He stared, mouth opening and shutting, and Sirius looked him over critically.

"I must say," he remarked approvingly, "you look very steady on your feet for a man who's consumed this much tequila. Chip off the old block, really." He blinked. "Not that any of us ever participated in underage drinking of any kind. Don't tell Remus I said that."

"All right," Harry said uncertainly.

Sirius reached out and took the bottle from him, giving him a conspiratorial wink. "It'll be our little secret."

They both walked away looking very relieved, and Harry found the others to instrument the plan he had come up with staring at the wall earlier.

"I want everyone left in the Young Order, everyone left who attended the meetings in Draco's room, and anyone else you think might be helpful," he told Hermione, who was awake and planning in the time it took Ron to snort and roll over. "If we're leaving, we're leaving with all the information we can share."

"Right," Hermione said briskly. "Where do we meet?"

"Draco's room again," Harry replied. "Come to think of it, I'd better go tell him about that now."

He got to his feet and back to the corridor before Draco woke up. When he shook Draco's shoulder Draco tried to blink, found his eyelids were glued together, prised them open and made a piteous plea for death.



"Can't kill you, too busy," Harry told him. "Having a meeting in your room. Come on."

"And I was not *informed?*" Draco demanded. "I am not even *dressed* for the occasion!"

"See, you're feeling better already," Harry said encouragingly.

"I feel abominable," Draco informed him. "And anything I may have said last night I entirely disclaim, and blame on the vile tequila gods."

"Right... so we're not talking - ?"

Draco made a swift dismissive gesture. "We're all right," he conceded. "I am willing to let whatever I may have said stand. On the distinct understanding that I do not remember it, and it did not happen."

Harry resigned himself to his fate. "You have issues, Draco."

"More than the *Daily Prophet*, quite possibly. Is that the point?" Draco gave him a piercing and imperious stare.

"No," said Harry. "I want you to help me drag my Somnasieve to your room."

Draco considered this. "I need to get changed first."

"Don't spend ages on your hair."

\* \* \*

The stone basin was not exactly portable, but he was not bringing already scared students into a dead teacher's office. He gritted his teeth and pushed as Draco tried to pull it. Draco had moaned at length about not using a Levitas charm, but Harry was afraid they might spill some of the precious silvery stuff inside.

"I'm not really made for a lifestyle of toil," Draco remarked after they had it down one corridor. "Can't we fetch Weasley? His long history of peasant forebears might come in handy about now."

"Shut up about Ron, you inbred weakling," Harry returned.

"Is that the best you can do? I'm disappointed," Draco told him. "Months now under my expert tutelage, and you consider this adequate banter -"

Harry put his shoulder to the basin and almost caught Draco off guard. Draco sneered at him and helped drag it along.

"You're one to talk," Harry said with an effort. "Every time you really get angry, you sound all of eight years old. Don't talk to me, you're mean, and your mother smells of sick goat."

"Now you question my repartee," Draco complained as they dragged the Somnasieve through the deserted Slytherin common room. He deliberately did not look around it, as if refusing to believe there would be a last time to do so. "Will you leave me with nothing?"

Once they had the Somnasieve installed in the centre of Draco's room, Harry collapsed against the wall. Draco, impelled by vanity apparently stronger than exhaustion, went to the mirror and checked his reflection.

"I thought there were more important things than hair," Harry remarked.

Draco brushed some strands into a more artistically pleasing fashion, and undid a strategic button. "There are, I suppose," he answered, sounding not entirely convinced. "But this is no time to be falling apart. This is the crisis point, and I refuse to show people I am crumbling under pressure."

Harry nodded, agreeing with the sentiment if not the excessive grooming.

"If we weren't all in so much trouble, I would have stayed angry with you," Draco went on.

Harry folded his arms over his chest. "Is that so?"

"Hey Potter! I am rubber and you are glue." Draco shrugged. "Clearly, I am a towering inferno of rage."

The door opened and Pansy, wearing a strangely bright pink jumper over her black dress, came in.

"You're also the last word in maturity, I see," she remarked.

"It's a private joke," Draco said in a peeved voice.

"It's a playground insult, Draco," she told him, and made a wide sweeping gesture that alarmed Harry and made him think of large, vehement birds. "Look! Here he is. Harry Potter, in your very own room. You don't need to resort to hatred notes any more."

Draco leaned against his dresser and looked mortally offended. "My hatred notes were works of *genius*."

"Hi, non-Slytherin here," Harry said. "I don't know what a hatred note is."

Draco blinked at him. "My notes," he said. "Long notes, some of them, and some breathtakingly succinct in their venom. Detailing my opinion of your personal appearance, behaviour, odour, destination in the afterlife and ancestry. Notes of brilliantly expressed hatred, Harry, come on, surely you remember?"

He looked scandalised. Harry rumpled his hair and looked back apologetically.

"That's really strange, Draco. And I don't think I got them."

Draco turned his head and levelled a silently accusing look at Pansy.

She held up her hands defensively. "We had to. Draco, you were insane, you were a man possessed. Some of those notes were very scary, we had to think of the house points -" Draco's tone was menacing. "Pansy, what did you *do* with them?"

"Well..." Pansy said, her voice small. "Well, we - threw them away."

"My painstakingly crafted hatred notes," Draco said. "My little works of art. Some of those took hours. You will pay for this, you unprincipled dabbler in Hufflepuffs."

Pansy smirked.

Harry was a bit hurt. "You hated me that much?"

Draco gave up leaning against the dresser and went over to him, patting him on the arm.

"Then, Harry, then," he assured him. "Since you wisely placed yourself under my supervision, you have been coming on by leaps and bounds. You're really quite tolerable now."

"Thanks," Harry said dryly. He gave Draco a sidelong glance. "If I'd got them, I would've answered them, you know." He considered. "Well, I might have tipped a potion on your head or something."

Draco gave a mollified sniff. "I like to feel appreciated."

Pansy, tugging at the garish pink sleeves of her jumper rather than the extremely short skirt of her dress, wandered over to Draco's bed and plumped herself down on it.

"I take it you two are getting on again," she said. "When only last night you said -"

"Stop dwelling in the past, woman," Draco commanded.

Pansy rolled her eyes. "At least the hatred notes were consistent. Nice basin, by the way. Very retro."

At that point the door opened again and Blaise Zabini wandered in, wearing all black and more obviously suffering from a hangover than the other two alcoholics in the room. He gave Harry a revolted look. "Not again," he said faintly, and went to sit with Pansy on the bed. Once there, he eyed the Somnasieve. "I take it we're all in for a viewing of -"

He was interrupted by Ron's entry, moving carefully in case the Slytherin germs batted down on him. He relaxed slightly when he saw Harry.

"Hermione'll be along with the rest of them in a minute," he said. "I see some people have already -"

That was when he looked round and saw that the other three people in the room were all Slytherins, beside it being very definitely a Slytherin room. His eyes moved from edge to edge, eloquently beseeching Harry.

*Slytherins everywhere! Save us, someone, anyone! Besieged, overwhelmed, going to catch something!*

Harry gave him a reassuring smile.

Ron's expression became pained. *Poor, poor Harry, already infected. Every man for himself!*

"Oh dear," said Pansy. "The freckled wonder lacks the mental capacity to finish his sentences."

"Don't push me, Parkinson," Ron snapped, giving her a prim look that indicated, with a wealth of expression, what Mrs Weasley would have thought of her dress. "I really don't know how Zacharias *could*."

Pansy put a hand to her jumper. "Oh, well, Weasley," she said sweetly, "when a mummy and a daddy love each other very much, and aren't sharing a bed with the pigs like some poverty-stricken folk do -"

Harry and Ron were both glaring at her when Hermione came in, ushering in about a dozen people. Ron cheered up at this influx of non-Slytherins and Harry took the opportunity to give Draco, who had been smirking, a reproachful look. Draco gave him a small mock-apologetic grin. Padma Patil had one hand on her hip and her eyes narrowed.

"I'm here because my sister was taken," she informed Draco icily. "I refuse to be at all affiliated with a subversive group that was your brainchild. I still don't trust you an inch."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"You're beautiful when you're suspicious," he told her in what appeared to be a spirit of pure mischief.

Padma huffed and Harry leaned in slightly. "Do you try to be aggravating?"

"Yes," Draco whispered back. "But it also comes naturally."

After an extended period of settling-down, Hermione stood up and addressed them all.

"These are the dreams Harry has when his scar hurts," she said in a serious voice. More than a few people looked automatically at Harry's forehead, and Draco shifted his shoulder slightly in front of Harry's. "We think they must provide some clues - particularly because Professor McGonagall was killed on the night she saw them. She may have come to some conclusion about them that meant she had to die, and if we find out what it was we may be that much closer to the identity of the spy."

"If this is so crucial," Zacharias Smith put in, "why have we not seen it before?"

"Because the Ministry prevents the public viewing of thoughts," Harry said. Draco gave Zacharias a disdainful look.

"Then we're breaking the law - ?" asked Susan Bones, who was looking even more scared now Hannah had been taken.

Harry tried to muster up an awkwardly reassuring smile. "No, this is a private sharing of my thoughts. It's like..." He searched for any analogy other than the one Lupin had used, and was terrified someone would look at him and realise he was thinking about sex. "Um. Well, let's just watch it..."

"See what conclusions we come to," Hermione added, with what Harry thought was a more effective reassuring smile at Susan.

Zabini yawned, looking bored. "A special insight into Potter's mind. I'm sure it will be thrilling."

"Leave it out, Zabini," Harry snapped. "I don't have time for you."

He noticed that everyone was fairly quiet after that, so he walked forward and put his wand in the silvery liquid. He stepped back to the wall beside Draco, and kept his face carefully impassive.

Everyone leaned forward to see his dreams.

Harry kept his face stoic. He remembered it all. Draco, Ron, Hermione, blood, chimeras, griffons, basilisks and books. There were no surprises here.

Draco in Snape's robes moved through the shimmering silver liquid, backing Harry up against a wall. Harry hoped they would not see that, despite Draco's very predatory behaviour, the look on dream Harry's face did not exactly suggest being threatened.

"Well, *well*," said Zabini in a delighted voice.

Harry gritted his teeth and waited, watched as the lake dream appeared and his stomach curled up and cowered in humiliation.

It had not looked like this when he was actually having the dream, Harry blinking and confused and wet in the lake, with no evidence that he was actually wearing clothes.

"My, *my*," said horrible and accursed Zabini, and a few others like Smith and Pansy were curling their lips in agreement.

Harry held himself firm for the worst part. Hermione and Ron both went by, and in the real world they gave him concerned looks as they did. Hermione had leaned forward at the earlier point when she was searching through books with an intent look on her face and Harry remembered Professor McGonagall mentioning the book Hermione was reading, but it did not call any particular book to his mind, and Hermione did not speak.

Then Draco was there in the water, speaking, but the rush of horror in his ears made Harry briefly unable to hear him.

"Fetch the popcorn someone," Zabini appealed to the others. "This is a much better show than I'd anticipated."

"Who do you trust?" asked dream Draco, and swam backwards.

There was a gleam of moonlight on the slick wet muscles of his chest. Harry was sure that Zabini was going to start cat-calling.

"The dreams are mixed with bits and pieces of real life," Draco said in real life, astonishingly different when dry, fully clothed and faintly flushed. "This bit must be from when Harry and I went swimming in the lake."

"But you're -" Pansy began.

"What was that, Pansy?" Draco inquired coldly.

"Um, I said, er, did you?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," Draco lied smoothly. "And obviously we were both wearing bathing suits, Blaise, I can hear you."

"Shame about you," Zabini said shamelessly.

That awkward moment passed. The flashes of violence from Harry's dreams, from when Voldemort was feeling particularly murderous, were harder to bear. Harry saw Susan's eyes fill with tears, and the others watching him as if nobody could have dreams like that and remain normal. Perhaps they were right.

As earlier and more innocuous dreams began to appear in the Sieve, Draco leaned over to Harry and spoke in a soft, vexed way.

"You might have warned me."

Harry tried not to notice the pink colour he glimpsed first at the base of Draco's throat, cupped by the open collar of his shirt, and rising along his neck.

"How would you have liked me to put it?"

He refused to think about wet hair like dimmed and tangled silver in the moonlight, or the very unfair fact that he had no idea whether the details of Draco's body as shown in the dream were accurate. Quidditch teams had showers, after all, and it only made sense that the teams save on water and have common showers. It was patently unjust that he could have drawn correct pictures of Fred and George's anatomy - oh, bad thoughts, bad thoughts - and remain unsure of the exact curve of Draco's naked thigh.

Harry was relieved when the dreams ended, and he had to pay complete attention. This was a war, and there was no other choice.

Hermione did speak now, leaning forward over her knees, her pose reminding Harry of a sharply angled question mark.

"That book I picked out of the pile," she said.

Harry remembered that she had picked out one in the dream, but only remembered that it had not been *'Men Who Love Dragons Too Much'*.

"Yes?" he asked tensely, and everyone leaned towards Hermione when he added, "Professor McGonagall mentioned that too."

"It's called *'The Most Ancient Forms of Magic'*," Hermione said, her voice certain. "I read that book in first year. Remember, I showed you both that passage about Nicolas Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone."

Memory dawned on Harry, the familiarity of that large, old tome in Hermione's small hands. He

must have taken that from real life too, but why had Professor McGonagall especially noticed it?

"The spy has the Philosopher's Stone?" asked Terry Boot, his eyes widening.

"No, he can't have. It was destroyed," Harry said absently.

"That book has a lot about old magics in it," Hermione said, her brow furrowed. "I can reread it."

"How many copies does the library have?" Draco demanded.

"What a fantastic clue. Let us all become juvenile detectives," Zabini proposed dryly.

"Do you have any great insights? No? Then belt up, Zabini," Harry ordered. Zabini subsided, but Harry's snap silenced the welter of suggestions. Everyone looked as if they were thinking hard, but fear and unhappiness were battling for pre-eminence on most faces already.

"What does it matter? Hogwarts is finished anyway," said Michael Corner.

Harry wheeled on him. "And the spy could be sent off with a group of helpless people!" he snarled.

"Surely not," said Padma Patil, her eyes cold. "Presumably the spy is closely linked with You-Know-Who, and that would suggest he belongs to one of the old pureblood families. He'll be sent home, and good riddance."

Everyone followed her gaze to Draco, who sneered at her.

"Fine!" exclaimed Harry. "Let's see the proof. Oh, you don't have any? Well then it's lucky, isn't it," he said with savage sarcasm, "that a spy has never been known to come from an unexpected place? I'm so glad you'll risk other people meeting your sister's fate on the basis of random speculation."

Padma flinched. After Sirius' appointment as a teacher, everyone had learned the story of Peter Pettigrew. She had the good sense to change her tack.

"What about your dreams?" she pursued. "You said they were clues. Malfoy was all over them! Are you telling me that Professor McGonagall didn't comment on that?"

Harry hesitated.

"She did?" breathed Ron, sounding partially convinced.

"Maybe it's his charm. Has anybody thought of that?" asked Zabini, lazily but just a touch ferociously.

He and Pansy were leaning forward, obviously looking for a fight. Draco was tense beside Harry.

"Maybe it *is* Malfoy," Hermione said, and Harry looked at her in horror. If she thought this was the way to defuse the situation, he had always given her credit for much more intelligence than she actually possessed. "Maybe it is, but we can't be sure. We have to look at the dreams from all angles and gather as many suspects as we can, or we run the risk of letting the spy slip through the

net. We have to remember the dreams and watch those placed in the groups with us with them in mind, just in case. Blaming anyone exclusively is counter-productive at this point," Hermione said, and finished by giving Padma a reproving look.

Terry Boot looked pleased.

"I always said that girl should be a Ravenclaw," he murmured approvingly to Michael Corner, and smiled warmly over at Draco.

If Ravenclaws were so great, the stupid Head Boy could have thought up a defence for Draco himself. Moreover, that grateful smile Draco was directing at said Ravenclaw was a smile that could have been devoted far more appropriately to more useful Gryffindors.

"Well, we've seen them," Ron said practically. "Anyone think up anything else, they should tell us. For now, we have to get ready - Dumbledore has said that today is going to be our last outing to Hogsmeade. Anyone who needs magical supplies gets them now or never."

There was an immediate bustle for the door.

"Quick," Draco said to Pansy. "Where are the younger ones? They're going to have to make me a list of what they need."

Harry was getting Draco the parchment out of his desk, and when he looked up he saw that Pansy had gone to talk to the younger ones, and he, Draco and Zabini were the only ones left in the room. Draco was sitting in his chair and Zabini was leaning over him.

"Well, goodbye," Zabini said. "I'll see you later."

"See you around," Draco told him, and then Zabini stooped down. Draco tilted his face up to his, blank of expression.

Their lips met in a soft, perfunctory and very definite kiss. Harry stood staring.

Zabini left the room.

"What was -" Harry began, and then realised his voice had been climbing. "No. I'll go."

"Harry, wait," Draco said. When Harry turned around he looked tired, and Harry felt guilty and furious.

"I know I don't have any right," Harry began. "I'll - I need to go."

Draco's voice was very sharp. "I didn't sleep with him, Harry!"

Harry held onto the door frame. He studied his fingers clenched tight around it, and saw the knuckles become less white. "Oh."

"Not for you," Draco went on, voice deliberately unpleasant. "For him. I don't use my friends. I don't use people I respect."



*Why would you need to use anyone, Draco?*

Draco had slept with him before. What was different about last night?

Harry had a more pressing question. "Then why - ?" he said, and gestured helplessly. Draco's lip curled.

"We did - things," he said, and it was warped how an innocent, unspecific word like that made jealousy snarl in the back of Harry's brain. Draco shrugged. "I owed him that much today, if he wanted it."

*Oh yes, poor Zabini, Harry thought. Positively martyred by all that Draco kissing.*

"Are we still talking?" Draco asked cautiously.

Draco had not even had to offer up this much. Harry had no right, absolutely no right. And Draco had not slept with the bastard.

Harry let the corner of his mouth turn up. "Yeah."

\* \* \*

Harry remembered what Draco had said, and told the first and second year Gryffindors that he would get them anything they wanted from Hogsmeade. He had simply not expected them to want so *much*.

He eyed the lists sceptically. He was pretty sure some of these children were Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, trying to get in on a good deal. He bet that nobody was trying this out with Draco.

Of course, that might be because Draco had a habit of referring to the younger students outside his house as insignificant maggots.

"It's because you're the big hero," Ron said, rueful and just a little bit resentful after all this time. He looked almost jealously at Harry's big stupid list. "Nobody asked me to get them anything. I could be trusted with getting some sweets, you know."

"Course you could," said Harry. "Tell you what, you can help me with my list."

"No, mate, you're on your own," Ron said. "I don't actually want to get the midgets' sweets. But it'd be nice to be asked."

Harry shoved back a bit at the jostling crowd, sure they were going to make his lists drop. He had never seen everyone who could so anxious to rush into Hogsmeade, as if it would sell them some remedy for all this.

He almost ended up shoving Pansy backwards, and stopped himself just in time. She stood in front of him smiling appealingly up at him, and he felt very afraid.

"Hi Harry," she said in a melting sort of voice.

Harry took a smart step backwards.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't worry about it, Potter," she said in a bored voice. "Really, everyone isn't dying to get into your heroic little trousers. I've never gone for speccky men, personally. It's just - you'd say that we're friends, wouldn't you?"

"I'd call you sworn enemies by reason of house loyalty," Ron put in. She glared and then returned her winning gaze to Harry.

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yeah, we're friends."

"I'd call us acquaintances who tolerate each other, actually," Pansy informed him, "but I was hoping you'd say that. Because I want you to do me a favour."

"Forget it!" Ron said crushingly. "You can't trick Harry into -"

"What do you want me to do, Pansy?" Harry asked.

Ron looked at him sadly, as if he were letting the side down.

Pansy looked up at him through her lashes, and then batted them.

"I'll love you forever," she promised him insinuatingly.

"That's nice," Harry said. "What do you want?"

"Some chocolate," Pansy answered quickly. "Look, Professor Lupin found me with a bottle of tequila that I did a kindness to by liberating and - for some reason he thought I'd already disposed of another, and Draco says he has too many things on his list to buy me chocolate and I've explained to Madam Pomfrey that it's a medical necessity but she won't listen!"

Harry made a small face. "I'm sorry, Pansy. I've promised too many people already."

Pansy made a distraught sound and people turned to see who was stabbing her to the heart. She clung to his arm and stared tragically into his face.

It occurred to Harry that the reason many of the Slytherins came off as melodramatic villains was because they were a house of drama queens.

"Harry! I thought you *liked* saving people from dire and life-threatening situations!"

"Ahem," said Ron.

"Can't you find it in your heart to save a damsel in - look, Weasel, have you got an insect in your throat or something?" Pansy demanded.

Ron stopped his gentle, suggestive coughing.

"I was simply pointing out," he commented with great hauteur, "that I, like some other people in this conversation but not like others, am going to Hogsmeade."

Pansy favoured him with a beaming smile.

"So you are," she said. "Well, Weasel, if you will do this for me, I will - I will try to like you for... about a week."

Ron blinked. "Excuse me? I don't think that's fair."

Pansy blinked. "Would you like money -"

"No!" Ron thundered. "I'm just saying that you offered Harry more than you offered me. Which is just typical, story of my life, thanks very much, and then you try to insult me -"

"For possibly the first time in my life, I wasn't -"

"By offering me *money* -"

"You insecure little *freak* -"

Harry looked back and forth, feeling a bit like he was at a tennis match with people lobbing little balls of crazy.

Pansy stopped and put a hand on her hip.

"Ah," she said. "I see where this is going."

Ron looked mollified. "Well, good then. Equal treatment, that's all I'm -"

"I am willing to have sex with you," Pansy declared, and then made a face. "Marginally willing."

Harry jumped, and Ron made a creditable effort to fly without his broom. He clutched Harry's arm fearfully, as if Harry would protect him, and cast a hunted look around for Hermione.

"You Slytherins are disgusting," Ron hissed, after assuring himself that no girlfriend was about to bear down on him with terrible vengeance.

He was scarlet to the roots of his hair. Pansy was smirking.

"I think it was a very generous offer," she remarked, and then sighed dramatically. "All right then, Weasley. If you will buy me chocolate, I will love you - in a few years."

"In a few years?" Ron echoed.

She shrugged. "I feel I'll need to work up to it."

"In a few years," Ron informed her, "I hope that I will be living blissfully in a world free of Slytherins, and that - I'm sorry to say it - *scarlet women* like you will be living on the other side of the ocean."

"Yes, yes, fine," Pansy snapped, "but if you buy me chocolate then I will love you very much from the other side of the ocean. Please, Weasley, please!"

Her voice was becoming frighteningly shrill.

"Fine, then," Ron mumbled, and she produced a roll of parchment from her shirt and shoved at him.

Then she turned and left without a thank you, to call a throaty hello to Zacharias Smith, who was looking with interest at her partially unbuttoned shirt.

Ron was already looking around and trying to make it very clear to everyone around him that he had a very important list, too, a list which had been entrusted to him by a public in need of Ron Weasley. He lowered his voice and spoke to Harry in an agitated tone.

"I'm holding br- er, bosom parchment!" He flushed red and made a comprehensive gesture. "Bosom parchment! What, I cannot believe it, Slytherins are so disgraceful, can you believe it, Harry? Doesn't it worry anyone that a quarter of our school are sunk in blackest evil and - and sexual depravity?"

Harry suppressed the thought that he personally considered it a great shame Slytherins were not being *more* sexually depraved.

"I'd worry more about Hermione's reaction to you buying another girl chocolate," he said mildly.

He, Ron and Hermione spent hours collecting what the younger students and they themselves would need from Hogsmeade. Hermione tried desperately to buy out the bookshop, holding the volumes as if she would never see another magical book again. Harry spent an inordinately long time in the sweetshop, trying to find the special treats of everyone on the list as the shop emptied at an alarming rate.

When he saw Draco across the street, diving into the bookshop Hermione had already raided, he realised that all the sweets would be gone by the time he got there. He hoped that Draco would not be devoured by tiny Slytherins in a feeding frenzy.

He did not see Draco again until they were coming back to school, and being mobbed. At the time he was smiling across at Pansy, who gave him a blank look and pushed him out of her way.

"Who wants you?" she demanded. "Where's Ron Weasley?"

Draco placed the back of his hand dramatically against his forehead as Harry came up to him.

"Spurned for a Weasley," he said. "Feeling faint with the shock. Be kind and support me until we find a couch for me to swoon upon."

Small creatures were leaping on the bundle of sweets in Harry's arms with starved sounds. He presumed that they were students and the house elves had not chosen this moment to stage the mass rebellion Hermione was always urging them on to.

"And here's me caught without my smelling salts," Harry replied, grinning. "Um. Hey. I got you something."

Draco tilted his head back, startled, and then gave Harry that slow brilliant smile he so rarely used.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Um, it's in my pocket..."

"Harry Potter, is that a line?" Draco looked distinctly amused and Harry felt himself go red.

"No," he answered, shifting his burdens to the crook of one arm and reaching in the back pocket of his jeans.

He produced the last handful of blood-flavoured lollipops - the younger students must be absolutely desperate for sweets - and presented it to Draco. Draco looked at them for a moment, smile stretching to almost become a laugh, and then took them.

He was still watching Harry from under his eyelashes when he put all but one of the lollipops in his back pocket, and absently unwrapped the remaining lollipop. Harry watched him slide the glistening red sweet between his lips and curl his tongue around it, and then he winked companionably at Harry.

"Who says you're not a hero, Harry?" he inquired. "Thanks."

He wandered off to distribute more largesse to the young Slytherins.

Lollipops were filthy, perverse objects, and should not be allowed. It wasn't decent. It wasn't right.

Harry went to the Gryffindor rooms to find Hermione on her hands and knees and almost in tears in front of the fire, trying to fit all the books she could into her luggage. He patted her on the back and assured her that he and Ron would be glad to carry the surplus. She gave him a watery smile and mercifully refrained from one of those short, sharp bursts of tears that always caught he and Ron by surprise and horrified them.

He put an arm around her as she sniffed and smoothed the jackets of her books, and it occurred to them that they were all so busy with the impending fact of departure that nobody had protested it since last night.

\* \* \*

Harry stormed up to Dumbledore's office as soon as he could leave Hermione. It took him a while glaring at the stupid face of the knocker until he remembered Dumbledore's current password.

"Lime lollipops," he said. Everybody was so fixated by lollipops all of a sudden. He came whirling into Dumbledore's office and Dumbledore looked up from his desk with an air of mild inquiry.

"Harry," he said. "What a pleasant surprise. Nevertheless, as you can imagine, I'm rather busy -"

"You shouldn't do this," Harry burst out. "There's no way their families can protect them. We should try something else, we should set up guards in the Great Hall -"

Dumbledore blinked over his half-moon glasses.

"We set up guards around the school with no effect," he said, gently and reasonably. "Many students were so afraid they stayed awake: it did no good. Voldemort seems to be concentrating on you children, and I want you placed out of the line of fire."

Harry slammed his hands down on the desk.

"I want to be in the line of fire!" he shouted. "This is my fight!"

"It is not, Harry." Harry had very seen Dumbledore so perfectly solemn. "You have not yet left school, and thus you are under my jurisdiction. I will not see you hurt. How would you even propose to fight this fight?"

"I - I don't know," Harry stammered out. "Somehow. I want to do something. I'll never do my NEWTs and properly leave school if we do this anyway, so I'm grown up. I can leave school now and join the Order of the Phoenix, I want to -"

The round office, the large grand desk, all the books and toys and the Sorting Hat and the gleaming phoenix, all blurred into a haze of anger in front of Harry's eyes. Dumbledore was supposed to be helping him.

"You have just said," Dumbledore said gently, "that you have no idea what to do. Is that correct?"

Harry stood and trembled with anger. "Yes," he said, feeling the weight of Dumbledore's hopeful, baseless expectation that he might have an answer.

Dumbledore sighed, a tired old sound. "Let me protect you to the best of my ability until you would reach the last of your school days. It is not much more than a month, and then you may join the numbers attending the Aurors' training camp in the summer. Safety may be hoped, there, to be in numbers, and I will not have to bear the responsibility for more students being hurt."

The idea of forced inactivity for any amount of time rankled with Harry, but Dumbledore's idea was a good idea. He could fight soon in that case, and Dumbledore had always been kind to him. It was little enough to ask.

"You and Ron and Hermione are of course considered as in particular danger," Dumbledore continued, sharp eyes noticing Harry's hesitation. "You will be placed under the special protection of two teachers I trust completely: Professor Lupin and Professor Black. Moreover, you will adopt the precaution of travelling and acting simply as Muggles. I think I can promise you absolute safety for the next month."

Harry hesitated some more. He did not want to be absolutely safe if others were not, but Ron and Hermione being safe was a tempting offer. The thought of either of them being taken made him feel very sick.

"They're in danger because they're my friends," he stated flatly. "There's someone else..."

"Young Draco Malfoy," Dumbledore said at once, and made a weak attempt to twinkle at him. "I'm sure his inclusion could be arranged."

"Well," said Harry.

"Thank you for your co-operation, Harry. It's taken a weight off my mind."

Dumbledore touched his forehead as he spoke, and it occurred to Harry that Dumbledore must have a lot of other weights on his mind if this was how he looked when he was relieved. He faltered for another moment beside Dumbledore's desk, and then decided.

"Fine," he said between gritted teeth. "But I still think we should keep Hogwarts open, I think we should fight now. I'll show you that I can fight sooner or later. I will."

Dumbledore picked up his quill to write what was apparently an open letter to all parents whose children were being returned to them.

"Harry," he said earnestly, "I hope so."

Harry was back in the Gryffindor common room, packing with Hermione, when the door banged open to the squawked protest of the Fat Lady.

Draco stood in the threshold, his face icy with rage.

"You complete bastard," he said. "You're coming to talk to me now. Or I'll break your neck here."

\* \* \*

"I don't know what you can possibly be angry about," Harry said, following Draco into the Potions classroom.

Draco slammed the door with a cataclysmic sound behind them and wheeled to face Harry. His face was a tight mask of fury.

"You don't know," he repeated. "All right then, let me refresh your memory. Did you ask Dumbledore to separate me from the Slytherins, from everything I've worked to keep together for two years? Did you do that?"

Harry understood and tried not to lose his temper, which was lurking too close to the surface as it was.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

Draco looked like he wanted to hit him. "Living as Muggles? With no way to communicate with them or offer them a refuge?"

Harry might not have thought this all the way through.

"Yes, but look, Draco, you had to trust them at some time or another. You can tell your mother to let them into your house, I'm sure she will, and you have to understand. You're in danger because you're one of my best friends. You need to be -"

"I know all that!" Draco spat. "I'm a Slytherin. I considered all the risks to myself. I did not consent

to being taken away from the Slytherins when they most need a leader. You go to Dumbledore, because he won't listen to me, you go to him and you tell him that I can go home -"

Draco's intentions were good. That, and the slight shake in his voice when he made his savage demand, made Harry want to comply with him. Fix it, and assure Draco that it was just a mistake made out of concern.

But this was war.

"If they have to be constantly under your eye at this stage they can't be relied on! It's best to know that now," he told him. "And do you think I could bear the responsibility of you being taken because of me without doing anything to try and prevent it?"

Draco moved forward, surging as if he was bent on hitting him immediately, but he stopped short and controlled himself with an obvious effort.

"Harry the hero," he spat. "Other people are responsible for things too, you know. It isn't just you and the army of light you were sent to lead and protect, I have responsibilities, I took them on, and how dare you step in smugly and try to take them away from me!"

It was always dark and cold in the dungeons, and now at night it was darker and colder than ever. Faint moonlight from one of the small windows was all Harry could see by, and Draco looked almost ghostly in that light. Harry shivered in the cold and met Draco's chilly gaze squarely.

"I'm sorry if you are upset, Draco," he said in a hard voice that was as even as he could manage. "Has it occurred to you that if you are a target and you insist on staying with the other Slytherins, you will make them targets too? You can't take the younger ones from their parents. You are offering the older ones a choice and a place to stay. And that's all you can really offer them, and the best way to keep you and them safe is the way I chose!"

Draco was held taut with his anger, almost vibrating with it.

"I can't leave them. I put everything I am into this, I can't -"

"You said it was useless last night," Harry interrupted fiercely. "I know what it meant to you, but Hogwarts is being shut down. Last night, you said -"

Draco's hands were curled into fists.

"I thought we agreed that we were going to forget everything we said last night," he said in a thin, cold voice.

Harry stared at him, blinking in slow realisation and feeling anger well up slow and hot at the sheer manipulateness of him.

"I never agreed to anything like that," he replied. "I know nothing's turning out the way you want it to, Draco, and I know you're afraid -"

"I'm not afraid!"



"I can't ask Dumbledore to change things when I think I made the right decision. And I don't care if you don't believe me, I won't take back anything I said last night." Draco was moving restlessly, eyes gleaming like a hunted and terrified animal who wanted to go for his throat.

"I swear, if you don't stop I'll -"

Harry had heard too many threats from Draco now. He was so sick of all this power Draco had over him, the power to be angry with him, to remove his presence and friendship. He was not going to be threatened because he had told the truth.

"What will you do, Draco?" he demanded furiously. "What can you do, if I want to say -"

Draco moved forward sharply, took his face in both hands and kissed him hard. Harry had never actually kissed a boy, apart from that one brief chaste kiss with Draco before. It was violently different from kissing a girl, with Draco's teeth pressing hard through his lip, and no softness of breasts and hips between them. Draco was just there, his ribs pressed against Harry's with nothing but thin layers of cloth and skin between them. Harry was angry and restless with it and he felt as if he could feel the thunder of Draco's blood against the rush of his own.

Draco pulled his mouth but not his body away, still standing against Harry and with his teeth a whisper of potential pain almost touching Harry's lower lip.

"Feels different, doesn't it?" Draco said in a low voice. "Feels strange, you're not entirely comfortable with it, you don't know what to do -"

"Yes," Harry admitted, the breath hitching in his chest and pressing it harder against Draco's. Draco laughed low in his throat and stepped back.

"I told you," he went on, in harsh tones. "You had a ridiculous little crush, and now you see that it was misplaced fantasy and you were absolutely wrong, and -"

Harry grabbed him and shoved him against the nearest wall. He held him pressed against the wall with his own body, aware of the cold stone and the thin warm barrier of Draco's flesh and bones. Draco was held too hard against him, too close and strange and dangerous. He curved his hand around the back of Draco's neck.

"I didn't say stop," he told him roughly, and pressed their mouths together again. Draco's mouth slid open for him, hot and slick. It was a viciously hungry kiss with tongues and teeth, biting and licking as he tried to push harder against Draco and Draco tried to arch into him, the bones of their shoulders and hips pressed too hard against each other and it still wasn't enough. Harry made a jagged sound that hurt the back of his throat and opened his mouth further, loved the feel of his teeth scraping against the corner of Draco's lip even as he tried to drink in the small demanding sounds Draco was making.

Harry was aware of a jar breaking, in one of the uncontrollable bursts of magic that had not happened to him since he was a child. He and Draco let their mouths separate for a startled instant and Draco blinked at him in something like awe or surprise. His pale hair was glittering with a dusting of glass.

"God, Harry," he said, but his breath was a hot presence against Harry's cheek, his eyes were heavy-lidded with lust and his lips were red and wet, and Harry was not going to stop now. Draco saw the look of determination on his face, must have, because his eyelids fell even further. His eyes looked black under silver fringes as he leaned forward and tore Harry's glasses off, throwing them onto some desk or other with a clatter.

Harry had both his hands in Draco's shirt, fists pressed against his chest, and this close the glasses made no difference. He saw the trembling curve of Draco's lower lip with perfect clarity.

He kissed him again and it was better without the glasses, another filthy demanding kiss with his eyelashes brushing against Draco's, cheeks sliding against each other while their mouths opened hotly again and again. Harry slid one hand around to Draco's back, not caring that the surface of the stone was grazing it, wanting the feel of the muscles of Draco's back moving fluid under his palm, the only obstruction a thin layer of cloth that was clinging to Draco's back already.

He could feel the space, the instant of heat between the buttons of Draco's shirt, with his other hand. He knew in a minute he was going to tear the buttons off to get closer somehow and he could feel himself going slow, hot red with the idea of it, with all of this, as he buried his face in the long wet curve of Draco's throat. Draco made a desperate sound when Harry's lips opened at the place beside his ear, and he moaned and pressed his head back against the wall when Harry slid his mouth in a trail down his throat. Halfway down he let his teeth scrape against the skin, and Draco's moan went uneven.

Draco's hands curled ferociously tight at the ends of Harry's T-shirt and then he was in motion, a wild stumbling instinctive rush of motion that Harry went with and didn't care where he was falling or about the slam of the desk against his back because he had Draco's mouth again. He had Draco on top of him, kissing hot and frantic as his hands moved and his hips moved, locked onto Harry's and still moving. Harry heard them both moaning and his arm tightened around Draco's neck, he pulled his mouth down harder to crush mouths and moans together. Draco's hands were under his T-shirt now, fingers climbing ribs and clawing at skin, pushing the T-shirt up, and Harry moaned and arched up and let him.

Draco slid the T-shirt up to Harry's collarbone and slid his body down between Harry's open legs. Harry closed his eyes and still cried out when he felt the edge of Draco's teeth against the curve of his ribs, testing and tasting and making Harry arch helplessly up again. His mouth travelled up, hot and with teeth and leaving a cool shivery sore path along Harry's chest. Harry called out again, an incoherent approximation of Draco's name, when his teeth closed on Harry's nipple. The scrape and slide was very painful for an instant, and Harry clenched his teeth and made muffled sounds that meant he was begging for more.

When Draco twisted back up towards his mouth, they both made sharp pleading sounds at every twist. The damp material of Draco's shirt was all that was between their chests and their hips locked again as Draco breathed hard and ragged against him, starting to move even before their lips met.

"Harry," Draco murmured, breath short and voice thick with hunger.

"Yeah," Harry murmured back, dazed with the painfully good movement and the close promise of

Draco's mouth.

"Just tell me it was stupid," Draco said, looking at Harry's mouth as if he was hypnotised.

"Tell me you didn't mean it, and then we can - we can -"

The way Draco could not even say it was like Draco pleading for it, and Harry moved against him and thought, God yes, whatever you want, because Draco wanted this and it would be so easy and so good, so...

Harry didn't know much about it, but he knew that you didn't lie to people you loved. Not about something like this.

He remembered the soft slurred tone of Draco's voice when he was pleading for something else.

*I don't even want you to let me try. I don't... do well without you.*

"I did mean it," Harry almost groaned against Draco's lips, still moving under him. "I do mean it," he added, softer and in a breath against the swollen line of Draco's lower lip, feeling the beginning press of another kiss. "I..."

Draco went still. He looked down at Harry with wide, wild eyes that hardly seemed to see him.

"No you don't," he snarled. "Stop."

He was off Harry and bolting out the door in what seemed like the same motion. Harry was still lying on the desk, trying to piece his mind back together and get his breath back. He did not even seem able to pull down his shirt, and he thought with sudden despair that he was never going to find his glasses.

# Chapter Nineteen: Exile

*I haven't felt the sun for weeks  
So long, so far from home  
I feel just like I'm sinking  
And I claw for solid ground  
If all of the strength and all of the courage  
Come and lift us from this place...  
I know I can love you much better than this*

Later that night, Harry made his way out of the showers to the dormitories and prayed to be left alone.

Because those whom the gods wished to destroy they first made Harry Potter, Ron was there and talking about the endless what-ifs of leaving Hogwarts, which Harry really didn't want to think about. He pointedly towelled his hair in Ron's direction and Ron somehow ignored this obvious hint.

"And my mum said that Muggle food can be really dodgy, I mean, they think chocolate's bad for you and - Oi," Ron said. "Harry. What happened to your chest?"

Harry stared at him, and then down at his own traitorous body. There was a trail of red marks down his stomach, and... oh *God*... his nipple was swollen.

"I er ah um," he said faintly. "Uh. Door. I walked into a door...?"

"A door with teeth," said Ron flatly.

Harry wished desperately for the days when they were fourteen, before Ron and Hermione started copping off, when Ron wouldn't have known teeth marks if they bit him and indeed when the thought of Draco Malfoy biting Harry's stomach would have induced a coronary and saved him all this trouble.

"This is a magical castle," he persisted. "Many... magical doors."

Ron looked amused. "You want me to believe you messed around with a door? Because you're my friend, Harry, and I will. *And* I'll tell Dean as soon as he gets in, and I'll tell Hermione, and soon the whole school will know that Harry Potter gets off with inanimate objects -"

Harry briefly hid his face in his towel, but when he looked up Ron was still leaning against his bedpost and sniggering like a maniac. He was beginning to think he should have stayed in his nice safe cupboard all these years.

"Bugger off!"

"Harry, come *on*," said Ron. "Just admit it. I know already."

"... What?" asked Harry. How had this happened? Where had Ron hidden the body?

"It's pretty obvious," Ron continued.

"Oh God," said Harry. "Are you really angry? Does Sirius know?"

"I would think so, Harry, since he saw you kissing her."

"Her?" said Harry. "That is - ah, he saw me?"

"We all saw you! And look, you needn't think I'll be mad just because she's my sister. I mean, you're a good guy, and Mum'll be pleased."

Harry felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. Life would be so much simpler if all he had to do was duck his head and mumble yes, thanks, and think about the promise of safety and warmth and belonging to the Weasleys now and forever. Getting into that family had been all he'd wanted when he was fourteen. It made *sense*.

"It's not Ginny," he said bleakly. "I wish it was. I mean - no, I don't, but I wish... I wish I could be someone who wanted her."

He wished he could be the simple hero he was sure she saw him as, someone uncomplicated and unafraid who would never desire anything but to save the world and sweep her off her feet. Not someone who was furious and uncertain and probably going to die someday soon, and who thought that there was some way all the jagged pieces of himself could fit against those of Draco Malfoy.

"I want someone else," he went on, quietly.

He looked up from his hands clenched around the towel to Ron's face. Ron was watching him with level eyes.

"I want an explanation," he snapped back. "What the hell do you think you're doing leading my sister on if you're shagging some other girl?"

"I'm not shagging some other girl!" Harry exclaimed. "I'm - look, okay, will you sit down?"

If Ron was sitting down, it would buy Harry a few more seconds to make his escape. And anyway, once Ron heard this he could faint and... hit his head, or something.

Ron subsided onto his bed and sat there, fists clenched and right on the edge of anger, and Harry couldn't really blame him. He hadn't thought about Ginny. He owed the Weasleys more than this, and Ron was his best friend. He owed him... the truth, or something like it. He climbed onto his bed, stared down at his hands and took a deep breath, then looked back over at Ron. Ron was sitting still but strained, his blue eyes fixed and his big shoulders held ready, as if he was poised for the moment when he hit Harry or Harry hit him but for now, he was putting all his attention into listening.

Harry did owe him this much.

"There's someone else," he said, all in one painful exhale. "There has been for a while."

"Before you kissed Ginny," Ron stated.

Harry hadn't known Ron's voice got this stern. He pressed a palm hard against his forehead, and looked at the drapes around his bed and all the familiar shadows of the dormitory for moral support.

"Yes," he agreed. "I didn't, um. I didn't realise for a while, and then something happened, and it's - Ron, it's all weird and impossible, and I was in bits about it."

"Oh my God," Ron hissed, moved by the excitement briefly back into the territory of best matehood. "Do you love her?"

Harry cleared his throat and admitted: "Yes. But -"

*"Is it a teacher?"*

"No!" Harry yelped. Mind you, he thought Ron would understand Professor Sinistra a lot more. "It might as well be," he mumbled. "This person -"

"Your secret love," filled in Ron, who picked up these words from his mum.

"Well, yes, anyway - they're not interested, and they're a mess, and I'm a mess, and everything's a mess, and it would all be really har- difficult, I mean -" amended Harry, and hoped he was not going red.

"You're blushing, mate," Ron remarked critically, and then his mouth fell open. "It's someone really young, isn't it?" he demanded. "It's Natalie McDonald, isn't it? Harry, that's kind of disgusting, she's not fourteen yet -"

"It's not Natalie!" Harry snapped. "The point is that I've been all twisted up about this," he went on bluntly. "And it was even worse and we weren't speaking and I was drunk, and Ginny was there - and so was -"

He trailed off. Ron's eyes narrowed.

"That's lovely."

"Look, I'm not proud of it, okay?"

"Well, I should bloody well hope not!" Ron exclaimed. "You deserve a thumping for this, Harry. She's my little sister -"

"I know that. You can thump me if you like, I'm sor-"

Ron jumped up with his fist clenched. "Don't say that!" he ordered. "What does that matter? You're not the only one who's a mess, Harry! We're all in this together, and it's really bad. Hermione is in her room packing all her NEWTs textbooks and crying her heart out, and she won't even open the door. She's in there all alone because the other girls are gone, and she won't even..."

"And that tears you apart," Harry said, low. "She can tear you apart, because you love her, you guys have done practically nothing but love each other for years. Now there's someone I love, and -"

"And I don't hurt anyone!" Ron shouted. "I don't use anyone if she makes me feel like crap. I realise I've been lucky, and it doesn't seem like you have been, but that doesn't change anything. Hermione's a mess, but Ginny is too. She's been looking to you to save her because she's too paralysed by fear to try and save herself. I know her. She's good with action, she'd never let anyone down, but this... with people disappearing and evil creeping in and nothing we can do at all - it reminds her of being helpless with that damn diary. She's no good to anyone like this, and she is in no state for you to mess around with her just because you're scared too, and all mixed up about some girl at last. You had no right!"

"I know that!" Harry shouted back, and he did know.

He just hadn't thought about it. There'd been so much to think about, and he wasn't good with touchy-feely stuff, with analysing other people's emotions. He was useless at being close, and being considerate, and now he'd really let Ron down.

"Hit me," he said. "Go on, you have every right."

Ron looked at Harry, and then at his own fist, with about equal amounts of astonishment. Then he let it fall.

"You're my best friend, and everything in the world has gone to hell," he said. "I'm not going to hit you. You were being thick, but - I can be thick, too. I wouldn't have known how she felt if she wasn't my sister. Things are too bad to fight now... but Harry, you make this right." Ron's gaze and voice had both gone level. "You go to her, and you explain, and apologise. You make things clear. You make things right."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I will."

Ron exhaled loudly. "Okay. Harry... it isn't Hermione, is it?"

It was so like Ron, to be insecure enough about Hermione to ask, and to wait until he'd sorted things out for his family before he did so.

"No, it's not Hermione," Harry promised.

"Good," said Ron. "Because you can't have her. Now go talk to Ginny, but find a shirt first."

Harry fished a T-shirt out of the general debris around his bed. He was going to have to sweep all of this up and pack it away before the night was out. Ron sank back onto his bed, and the possibility of violence in the air faded.

"Hermione'll slap her around if I tell her you thought she could've cheated on you," Harry remarked indistinctly, struggling into the shirt.

"Yeah?" said Ron. "Well, pretty soon you'll have a girlfriend and then I'll have my revenge."

"A girlfriend? Me?" asked Harry.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry, you enormously stupid prat. I don't care what the bird is saying to

you, if she's also yanking up your shirt and biting her way down your chest, she's probably a little bit interested."

"Er," said Harry.

"Now go talk to Ginny. Or I will beat you up. And Fred and George will beat you up, and then Percy will beat you up - though you probably won't notice that - and then Charlie will beat you up. And he'll have dragons, so I don't think there'll actually be much left of you, which will piss Bill off."

"You're a mate, Ron," Harry said dryly.

Ron sat up fast, and almost fell off the bed. "Wait! I almost forgot to tell you something. Maybe you'd better sit down or something, this is going to be a bit of a shock. I know you like the guy -"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Even though in my opinion he's a snake and should have been sent to Azkaban at birth to save time, I'm sorry you have to find out this way -"

*"What's happened to Draco?"*

"Malfoy," Ron announced, "is a raving poofster!"

"Oh," said Harry.

Ron stared at him incredulously, obviously expecting something like a scream of 'He touched my shoulder once in the hall! I shall never never more be clean!' and some sort of panic attack.

Harry wondered whether Ron's system could stand the shock of one final revelation.

"About Draco," he said carefully.

"Well, what?"

"He's coming with us tomorrow," Harry said in a rush.

"WHAT?"

"Must see Ginny right away," Harry told him, and fled.

\* \* \*

Harry found Ginny in the common room. She and Dean were in the common room, writing letters to their families. They were both going with Professor Sinistra's party: Dean's family were Muggles, and couldn't protect him, and the Weasleys were too much of a target for Ginny to be safe at home.

That was Harry's fault, too. Ginny looked so young in her yellow pyjamas, hair in two plaits and smiling at Dean's jokes to please him. The Weasleys had been so good to him, and he'd put them in danger, and now he was going to hurt their baby.



"Hi," he said.

She tipped up her face and gave him a radiant smile that made him feel so guilty he thought he might be sick.

"Harry," she said. "Hi."

"Could I, um." Harry hesitated. "Could I talk to you?"

"I'll go," Dean said at once. He scrabbled around for his papers and said airily that he'd meant to leave anyway, talking so Harry and Ginny wouldn't have to. Dean was considerate, unlike other horrible human beings currently in Ginny's presence.

He looked down at her, for once giving her his full attention. She was all yellow and red filling his eyes, the Gryffindor common room her natural background. Ginny would be so glad to be a place he could belong to: she'd be happy to be his home. It would have been so easy and comfortable.

She would never be a challenge, never be an equal, but he still wished he could be the kind of person who would've loved her. Instead of hurting her like he had to.

Dean departed discreetly, giving Harry a single undecipherable look.

Harry knelt down by the fire, at Ginny's feet. The little bunnies on her slippers fixed him with an accusing stare.

"You know how we kissed," blurted Harry, and then cursed himself. Smooth, Potter, very smooth.

She reached out her hand to him, but if he'd taken it he would have exploded from sheer guilt.

"Yes," she said, glowing undeterred.

"Ginny," Harry said wretchedly.

"Harry," she breathed.

Perhaps he could just fling himself off Gryffindor Tower. That seemed a much more pleasant option.

He blinked up at her in distress.

"Harry," she said. "It's all right."

"It is?" Harry asked with wild hope.

She leaned forward, and the soft beauty of her eyes filled him with dread. "Of course. I know you're shy, Harry, but you really don't have to ask me."

This was so bad, so unbelievably bad. She leaned forward a little more, her freckles golden patterns in the firelight, and Harry fervently wished he'd chosen the option of Charlie, dragons and death. It'd probably be quick and everything, he could just nip up back to Ron and Ron'd be reasonable, he'd see it was for the best...

"It's not you," he said abruptly.

Tactlessness like this had to be some kind of birth defect.

Ginny blinked at him and swallowed. Harry's mouth was a runaway train, and his brain was just sitting back and observing the horrible carnage.

"It's never going to be you," he went on. "There's no way it could be, you have to forget about it. I'm so sorry, Ginny, but there's someone else. No..."

Harry paused and did not find any tact, so he went on helplessly with the truth.

"There isn't someone *else*," he said softly. "There's just someone. I can't even see anyone besides them, not like that. There's someone, and - there isn't any room for you. I know I've treated you really badly, and there's no excuse. I'm really sor-"

"Do you love her?" Ginny's voice was very small, wounded and mortified. "Does she love you? I mean - does she really, really love you?"

Harry hesitated. He had taken advantage of Ginny, and he owed her the truth - and besides, the selfish part of himself whispered, he could bear it if Ginny turned away from him. She wasn't as important as Ron.

"I love him," he said. "He's not really bothered about me."

Ginny's eyes widened to an extent where she began to resemble a house elf. Harry met her gaze squarely.

"Him?" Ginny said, her voice perfectly blank.

Harry coughed, but did not let his gaze waver. It wouldn't be right, to let her think he was ashamed of this. "Yeah."

"I am so stupid," Ginny whispered, going a dull red. "It's Draco Malfoy, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Harry answered. The look on her face made him feel lower than worms. "I'm so sorry, Ginny. I led you on, I know, I should never have kissed you. I was -"

"You were fighting with him around then," Ginny said quietly. "I remember, and he was... oh my God, he was in the pub, wasn't he?" Her voice went ragged and she pressed her hand to the corner of her mouth. "I was so happy," she whispered. "I've been such an idiot."

"No, you're not an idiot. It was my fault. Ginny, believe me, I never meant to hurt you. I - you're my friend. Your family has been really good to me, and -"

The shine of her eyes, which he had been hoping was a gleam of firelight or even homicidal rage, turned into a spill of tears.

"My family. I've never been anything but an unimportant part of the Weasleys to you, have I?"

"I - that's not true, Ginny. I like you."

She whisked away the tears with her fingers, quickly, as if she hoped he'd failed to notice them. "But not enough," she whispered. "Not more than Draco Malfoy, Malfoy, for... You'd rather someone racist and cruel -"

"Ginny, that's enough. You can say whatever you like about me, but he hasn't done anything to you."

She wasn't trying to hide her tears now. She sat up straight in her chair, the tears rolling down her cheeks and her eyes drowned and blazing at once.

"No?" she demanded. "And his father never did anything to me, either? He never slipped me something that sucked the life out of me, made me have nightmares every night for years, w-woke me up in my bed with blood up to my elbows and so frightened -"

"Ginny," said Harry, and reached for her hands.

She made a sound almost like a scream as she warded him off. "No! You were meant to save me, not... not be sleeping with the enemy!"

"I'm not sleeping with him, and he's not the enemy. He's not his father."

"No!" Ginny cried. "You saved me from his father. Who can I trust now?"

"You could trust yourself," Harry said.

She looked at him for a long moment. "Maybe I will," she answered. "Look. Just tell me why. I don't understand - you're supposed to be a hero, you're supposed to be something good - something great - why would you choose a power-hungry bully?"

"It wasn't a choice," Harry said shortly. "No-one else was even a possibility. At least he didn't see me as nothing but a hero!"

Ginny got up as soon as Harry shouted, and stood staring down at him.

"Fine," she answered thinly. "All right, fine. I understand what I have to do now." She looked down at him for another moment. "You're such a bastard, Harry Potter," she told him, and then walked away.

"I really am sorry," said Harry to her yellow-clad back. She never turned or paused on her way up the stairs.

Well. That could have gone better.

She might have had a point about that bastard thing, and now he'd declared love for Draco Malfoy to the Weasley clan more often than he had to Draco himself. And he felt sick even thinking about it. It wasn't like he had much experience with that kind of thing - you were supposed to treat the person you loved as family, and he'd never had one. It was all going to end in painful disaster, which was at least more familiar than this.

Hogwarts was closing down and he was thinking about his love life. He was *such* a bastard.

There was a tapping behind the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Sorry," said a voice he recognised as his Keeper Natalie McDonald's. "Are you done in here? Because I heard shouting, but I really need to pack -"

"Yes, of course, come in," Harry said.

Natalie came shyly in. She was a nice girl, Harry thought, and it was his second time in as many minutes to see a nice girl trembling on the point of tears. She said, "Hi, Harry," and looked as if she was just going to pass on.

Harry, out of some misbegotten desire to redeem himself, stopped her and asked: "Is everything okay?"

"Oh... yes," she said. "I'm going home to Mum and Dad, it's okay for me, but... I was just visiting my boyfriend. He's scared out of his mind, his parents won't take him home - it's very hard on him." Her chin trembled. "He'll have to go to Malfoy Manor."

"Malfoy - Natalie, who is your boyfriend?"

"Malcolm Baddock," Natalie said, smiling at the sound.

"A Slytherin?" asked Harry with increased interest, because he was the king of bastards.

"Well, Harry, nobody's thick enough to still be prejudiced against Slytherins these days."

"No, no," Harry said hastily. "Never really were, anyway. Just, um... jolly rivalry. Fun for all."

"Not what I'd heard," Natalie said, dimpling. "Anyway, you know what they say."

"Not... as such," Harry answered slowly.

Natalie began to blush. "Well, that Slytherins are better kissers," she said. "You know, it goes like this... Gryffindors plunge right in, Ravenclaws work at it, Hufflepuffs try harder... but Slytherins know all the tricks."

"Er," Harry responded.

This was shocking. When he'd been fourteen, he and his friends certainly hadn't run around the place assessing the kissing techniques of Slytherins. They'd been trying to fight evil, and - all right, he had been fixated on getting Cho Chang to come to the ball with him and getting Draco Malfoy ignominiously expelled, and Ron'd been torn between pulling Hermione's bushy pigtaileds and writing 'Mr Fleur Delacour' on his parchment, and Hermione - the quick study - had been seducing international Quidditch stars.

Also, based on Harry's admittedly limited experience, Natalie was absolutely correct.

"I mean, it's not about that," Natalie told him hastily. "I really like Malcolm. I'm really worried

about him, he – You see, Malfoy was supposed to go with all the people whose parents are Dea- won't take them back, that is, but now he's told them that Dumbledore's making him go with you, and..." She bit her lip. "They're going to arrive at Malfoy Manor to stay with Malfoy's mother, and she doesn't want to take responsibility for them. It... it's not going to be a good situation, and I understand that Malfoy needs to be kept safe, but –" She rubbed her arms, as if gooseflesh was rising on them as she stood by the fire. "Malcolm's really scared," she said softly. "And I'm scared for him."

Guilt was cold at the back of Harry's throat. He'd done this. He wasn't sure he'd have chosen differently – Draco did need to be kept safe – but he should have considered all this, like he should have considered Ginny. He had to start being responsible.

He remembered something, took Natalie's shoulder in one hand and said: "You are not afraid."

Natalie looked at him as if he was crazy. "Oh yes I am," she returned. "I just told you so."

Sod that, then.

"Well, you shouldn't be. Because I'm going to kill Voldemort," Harry promised, "and then everything's going to be fine."

She actually looked comforted, as if she knew he meant it. And he did mean it: because he wanted to act, and he wanted revenge for everyone, from his parents to McGonagall, and with Dumbledore defeated enough to shut down Hogwarts there was no-one else. He was disgustingly inept at caretaking other people, but he'd faced danger more than they had: he had at this a better chance than they did.

Someone had to do it, and he had to do something.

It was nearly June, and after the summer of hiding he'd be eighteen and no longer a student: through the summer he could train under Aurors, and then one day, somehow, he'd be ready and able to do it. He wanted to do it, he could taste it...

Revenge or justice, there was no alternative. He had to do it, so it'd be done, and then everyone would be safe.

Until then, of course, he was doomed to be an enormous prat around crying girls.

"D'you want help packing?" he asked her, not because he had any great confidence in his elite folding techniques but because she'd probably feel better if she had someone talking to her as she packed. If she wanted, he could tell her he'd kill Voldemort again.

Natalie said okay. As he helped her, some other people said they could use a hand – or someone sure, someone reassuring, to hand – and he went to them. He wasn't sure how well he did, but he did it.

It was long past dawn when he got back to his own dormitory. He poked Ron in the side until he stirred and exclaimed, "Damn the flobberworms!"

"Um, it's me, Harry," said Harry. "I told Ginny. Um. I made a complete mess of it. Sorry."

"Wasn' really expectin' anythin less," Ron mumbled. "No offence."

"None taken."

Ron blinked blearily up at him. "Is Malfoy still coming with us tomorrow?"

"Later today, actually, yes," Harry said apologetically.

"Oh God. I was hoping it was all a terrible terrible nightma..." Ron fell asleep mid-sentence.

Harry packed his own suitcase using his time-honoured method of scooping everything off the floor and hoping he hadn't packed owl droppings. After that, he looked out the window. The sky was bleak and cold, but light, with fingers from cloud-shrouded sunlight reaching out over the hills: like the white streaks in a very old woman's grey hair. It was morning.

There was no point trying to get some sleep, and he'd spent all night giving out reassurance. He wanted...

He went to see Draco.

\* \* \*

He found Draco in the common room, acting as an arbiter of justice. For a given sense of the word.

"It's not a case of finders' keepers if you didn't find it," he was telling one shamefaced boy severely. "What you did was break into her dormitory, unlock her case with a spell and take it, and worst of all - you left the lock open. And thus you were found out. Call that cunning? Give it back to her immediately, we have a reputation to keep up here."

The boy offered up what seemed to be an item of ladies' lingerie with the saddened air of one who will commit more devious crimes in the future.

"And you girls! Cassandra, it was an act of Hufflepuffian stupidity to sell her a time-share in your jade statue anyway, but it's a small item and I expect you can Owl it to each other. As for who gets first dibs, if you plan to wrestle for it I am perfectly willing to provide you with a tub full of jelly, scanty swim attire and refreshments for the undoubtedly wide audience you would collect. If you reject this idea - and I personally think there's a lot to be said for it - you could always flip a coin."

The girl he'd addressed as Cassandra, who Harry thought was a sixth year, giggled and winked at him. Draco winked back.

Draco was winking and wandering around the place in pyjama bottoms and a dressing gown. Part of his chest could be seen. It was ridiculous. People's attention was being distracted from the war effort.

"Can I get a word, or should I come back after the wrestling?" Harry asked.

Draco looked at him, eyes narrowed. "I suppose we should have a word now," he conceded.

"Cassandra, Ann, feel free to start stripping while I'm gone."

He swept away and Harry followed. Harry would've suspected him of a dramatic Hugh Hefner impression if he'd believed that Draco knew who Hugh Hefner was.

"You're all taking a long time packing," Harry observed. "Must be that lack of respect for personal property slowing you down."

"All Slytherins are not petty thieves, Potter," Draco said with dignity.

"Still taking a long time to pack."

"Well, I never said none of us were," Draco answered, dignity undiminished. He had parchment unrolled on his desk, with his handwriting on it. When he saw Harry glance at it, he gave him a sharp look and went to put it away.

"It's an Owl to my mother," he explained, and then he turned back and looked at Harry, his face sharp and unpleasant in the way it always got when he was tense. "I - look. Potter. I owe you an apology."

Harry blinked. "Sorry?"

Draco's gaze was firmly fixed on the middle distance. "Yes, that was more or less the intended word. I don't - I don't take advantage of my friends. I don't use them. And I don't try to manipulate them in order to get my own way. The rest of the world is fair game for all of the above, but... you're not. So I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Nothing nice ever happened to Harry: it was official.

"Thanks for the thought, Draco," Harry said, keeping his face a perfect blank.

Draco scowled, apparently at one of the knots in his door. "I'm still furious at being dragged away like this," he said, a fraction more relaxed as if anger came far more easily to him. "They need me. You should have asked me."

"You would've said no! And what good would you be to them dead? Be practical!"

"I'm trying to be practical," Draco said thinly. "I don't particularly want to fight. But it's been a difficult night."

"Yes," Harry said with feeling. "They're all so scared."

"Aren't you scared?"

Harry frowned. "I suppose. I'm mostly - I'm mostly angry. I look around at them all and I wish I could hurt something."

Draco's mouth turned up at one corner. "Oh, yes."

Harry let the corner of his mouth turn up too. They could both be such bastards. The brief moment

of accord, a wavering moment when it seemed as if Draco might actually look at him, was shattered by the advent of Pansy and Zabini. As soon as he was in the door Zabini gave Harry a poisonous look.

"It's the ubiquitous boy wonder again," he remarked. "Making quite sure you get to take something Slytherin needs away?"

"Be quiet, Blaise," Draco snapped. Zabini paid no attention. He walked up to Harry and tilted his face up a little to look Harry in the eye.

"You make me sick, Potter," he said with precision. "Always swanning around the place as if you owned it, Dumbledore's precious pet, ignoring us when you weren't eyeing us with that golden-boy contempt. Draco and I saw through you from the start, and now because of some sort of whim you've got him to change his mind somehow, and you're set on taking the best we have because you've never, ever thought anything was as important as yourself!"

He put both hands against Harry's chest and shoved. Harry was too tired for this.

"Back off, Zabini, I don't like you that way," he snapped. "Or at all, actually."

"Yes, pipe down, Blaise," Pansy chimed in sternly, and now everyone in the room was against him. Blaise backed down a step but continued to watch Harry with those angry, scared eyes. "Everybody's tired of the histrionics. It can't be changed now. We'll - we'll get by, and if Draco's in danger then it's right to put him where he'll be safe."

Her chin trembled slightly. Harry Potter made girls cry.

"Not that I'm happy with you at all, Potter," she continued, turning on him with a steely glare. "You interfere too much and you're always underfoot. I much prefer Weasley. Keeps his distance and brings me chocolate. You should be more like him."

"God forbid!" said Draco.

Pansy then shocked and knocked all the breath out of Harry with a fast, hard hug. She gripped too tight and it was altogether a very painful experience altogether.

"Take care of him," she whispered menacingly in Harry's ear. "Keep him safe, or I'll charm off your manly parts and keep them in a jar to experiment with."

"Um," said Harry in fear.

Pansy detached from him with a brilliantly false smile. "And you have a safe journey too, Potter. Nobody will ever shag you if you have two disfiguring scars."

"Right," said Harry.

Pansy had carefully avoided looking at Draco since she came into the room, but every muscle of her had been straining towards him and focused on him. Now she still didn't look at him, even as she went over and leaned against him, her head drooping down to rest at the hollow of his throat.

"I sent my mother an Owl," Draco said. "You'll all be quite safe."



He must be sending his mother two Owls, since he'd said the paper he'd put away was for his mother as well. That was weird. Harry wondered what he'd said.

"I know. I'll mind all of them. Don't worry about us, I can handle it," she told his neck with great conviction.

"Mind yourself as well," Draco ordered, smoothing a hand over her thick dark hair. "I'll miss you, you shameless wench," he added into her hair. "Mostly because of the daring negligees in the common room."

"I'll miss you," she whispered back. She put her mouth to his ear and said, "I love you."

It was very clear to Harry that he had to leave the room without in any way moving an inch or making a sound. What good was magic if it didn't let you do that?

Draco closed his eyes, his face tight and livid, ashen skin stretched over the bones of his skull. He'd never looked like this before: so tired and pained and frightened he was grotesque, and Harry wanted to pull Pansy away and stop her hurting him.

"I love you too," Draco said, his voice coming out calm and perfectly normal between his locked, bared teeth.

Pansy began to cry. Harry became aware that Zabini was staring at him, his black eyes filled with hatred.

"Get out," he said between his teeth. "Haven't you done enough? D'you want to stay and gloat over it? Get out!"

Neither Draco nor Pansy seemed to notice anyone was talking at all.

"I want everyone to be safe," Harry said. "That's all I'm trying to do. I want to do the right thing, even if I don't do it the right way. I'll make you all safe in the end - even you, Zabini. Even if you don't want me to."

"One day I'm going to kill you, Potter. Get out!"

"One day I might help you, Blaise," Draco said, not opening his eyes. "Harry, I know you were trying to do the right thing. Maybe you even did. But right now, it doesn't matter. I'll see you later."

"Okay," said Harry, and went.

He turned as he left the room to see them once more. Pansy was still crying, Zabini was coming closer to them and Draco, his face still shut down and ghastly, was reaching out to pull Zabini into the harsh embrace.

The Great Hall was filled with grey light as Harry came up into it, old and dull, and the defeated colour seemed to overlay Dumbledore's white beard and blue eyes as he stood waiting to bid all the students goodbye. He gave Harry a sad, subdued version of his old smile, nothing bright about it left.

"It's for the best," he said.

"It's not," said Harry, clenching his fists. "It doesn't matter what it costs, you always keep fighting. You don't give up like this. I won't."

Hogwarts was shutting down, his Hogwarts, and everybody was ripped apart and terrified. He didn't know how to stop it, or even to make anyone feel better, but angry purpose was building inside him, stronger every minute. A promise to every stone and every pang and every person he'd known here: that he would kill Voldemort.

\* \* \*

Leaving Hogwarts was a very subdued affair.

Hermione had thought there should be trumpets, tears, black flags, a flaming sword barring the way. It wasn't like that at all: just a gathering so tight it seemed even smaller than it was, going to the train station and assembling in little groups around their allotted teachers. The students going home to their parents came together in an uneasy gang, almost ashamed that they were luckier. The Malfoy Manor lot, whose homes were judged magically strong enough to be safe but who knew going home meant joining You-Know-Who, were around that cow Pansy Parkinson.

The Malfoy Manor people were a larger group than Hermione had expected. She hadn't really thought so many Slytherins would desert their parents' side - it would only be natural to want safety and the comfort of home. Malfoy was smarter than she'd thought, if he'd persuaded that many that safety could not lie with Voldemort.

She hoped Pansy Parkinson wouldn't let him down, that stupid, bristling girl who wore too much make-up, too few clothes and made eyes at boys rather than pay attention to lessons. As far as she'd noticed, all Pansy was good for was making nasty little comments, not even as frankly insulting as Malfoy's but the mean kind of girls' talk, so underhand that boys never caught on and that bred spite and dislike.

Hermione didn't really have time for dislike today, though. Pansy looked stern and her eyeshadow was smudged, and Hermione looked at the pale faces of the Slytherins - some of them were first years - and wished her luck.

She felt awful for being so glad they weren't alone like that, so glad they had teachers with them. She tried not to think about how alone all the girls from her dormitory might be now, with no help coming - and she met the steady reassuring gaze of Lupin. She felt Ron reach for her hand, but she kept it just out of his reach. She didn't want to fall apart on the platform or anything.

Everyone else in their little group was standing alone: Lupin tired and silent, Sirius trying to act as if they were going on an adventure, Harry with an angry look in his eyes that scared her. Malfoy stood apart from all of them in silent rejection, looking the stupidest in his disguise.

The Muggle world was large enough to get lost in, Lupin had said. They'd be travelling by Muggle transport, receiving no Owls, wearing Muggle school uniforms and being for all the world a few Muggle students, going with their teachers on a classics trip. Hermione felt as if she'd been shut out of the world, back to the life she'd been expecting when she was eleven. She thought Harry felt the

same; he'd muttered something about Stonewall High after all.

The others looked weird. Sirius seemed to be dressed in eighties chic, and Hermione did not feel up to suggesting that stonewashed jeans were not a good choice for those closer to forty than thirty. Ron kept tugging at his tie as if it was a choke chain, and the look on his face suggested that he'd indeed been dressed up in bondage gear and was very doubtful about this new lifestyle choice. She had assumed before this that because the Weasleys were modern enough to wear sweaters and jeans, they would be comfortable with all Muggle clothes, but this had turned out to be very much not the case. The trousers had confused Ron, the buttonup shirt had upset him, the tie had defeated him and he had seen the blazer as pointless cruelty.

Malfoy looked as if he'd fought the battle alone. The trousers, thankfully, he'd apparently worked out: the thin white shirt was crumpled and buttoned wrong, the tie untied and there was no sign of a blazer. His mouth was the vicious little line it usually was before he said 'Mudblood' and he was not looking at anyone at all.

Even when Terry Boot had come over to say goodbye, he'd hardly seemed to notice. It had been extremely rude of him. Terry had said: "Draco, I wanted you to know I still -" and Malfoy had blinked, looked at him blankly and said: "Sorry, what?"

Hermione was aware that she was desperately thinking about clothes and that cow Pansy and everything, anything, to stop herself from hearing Dumbledore's farewell speech. It was ending now, it was almost all over, and the clouds made the sky seem low and dark, as if it was about to press further down and crush them all.

There was Ginny in Professor Sinistra's group, her bright hair waving around her sad face. She was whispering something to Dean, who was looking almost hopeful as he reached for her hand. She let him take it, and that was new...

They were all getting into the carriages. Hogwarts was over.

She held her head high and still did not let Ron take her hand. Harry bumped his shoulder with hers as they got into the carriage.

"I'm going to kill him, and then you can take the exams," he said in a low voice. She looked at his angry eyes in his set face, and nodded. Felt perhaps a little bit lighter. Harry was the most emotionally dense person she knew, blundering around hurting Ginny and having disgraceful taste in boys, but you could count on him in an emergency. She knew he'd been up all night with half Gryffindor tower. You could believe in Harry. She always had. She was vaguely surprised when Malfoy grabbed the seat beside her before Ron could do so. When he pointedly asked Lupin to sit beside him, she understood: he was sulking at Harry for some manipulative little purpose of his own. As if Harry didn't have enough to make him unhappy.

The train began to move. She could glimpse Dumbledore outside, a lone figure against the greyness. She set her nails into her palm.

They left Hogwarts station.

There was a taut, terrible silence. Hermione's throat was aching.

Malfoy broke it, because he was an irreverent bastard.

"I think they could've - what's the Muggle word? - posted our NEWTs to us. You could have supervised us, Professor Lupin. I'm sure the board would have implicit confidence in you."

Another bad quality of Malfoy's, and there were so many it was hard to keep track, was that he was a shameless little suck-up.

Ron gave Malfoy a dirty look. "Mental as well as a bloody Slytherin," he said. "So great that you could come with us, Malfoy."

"Well, it's a travesty that we don't get to do our NEWTs," Malfoy said, and Hermione could almost have liked him before he added: "Do they expect me to work for nothing? What about our job prospects? Will this affect my political career?"

"Political career? Oh, will no-one defend England?" Sirius asked under his breath.

"Would it affect our careers?" Ron asked, frowning suddenly.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. "Not any career you're likely to have, Weasley."

"Shut up," Harry said tiredly.

Ron was noble and ignored him. "Seriously, Professor Lupin. Because I was thinking of, you know, going into some kind of business with practical spells - I'm good at them - and then, um, kind of getting an apartment for two -"

"Harry already has an apartment," Hermione said absently.

It only struck her when he flushed up to his roots that in her distracted state, she had just been incredibly dense.

"Um. I know that," Ron said. "I was thinking. Um. If it appealed to you at all, in a year or so - take as long as you like to think about it, really, if nothing better comes along... You haven't been writing to that idiot Viktor Krum, have you?"

"No, Ron," Hermione promised him, smiling. It was more or less the hundredth time he'd asked.

"Quidditch players travel a lot, and - they have groupies. It's a dodgy lifestyle, Hermione, really, I don't think you'd be happy -"

Ron being a complete berk was familiar and dear enough for her to reach over and take his hands in hers, playing with them. Her hands looked lost beside his, but he let her take the lead and try to clasp them.

"I just hadn't thought about it, Ron," she said. He looked at her with his blue steadfast eyes, something to cling to as beloved and safe, with all his old insecurity in their mute appeal. She squeezed his hands and continued: "But I will."

"Yeah?" said Ron, and beamed. "Cool."

Malfoy snorted and Hermione glared as he rolled his eyes. "Gryffindors in love," he sneered. "How precious. Nobody minds if I'm sick out the window, do they?"

"Mr Malfoy, be civil," Lupin said, forestalling a snarl from either Harry or Sirius.

"Sorry, Professor," Malfoy the toady said hastily. "And call me Draco, please."

"All right, Draco," Lupin said equably.

Malfoy bestowed his slow insinuating smile on Lupin. It was the kind of smile that made you forget that he had a pointy nose and a rumpled shirt.

Lupin took out a book. Malfoy began to talk to him about it.

Malfoy's entire demeanour suggested that he'd never been acquainted with a Harry and if he had been, Harry certainly wasn't around right now. Hermione made a private resolution to corner Malfoy as soon as possible and try to get answers about what the hell he thought he was doing.

"Do we really have to take Muggle public transport?" Malfoy asked suddenly. "I mean, they have all sorts of peculiar diseases, don't they, and we don't have Madam Pomfrey with us..."

"Oh, Malfoy, if you think we're so disgusting why didn't you run away instead of coming along?" Hermione demanded.

Malfoy looked at her, silvery lashes dropped and face more serious than she'd ever seen it when he answered: "I had my reasons."

Hermione stared at him in confusion, remembering the pale faces of all those young Slytherins. He almost looked vulnerable now, with the curve of his mouth trembling.

"Well then... why did you?" she asked, more quietly.

To her increased amazement, he made a move towards her as if he would have liked to take her hand, and spoke in a low voice.

"Because..." He stopped and looked into her eyes. "Because I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione's mouth fell open.

Malfoy sniggered. "The look on your face is *priceless*."

"You are such a bastard, Draco Malfoy!"

Malfoy just shook his head and snickered happily to himself. Hermione looked at Ron and read her own outrage in his eyes, and then looked at Harry, who was shaking his head and smiling a little.

Malfoy was the worst influence imaginable. He had to be dealt with.

They had to wait in the train until everyone else had disembarked. They were supposed to be the last to go.

The train was the last piece of Hogwarts left to them, and Hermione let Ron put an arm around her because she wasn't sure she wanted to go through the wall of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

She did, though. They all did, and then they stood in the prosaic surroundings of King's Cross station, on Platform Ten with grey-suited businessmen and sticky-faced children and a whole mass of people she was almost frightened of now.

I never meant it when I felt overwhelmed and wished I was like everybody else, she thought. I want to go back, I've learned a world structured by spells. I don't know what to do here, not for good. I want to go back.

The steel ceilings were high over them, the concrete harsh under her feet. There was no scarlet steam engine and no castle. The magic was gone.

They went to the ticket office so Sirius could collect their tickets. They were supposed to be making their way to Stonehenge, that was the story. Malfoy was walking very close to Lupin.

"Never seen this much of the station," he said, and his usual sneering tone briefly held a quiver. "The Muggle world's huge and ugly like this place, isn't it?"

"You always were a coward, Malfoy," Hermione said cuttingly.

"I'm not a coward!" Malfoy snapped.

"He's not," Harry said quietly.

Hermione looked at him sharply, but he wasn't staring at Malfoy with besotted concern or anything. He still looked angry, and he had just been speaking factually. He really believed it.

She recalled how Malfoy had held her up after finding McGonagall, and she opened her mouth to apologise, but... he was such a nasty little prat. She shut it again.

The train was a sad, loud, rattling thing in subdued shades. Malfoy was so busy complaining about the tatty covers on the seats that Sirius, Lupin, Ron and Hermione got themselves one set of four seats, and he was forced to sit with Harry.

"Tell me about the sleeping arrangements for the bed and breakfast again," he said. "I can share with you, can't I?"

Hermione refused to put the soft wheedling tone of his voice and the widening of his eyes together to form an explanation for his behaviour. Because one did not act that way with teachers, because it was wrong, wrong, sick and wrong.

"I'm not sleeping in the same room as that poisonous little - I mean, I mean, best not," Sirius said, belatedly remembering that he was an impartial educator and caretaker.

"Oh," said Draco flatly. "Would it involve sharing with you too, Professor Black? Never mind that, then."

Lupin, who Hermione was passionately grateful to for maintaining an attitude of total unawareness

of Malfoy's shocking conduct, explained the arrangements again. There was one room with three beds in it at the top of the corridor, two of which Lupin and Sirius would take. There were no windows anywhere, so it was the bedroom most likely to be attacked. Then there was another room with two beds in it, and the last room with a king-size bed.

"Hermione can have the room with the big bed, and Harry will share with us," Sirius decided, pleased.

Ron made a strangled noise of protest. Hermione took 'Gyaaargh!' to mean that Malfoy was evil, he'd probably kill Ron in his sleep or - which would be so much worse! - molest Ron in his sleep, and in short, no.

"I don't think Ron fancies the idea," she said diplomatically.

"Well, Ron could share with us then," Lupin suggested.

"Yes. Please. Yes," said Ron desperately.

"No!" Malfoy said sharply. "No, I'll take Weasley."

Ron held Hermione in a death grip to shield himself from any taking. Harry did not say a word. His silence was almost deafening.

"Or Granger," Malfoy went on. "Granger'll do."

Hermione astonished herself. "Fine," she said. She'd wanted to talk to Malfoy alone. What better opportunity?

"Hermione!" Ron cried.

Lupin looked very taken aback. "I'm not entirely certain we can permit a boy and a girl to share a room..."

"Look, Professor," Hermione said, leaning forward and smiling. "Do me a favour. Honestly. It's Malfoy. Ron doesn't want to share with him, and - Ron doesn't want to share with him, and I don't mind. He knows I'd rather snog a Hippogriff."

"Admit it, Granger, you crave me."

Hermione gave him an appalled look and Sirius snorted very loudly.

"Why do you talk like that, you little twerp?" he demanded. "Has it somehow escaped your attention that you're all but an albino?"

"Perhaps," said Malfoy haughtily, "but I have a very beautiful bone structure."

"I suppose it would be all right if you two shared," Lupin said, and gave them both a small smile. "If we put a mirror in the room, Draco may not even notice Hermione's there."

Malfoy looked charmed that he'd won a professor over, and returned his smile with an engaging

grin.

"Two of me, though? Is that fair to Granger? She's led a retired life: she might have a heart attack."

"Malfoy," Ron burst out, "your parents should have drowned you at birth."

Malfoy's mouth twisted. "Don't talk about my parents just because you're concerned for the sanctity of your little Mudblood's knickers."

"Oh my God, Draco," Harry thundered. "*Shut up.*"

The sound of his shout echoed through the carriage. Ron and Sirius, who had both been bristling and ready to fight, went quiet with the others. Malfoy turned his head and looked at Harry, and Hermione realised he hadn't done that all morning.

"He didn't mean it like that and you know it! Stop taking this out on everyone, we all have to go through this -"

"Oh, I doubt you have any idea what I'm going through," Malfoy sneered.

Harry slammed his fist against the plexiglass of the train window. "No? You don't think so?" he demanded. His hand closed around Malfoy's arm, fingers going so white that Malfoy's skin must be going red underneath. "Come on. Let's go."

He got to his feet and Malfoy rose with him, only to shove him backwards and stride out the door before him. Harry followed and slammed it.

"*Why* are they friends?" Ron demanded. "If they fight all the time, why did they have to be friends? Couldn't they have stayed enemies? I *liked* that!"

Muffled behind the door, there were shouts.

Sirius and Ron began to lay bets on how long Malfoy would last in a fight.

\* \* \*

In the tiny corridor between the carriages, Harry shoved Draco away so he wouldn't hit him, and then hit the wall hard.

"Oh God, oh hell," he said. "I don't want anything to be happening this way! I forgot to say goodbye to Hagrid, do you realise that? He's one of the only people who's been there for me since I was a kid, and I just left."

The fluorescent light was broken, only one side of it still dimly glowing. Draco's eyes were gleaming and cold in the half-light.

"*You* just left," he snarled. "Do you have any idea what I've left? Do you have any idea of what they - I *promised* to guard them and I had to desert them! Do you have any idea at all of how much I bloody resent you?"



"I don't care!" Harry shouted. "I don't care, I don't *care*, I just want to *hurt* something. I thought it would all be okay if I could just promise myself that someday I'd kill Voldemort, but Hogwarts was home and we tried with the Young Order and the meetings in your room, we were all trying, and it was all so damn useless."

Draco took a step right into Harry's personal space.

"Don't talk to me about futile!" he hissed. "I put everything into getting them together! I don't know what I have now, I don't know what I am now and I don't want to be a coward!"

"You're not a coward, you stupid idiot!" Harry yelled at him. "And I don't care if you do resent me, I'd rather have that than have you hurt, but I wouldn't have had to do any of it if I'd been allowed to stand and fight! I *hate* this! I hate all of it!"

He moved to shove Draco away and into the wall, to do something, anything, and Draco resisted. He stood still, and Harry realised that he had one hand open against Draco's shoulder and their faces were an inch apart.

He'd already been sweating and breathing hard.

They were both suddenly very quiet.

Harry could feel the rasp of Draco's breath warm against his cheek. He could feel the thrum of Draco's beating heart under his hand, and moved his fingers along, up to his collarbone, against his neck. The skin was smooth and quivering under his touch.

Very slowly, Draco tilted his head to the right angle. Harry saw the gleam of tongue and teeth behind Draco's half-parted lips.

He could feel every inch of Draco's body against his. He could reach up and grab a fistful of Draco's hair and Draco would open his hot mouth under his own. If either of them *moved*...

And Draco was already scared. After the night full of crying women, Harry felt as if he should work on being less of an insensitive prat, and... Draco had always wanted all the attention he could grab, had always raced to fulfil people's expectations, coaxed for a laugh. Harry'd known that when he saw Draco seeking Lupin's approval. Draco needed people, and he hated feeling dependent.

Draco was desperate.

He exhaled hard, stood back and collapsed to the floor, back against the opposite wall and locked his hands over his raised knees to preserve himself from temptation.

"Oh, hell," he said again, and then took off his glasses and kneaded his brow hard. When he replaced his glasses and looked up, Draco had sat down against the opposite wall.

"I see we're in complete agreement," Draco observed, his voice the clear cool Malfoy voice Harry knew too well, even though his cheekbones were crested with faint colour. "Do you hate everything? I hate everything."

"I don't hate you all the time," Harry said wearily.

"Well," Draco conceded. "Perhaps not all the time." He hesitated. "Or even most of it. I know you were trying to - help me be safe, or whatever, but I can't forget them! And I can't forgive you, now, for being able to be the lone bloody hero."

"It's not because you're a coward, Draco," said Harry, who'd been giving it some thought. He saw how Draco flinched at the word. "It's because you've got a mind more like an army commander. You want forces for your game plan."

Draco gave this some thought in his turn, and appeared to like the idea.

"Which makes me a more modern and efficient warrior," he noted with considerable satisfaction. Harry shrugged, and he added: "Don't worry about ignoring Hagrid, anyway. I'm pretty sure I blanked poor Terry right there on the platform."

"What a shame," Harry remarked with utter insincerity.

"You don't like him, do you? Why's that?"

"Er - bookish people. Don't like them," Harry answered.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Woe upon me and Granger. The favour of Harry Potter has been withdrawn from us. A suicide pact is obviously in order."

"Shut up, you pillock."

"Oooh, Harry, I'm so sorry your noble instincts are all frustrated by everyone else's craven surrender of Hogwarts. Want to smuggle on a train back there and sing noble songs of resistance, and demand to take our NEWTs and stuff? I bet Granger will join us if we mention the NEWTs bit."

"It's probably not a very practical plan," Harry said with a certain amount of regret.

"Logic from Harry Potter," drawled Draco. "My little boy is all grown up. I think I may cry."

The train jolted and the light flickered off, and then fully on. Harry saw light strike the sweat gleaming on Draco's throat, thought about licking the soft place directly beneath his jaw.

"You do realise," Draco said, very evenly, "that we are now yelling at each other when we are basically in agreement. If we keep it up like this, we'll kill each other by tomorrow."

"Right," Harry said, thinking about the swollen curve of Draco's mouth last night. He shook his head. "Right, right, you're absolutely right."

Draco's face twisted in something that looked like regret. "I'm brilliant, you know."

"So you keep telling me," Harry said, and smiled.

"I've made a bad situation worse. It's my fault. I am sorry, Harry, it was an irresponsible and unforgivable thing to do when you - you don't know anything about this sort of thing. I'm your

friend and I should be helping you instead of messing you around."

The look in Draco's eyes suggested that he was concentrating on making private, spiteful remarks to himself. Harry was starting to feel extremely embarrassed. He'd been pretty sure that Draco was... no, damn it, he'd *known* Draco was... but it was true Harry wasn't exactly experienced.

"I mean, you haven't even decided on a lifestyle choice yet, you have no idea," Draco continued, his voice stern and his lower lip drawn in painfully.

"Oh," said Harry. "I've been thinking about that. I've decided it doesn't matter."

Draco closed his eyes as if he was in some kind of pain.

"Do you ever hear non-Dark Lord voices in your head?" he asked carefully. "Ones that perhaps, tell you to burn things because fire is pretty, or perhaps don a yellow tutu and perform a mating dance for the buttercups?"

"I'm not crazy, Draco."

"Naturally not," Draco soothed him. "But it might be an idea not to listen to the voices, Harry. Just say no, that's the ticket."

"It just doesn't seem to matter. I mean, not with everything else going on. I might not end up with a lifetime to have - lifestyle preferences in, and I don't see why I should be wasting time going over my feelings like a twit, when it can be simple." He focused hard on his own knotted hands, tried to overcome the knot of mortification in his stomach and said: "I want you. If there's anyone else -"

"*When* there's someone else," Draco corrected him, his voice thin. "When, very shortly, there is someone else."

"I don't think so," Harry said, challengingly. "If there is, then that'll clear things up. As it is, there isn't anyone else, so what does it matter?"

Draco's mouth kept shaping and reforming itself into different expressions, as if he was not even certain how to feel about this conversation. He kept trying to look at Harry and then failing.

Of course, Harry could only tell from the limited background view he had of Draco while he concentrated on the white line of his own knuckles.

"You must see that it would be sheer madness, Potter," he said at last, and made one of his sweeping gestures. "I mean - what, you couldn't want us to be boyfriends, or something."

Boyfriend. It was a stupid, stupid, embarrassing word.

"Wouldn't mind," he mumbled, and then said to hell with it and looked Draco in the eye. "I mean yes. Yes. That's what I want."

It was the first time Harry had ever made a proposition like this to anyone, and let alone the fact he hadn't expected it to be Draco, he really hadn't pictured the person addressed to rest their forehead against their arms and say: "This *cannot* be my life."

"Look, Draco," Harry snapped. "Did you like it? Last night?"

Draco lifted his face from his arm, looking warily at Harry and then down again.

"Yes," he said curtly. "Yes, but - I don't want to mess everything up because you're confused and I'm weak and excessively hormonal. I don't want to - I don't want never to see you again because we did something sentimental when we were schoolboys and you can't imagine why you did it any more."

"I'll remember," Harry said, and when Draco looked up he offered him a weak smile. "It's all about the bone structure. I have a weakness for a really good bone structure."

Draco actually laughed, which on this day of all days seemed like a tremendous accomplishment.

"All right," he said after a minute. "Go in there and tell Weasley all about it."

Harry looked at him, and then stood up slowly. "Okay."

"Sit down! Don't you dare move, are you insane?"

Harry did sit down because Draco looked panicked, though he generally did not obey barked instructions because it would only encourage Draco in his apparent belief that he was Lord High Commander of the Universe.

"Do you have no sense of shame?" demanded Draco.

"I don't think you're someone to be ashamed of," he said quietly.

Draco pointed an accusing finger. "You are crazy. I *knew* it! And everything I said before still counts," he added. "Sentiment is a lie, and then there'd be your horrible realisation, and - and I can't. I mean, I don't want to."

He hadn't really expected anything else, and he'd been quite girly enough without blithering about like a woman scorned. He concentrated on the wall behind Draco's head and forced his voice to be normal.

"All right," he said. "It's your decision. I'm glad we're talking again, anyway, and that you're looking at me."

"Quite," replied Draco, who was not currently doing so. "So now that everything's settled and the world remains a cruel and hateful place, and we'd both like to kill things a lot, shall we get back to the others? I fear Weasley may pine without me."

Harry stood up, and offered Draco a hand to help him. Draco took it, and looked briefly less tired.

Draco needed people, and all he had for now was Harry. And it wouldn't be right to like that.

"Your shirt's a mess," Harry said, letting go and touching the corner of the shirt shoulder. "What did you do, wrestle with it? Crumple it in your hands until it begged for mercy and let you put it on?"

Draco looked lofty. "It was giving me cheek. So perish all the enemies of the house of Malfoy."

"That tie is meant to be tied, too."

"Oooh, your expertise in Muggle habits reduces me to quivering admiration, really, it does."

"I'm sorry my superior knowledge bothers you. I can't help being so learned."

Draco held open the door. "After you, oh omniscient hero," he said in a bored voice.

Harry felt a bit less like killing things.

\* \* \*

When they came back, they were almost smiling. Hermione shocked herself by giving them a quick once-over and deciding she'd know if there'd been any goings-on. Not to mention that she hoped Harry would have more decency with Ron and Sirius only a thin carriage wall away from cardiac arrest.

Still, it was annoying to see Harry looking calmer and happier because Malfoy had been a racist bastard and then they'd shouted at each other. It was frustrating and inexplicable.

"Forgive me for the unkind words, gentle lady," said Malfoy, and she was pretty sure her death glare was all that stopped him from bowing. He smirked at her instead.

"It's fine," she said unconvincingly.

"Did you hit him, Harry?" Sirius asked, leaning forward. "Or did you knee him first?"

"I didn't do anything to him," Harry answered. His voice sounded more relaxed, as well, and Hermione was grateful for the informative phrasing.

"Did he hit you?" Sirius asked. "The underhanded little weasel!"

Malfoy gave him a level look. "I killed him," he said pleasantly, as he and Harry settled themselves back in their seats. "Then I Transfigured my pocket handkerchief into Harry Potter, in order to escape repercussions and completely fool you all. D'you think my hanky will be any good at defeating evil?"

"The twit is trying to say that nobody hit anyone," Harry said tolerantly.

Sometimes Hermione thought it might be quite easy to be civil to Malfoy if only Harry had kept having wistful daydreams about Malfoy being eaten by the giant squid instead of disturbing her horribly by using that tone with the affection radiating from it. She was able to accept that Harry might be attracted - some people liked that sort of thing, Malfoy was blond and swaggering. She'd never quite seen all the fuss about Cho Chang, either. And Harry was naïve, and fancying someone meant things to him, and that would account for the moonstruck look. But when Malfoy did something or said something and Harry responded to it with warm recognition, was all lit up by the reminder that this was the person he'd, he, that this was - that person...

It made Hermione feel sick to her stomach, that was all. She and Ron had been enough for him once.

Malfoy, relaxing like a big pleased cat, got out a book from his bag and showed it to Harry.

"It's about vegetarian substitutes for blood sacrifice," he explained, managing the difficult feat of drawling enthusiastically with apparent ease. "I mean, I certainly think it lacks style, but this is a decadent age and we're running out of virgins, so innocent root vegetables are the next best thing. Besides, it's mainly technical, you'd be amazed at the arcane signatures that plants and people have. Sometimes they can be really alike."

"That's fascinating, Draco. I mean that," said Harry, straight-faced.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and snickered. He buried himself in his book - which actually did look interesting and if they were sharing a room Hermione might as well take advantage of it by picking up any stray books he left around - and Harry looked out the window.

That is, Harry looked out the window for a while, but it had been a long night for him. They all became quieter as Harry's breathing deepened, and then Sirius and Ron returned to their argument about who owed who money, Lupin returned to his book, and only Hermione was watching when Harry shifted in his sleep and his head ended up on Malfoy's shoulder.

Malfoy blinked down at him, face startled into a softer expression than Hermione'd ever seen on it before. Then he sank down a little in his seat, reached over with his other hand and took Harry's glasses off. He slipped them in his own pocket.

At that point he caught Hermione staring, gave her a chilling and filthy glare, rested his cheek against Harry's hair and returned to his book, face back to its normal cool half-sneer.

She had to corner Malfoy and talk this out as soon as humanly possible.

Once they got to their stop, Malfoy woke Harry by saying 'Boo' in his ear and passing over his glasses as he shifted, murmured and half-opened his eyes, then smiled. As soon as possible, Hermione vowed to herself again. If it was anyone else, she'd have said Malfoy was being sweet with Harry. It wasn't right.

After they were outside, looking around at the grimy, grey streets of one of the less attractive parts of Salisbury in the gathering evening, Hermione realised sharply that she'd been trying to use Harry's love life to distract herself from how very far away from home they were.

She wanted Hogwarts. Failing that, she wanted Mum and Dad.

She had Ron, holding her hand. She managed not to cry.

"I don't think we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," said Harry.

Malfoy gave him a mock-annoyed look. "We're not where? Whom are you addressing? You're so crazy, Harry Potter. Probably all that time in the cupboard did it to you, environment is so important for the young mind. Professor Lupin! He's Muggle-referencing at me. It's not kind, and

it's not fair."

Harry's elbow was touching the inside of Malfoy's. Hermione clung to Ron's hand, and looked at Lupin's tired face, and Sirius' restless black eyes, and knew these people were all she had left of her world.

It was pathetic, but she was so scared.

She was scared as they trooped into the bed and breakfast, and Lupin smiled with tired charm at the landlady and gave her a credit card, which Malfoy asked to touch.

"Pretty money card," he said at last. "May I have one of my own?"

Harry took it off him firmly. Then Malfoy amused himself by making disparaging comments about Salisbury.

"Come off it," Sirius growled at last. "Malfoy Manor is in Wiltshire too, I was there for the wedding. You're a bloody local."

"I have nothing to do with dirty Muggle urban areas," Malfoy said disdainfully.

Lupin told Malfoy off for saying the word Muggle, let Ron see his credit card and suggested that they might all like an early night.

"Yes, Granger and I wish to be alone," Malfoy said, regarding the homicidal expression on Ron's face with calm joy. "She cannot wait to revel in the untold carnal luxury of my skin against hers," he proceeded.

"You're right, I can hardly wait to slap your face," Hermione informed him briskly. "Now go inside and get changed first, and Harry, you go to your room. You're obviously shattered."

Harry complied amiably enough, wandering down the whitewashed corridor with its hard brown carpet and faint smell of medicinal cabbages. The others seemed tired enough to follow suit and go into their room. Ron paused to kiss her.

"I'll come in a bit later," he promised. "Bearing with Malfoy, you're a heroine! I'll make it up to you. I'll cook you dinner or, like -" he went red "- perform crazy sexual favours on request, or something."

Hermione kissed him softly back. "A good book's always welcome, for choice," she murmured.

"Thanks very much," said Ron, and hugged her hard before he left her. She stood in the cold little corridor and breathed. Eventually Malfoy came out and she gave a yelp of horror.

"Find a T-shirt, Malfoy!"

"Sleep in one of my shirts?" Malfoy inquired in a voice of ice. "I think not. I only submit to night attire because you are a lady. I'm not accustomed to it, and I probably shan't sleep. Then I will have circles under my eyes, and you will have nobody but yourself to blame for spoiling my radiant beauty."

"Oh God, shut up," Hermione said fervently, and went inside.

She'd worked out how Malfoy had done it. He had talked to Harry until Harry's brain was destroyed, and Harry was putty in his hands. He stole independent thought with his endless annoying chatter.

She chose blue pyjamas that buttoned up to the neck, tied her hair back severely, got into bed and pulled the covers to her chin, and then told Malfoy he could come in.

"Granger, you saucy vision of loveliness," Malfoy drawled, lounging in the doorway in order, Hermione presumed, to look louche and shirtless.

She knew plenty of nicer men who had good shoulders too.

"If you're going to bother me, Malfoy, you can sleep in the corridor," she informed him. "I could use a draught excluder."

He raised cool eyes to the cracks in the ceiling, and the worn-out spots in the brown carpet, and then the cheap white sheets of the bed.

"Anything that would make you more comfortable in this place, I feel it my duty as a gentleman to do."

"Well... good," said Hermione, who favoured the direct approach. "Good, because I want you to do something for me."

"You vixen," Malfoy said with an air of mock awe.

"You can stop fooling around, get into your own bed and talk to me."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "You're breaking my heart," he declared, and threw himself dramatically on the bed with one hand flung dramatically across his brow. Hermione laughed slightly, since it was pretty clear that was what Malfoy wanted, and he did look a little bit funny.

"I think it's time for us to talk."

"So talk, Granger," Malfoy said lazily.

"I want to talk about Harry."

Malfoy went very still. "What about him?"

Hermione wanted to catch Malfoy's eye, but he lay quiet under the sheet, lying back on his elbows and looking straight ahead. All Hermione could see was his taut unreadable profile.

"I care about him, that's what. Much that you'd know about that, of course."

"Indeed," said Malfoy distantly.

He wasn't looking at her and she thought she might've been unfair, and that made her angry enough to sit up in bed and snap at him.



"Malfoy, I just want to know what's going on! You say you're on our side, well, I think things are bad enough without you messing Harry around. I want to know what you're doing with him. I want to know what you're planning."

"Something dreadful," Malfoy responded, his tone still even.

"I wouldn't put it past you! He's been up and down since you two started this whole friendship thing. I need to know that you're not trying to hurt him. I need to know that you're really his friend!"

"I'm his friend, then!" Malfoy snapped, turning a poisonous glare on her and leaning forward.

"I'm his friend, or at least I'm *going* to be his friend again, after he gets these stupid ideas out of his head, and you can't stop me -"

At this inopportune moment, Ron walked into the room. Hermione had never been so very unhappy to see him.

He took her stare of reproach as a welcome, and came over and sat on her bed, putting an arm around her.

"Hey," he said. "I wanted to see how you were holding up in here with bloody Malfoy."

They'd been progressing nicely until Ron showed up, but Hermione shut her eyes and leaned in when he kissed her temple. She was so tired, and she felt so lonely. She should to be taking roll call right now.

He kissed the corner of her mouth and she sighed and snuggled in.

"Oh my God," Malfoy exclaimed. "Gryffindor mating rituals before my very eyes. Why *me*?"

"Oh, shut your trap, Malfoy," said Ron, and kissed her again. There was a sound of rustling sheets, but Hermione kept her eyes tight shut and luxuriated in this brief illusion of warmth and security. Then Malfoy's most unpleasant voice broke the quiet.

"I'm going to go sleep with Harry," he announced, and the door slammed.

Bastard!

\* \* \*

Harry lay in bed thinking about Draco.

Oh, what else was new? he thought in exasperation, turning on his side. He should be thinking about Voldemort, the danger they were all facing, or tomorrow. He was a bloody pathetic hero, letting the thoughts of Draco linger and flavour everything else.

What would Draco think about that, what would Draco say if he knew... or simply, how would it be if I had Draco with me through all this? With me, as mine.

That constant sick wanting. If this was love...

It was so bloody *stupid*!

It was so humiliating that his subconscious forced him, every night, to conjure up some image and hold onto it, trying to convince himself that it was Draco, Draco, Draco...

Draco slipped in his door.

Harry was so certain it was a dream he snatched up his glasses, and only seeing Draco through lenses and the smudge of his sweaty fingers did he believe.

Draco stood there, watching him. He was wearing only a black pair of pyjama bottoms and even as Harry's mind scrambled for explanations of his presence some part of him was being a deviant and cataloguing images.

The white swell of his shoulders, the smooth pale torso. The way the black material bit softly at his hip. Bare feet and, of course, an annoying air of assurance, as if this was completely normal.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Harry," he drawled, "but can I get into your bed?"

Harry's mouth was too dry to speak, to his everlasting shame. He simply made a 'go ahead' gesture.

He had that feeling of extreme sensitivity that one gets right after a hot bath. Every pore screamed out messages to him.

There was the draught of cool air when Draco lifted the sheet. There was the sinking of his bed beneath another weight, something which Harry had never felt before in his life and which was quite frankly marvellous. There was the heat of Draco's body, which seemed to be radiating at Harry across the bed in an indecent manner.

And there was how Draco looked lying next to him, his hair fluffed up just a little against the pillow. Harry felt suddenly and obscenely content.

"Weasley came into Granger's room," Draco explained simply, sliding further under the covers. "Whether it was for a snuggle or a shag, I didn't wait to find out. I don't need that kind of trauma."

Harry found a voice. It couldn't possibly be his, he didn't croak this alarmingly.

"It's okay."

The corner of Draco's mouth quirked slightly.

"My, my, Potter, if you get this excited about a little sleepover your head might explode if Ginny Weasley ever gives her all."

"Don't," Harry said sharply.

The small, scrunched-up face that Draco made now was sometimes indicative of regret. Harry had to combat the urge to roll over and kiss it.

"Sorry," said Draco, in his most insincere tones.

Draco liked to sound insincere when he was saying things he meant and did not want to say. Harry sighed. He understood Draco now, he thought. He could interpret most of those signs that had frustrated and confused and finally intrigued him. He knew Hermione didn't believe it, but he would've had to be blind not to notice that he was a right bastard half the time. And he loved him horribly, which pretty definitely made him a bastard as well.

"S'okay."

Draco's smile turned teasing.

"Well, good night, Harry. It'll be a long day tomorrow, so try not to take abandoned liberties with my person as I sleep."

"Good night, Draco," Harry replied dryly.

Draco rolled onto his side, his back to Harry, and appeared to settle down to slumber. If he thought this would help Harry's distraction, he was grievously mistaken. Harry lay looking at the contours of that back, the too-sharp definition of shoulder-blades and the straight line of his spine.

*Stop obsessing over a back, Harry Potter. This is becoming truly sad.*

He went to sleep instead.

\* \* \*

The next thing he saw was a crystal with lightning and screams inside it, and then a rush of blurred, confused images and sounds.

A high-pitched laugh he knew and hated.

Black robes swirling over flagstones, shadows and the flame of torches mingling overhead. The fall of a woman on stone, a woman screaming a name. The sick thump of someone's head against the stone.

Fear running cold in his veins or someone else's, a sense of panic, urgency but most of all disbelief. Someone wondering how could this possibly be true...

Red eyes in the darkness. Red eyes with the blood of a thousand lives mirrored in them, and then a gleam of moonlight on blond hair.

Who...?

*"Don't think that you won't be punished."*

A woman screaming in pain this time, horrible, unbearable pain... being totally unable to help her... only bearing witness and shouting silently, shouting because if they didn't stop the woman was going to...

"No!"

Harry sat up, chest heaving and slick with sweat under his pyjama top. The world was blurred around him and for a moment he thought he was still - there - wherever there was - with that woman...

Harry blinked.

He was in bed, Draco's hair glinting on the pillow beside him. He was... It had just been another dream about Voldemort, one of those...

Harry bit his lip hard, throwing his head back until his lip bled and his neck muscles screamed in pain.

Just another one of those dreams where he was forced to know that someone was suffering, and all he could do was know about it. He could never ever do anything to help, there were no clues, there was nothing but waking up with despair and shuddering breath and crippling fear. Now that Hogwarts was shut, he couldn't even record it in the Somnasieve. Everything was *pointless*!

Harry tried to get a grip, eased himself down on the bed with the smell of his own terror in his nostrils and that aching knot of frustration and despair in his chest. His eyes were so dry they burned.

As his head fell back against the pillow Draco's voice met his ear, thick with sleep.

"Harry...?"

Harry tried to push down the ache in his throat.

"It's all right. It was just - a bad dream."

He was cold and beginning to shake with it. That woman screaming... and he could do *nothing*.

"Mmm," Draco murmured, just the sound of someone going back to sleep. He had never really been awake anyway.

Which was when Harry realised he was trembling against Draco. He must have jumped across to him when he woke. He would have to move back.

With dreamy slowness, Draco's arms went around him.

Harry went very, very still. That inner cataloguing was going on in his mind. This to remember, and this, and this...

One arm going around Harry's shoulders, locked strong against his shoulderblades. The other lying on Harry's side, fingers curled on his ribs. The feel of Draco's sleep-warmed chest pushed against Harry's.

His cheek and the light tickle of his hair against Harry's face, the whisper of warmth that was his mouth by Harry's neck.

"Hmm," mumbled Draco, his lips moving against the skin of Harry's throat and making him shiver. "Shhh. It's okay."

Harry had never been held after a nightmare before, let alone held by someone he loved. His impulse was to try and get closer, to kiss and caress and keep, but he was terrified that Draco's sleep-blurred purpose of comfort could be changed. If Draco woke up any more...

Harry lay quiet for a moment, then put his arms carefully around Draco. Draco made a tiny sound, more like a small animal getting comfortable in his sleep than anything else. His skin was soft, and Harry traced a single stroke up his spine.

He could feel Draco's mouth curve against his throat.

"Harry," he said in a low voice. Harry could feel Draco's body relaxing against him even more. It was all liquid comfort here, curled up around him, and Harry's mind was fragmenting into well-being.

Why had nobody told him how nightmares could go away, with something as simple as this?

"I love you," Harry whispered, and this time it didn't seem so terrible, or so terrifying. Draco was already asleep. Harry kissed the side of his eye, pressed his face harder against Draco's. The pain melted away gently, leaving him loose and boneless and in spite of everything, almost happy.

# Chapter Twenty: The Summons

*You can't change the way I am  
I'll be the last to help you understand  
Try and love me if you can  
Are you strong enough to be my man?  
When I've shown you that I just don't care  
When I'm throwing punches at the air  
Are you man enough to understand?  
Are you man enough to be my man?*

Harry had not realised he was looking forward to waking up with Draco before he didn't. Before he even opened his eyes, all he could do was lie there and think about how it would have been if he hadn't woken up alone.

The look of skin so close to his eyes that it became pale background to tiny fair hairs, making a silver sheen against the nape of Draco's neck. Warmth and peace and a certain security in being so very together, in being able to measure out time with someone else's breath. He was beginning to have some creative ideas involving Draco's chest against his own and husky voices and hands against sleep-warmed skin when it occurred to him that having steamy fantasies with Draco in the room would be incredibly thick.

He opened his eyes hurriedly.

Draco came out of the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

He looked young and cheerful in the morning light, hair a gleaming mess, wearing grey suit trousers and a white shirt he was trying to button up one-handed. He gave Harry a brilliant smile around the toothbrush.

Harry felt the pang of disappointment in his chest ease. This whole scene was so - comfortable. Something he could get used to, far too easily.

Then he frowned. "Isn't that my toothbrush?"

"Yeff." Draco removed the toothbrush. "My mouth felt disgusting," he explained unrepentantly. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

There was a trace of toothpaste ornamenting his lower lip. Harry thought that his mouth looked anything but disgusting.

If he developed a toothpaste fetish, he would definitely be a deviant.

"Lupin left us both a new set of Muggle uniforms," Draco continued, gesturing to himself. "Apparently being on an educational trip with our teachers requires us being in our uniforms at all times, according to the cruel rules of the fearsome Muggle school from which we hail. I wanted to think up a false name for myself, but Lupin said there was no need." He looked distinctly sulky. "Spoilsport."

Harry propped himself up on his elbows, unable to stop smiling.

Draco made a face at him.

"Get a move on, Potter. I want my breakfast."

Harry yawned and stretched. "How come you're so chipper? I thought you always slept in late."

"It is late," Draco answered absently. "It's past eleven. You were sleeping like a log."

He picked up his tie and examined it doubtfully. Eventually, he put it around his neck. Then he held the two ends and waggled them vaguely about.

"Er," he said at last. "A little help here...?"

Harry wished he was less pathetic, and that he could help this constant smile. He got up and took the two ends of the tie from Draco.

Of course, all of this involved being close to Draco, which always had an unfortunate effect on Harry's ability to think. He tried to seem composed as he stepped in and felt that hollow scooped-out sensation in his throat, as the breath left him.

Draco smelled... well, mostly like toothpaste.

Harry tied the tie as efficiently as he could, and stepped back. He could function much better at a slight distance.

"Thanks," Draco said, in his most lordly manner. "Now come on, hurry up, I'm starving."

"I've got to shave first," Harry mumbled, heading for the bathroom as he rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

Draco followed him, which would have been a bit tricky if Harry had needed to use the toilet. Draco also perched on the sink and got in the way as Harry tried to shave. Harry really wished he minded, but that comfortable feeling remained.

"Hey," Draco said, peering at Harry's face in a critical manner. "You have some serious stubble. You lucky bastard."

If Draco kept looking at him, he was going to end up cutting his throat.

"Why's that?"

"Oh, I like the look." Draco looked meditative. "It's manly, and I am woefully unable to achieve it."

"I'm sorry I have so much more masculine appeal than you do."

Harry kept a straight face while Draco spluttered his indignation.

Later, when Harry was putting on his socks, he reflected on how pathetic he was. It wasn't as if any

hope had been offered. There had been nothing but a little sleepy comfort, a smile in the morning. Oh, but that sense of being safe and warm was pervading him, and logic wasn't destroying it.

If it hadn't been for... everything else, the furious need to do something and protect people instead of hiding away like a scared child, he might have been happy.

If it hadn't been for everything else.

\* \* \*

Hermione was at one with horror. What had happened last night?

They were all standing outside the hostel, discussing plans for the day. Harry and Malfoy were a little apart from them, forming what appeared to be an exclusive little sub-group. They were talking continuously, soft snatches appearing in the chinks of Sirius and Lupin's conversation. Hermione could not make out the words, only Malfoy's amused, animated drawl and the low pleased murmur of Harry's voice, still scratchy with sleep. Malfoy had his tie in a casual sideways knot that was at once practised and not at all Malfoy's style, and he was standing so close to Harry that his hair was touching Harry's forehead. Harry, who was rumpled and had not shaved properly, turned his face to Malfoy's whenever Malfoy shifted stance or either of them spoke. From some angles, it must have looked as if his slow smiles had already become slow kisses.

In a public place!

It was no better when they decided to walk up and down the nearest streets in order to find the nearest magical spot from which Lupin could Owl Dumbledore of their safe arrival. They walked side by side, Malfoy gesturing when he talked as if all his conversations had to be subdued versions of his little mimicries, and Harry's hand touching Malfoy's wrist whenever he let his hands fall.

"I think electricity is very funny," she heard Malfoy say. "They use it to make light and toast, you know."

Ron loudly forbidding anyone to say that Malfoy reminded them of Mr Weasley drowned out the happy hum of Harry's response.

"I know none of you wanted to do this," Lupin said as they walked, and Malfoy and Harry no longer looked happy. Nor did anyone else.

"That's right," Harry answered curtly.

"Since it is now a fait accompli, perhaps we can all take it as a rest before some - truly horrible things occur." Lupin's voice was serious. "A war is coming, and I know all of you will fight, but... you're young, and it's summer. A few weeks of safety can do you nothing but good. You should have a holiday, while you can still have something you want. Tell me what you all want to do."

"I want to go back," Malfoy snapped, both he and Harry still looking stern, their tense shoulders pushed against each other. Then Malfoy's eyes dropped from Lupin's, and he shrugged. "If I can't have that, I'd like to go see a shop with electric things in it. Even if I can't have a money card to buy things with."



"My father is a good man," Ron asserted vehemently.

Malfoy was looking at him as if he was crazy when Harry mentioned, "I have a credit card. Sirius got it for me: he said his family'd always had links with the Muggle government."

Sirius looked shifty under Lupin's accusing glare.

"We used to know some people - er, whom we bribed and bespelled to do our bidding," he muttered. "Look, I just thought, he could use it. The part of London his flat's in is mostly Muggle, he could use it for groceries and stuff -"

Malfoy looked speculative. "I'm sure it will come in very handy."

"What do you want me to buy you?" Harry asked, in the upsetting tones of one who had Malfoy's number and against all reason, liked it.

"Me? No, no, Harry, don't be shocking, I couldn't possibly be a kept man, my mother would have fits," Malfoy said in a distracted manner, putting his hand on the small of Harry's back. Hermione privately longed to knock it away, but Harry relaxed back into the touch and let Malfoy steer him into a shop. "But there's no harm having a look around," Malfoy's voice drifted back to them.

They made arrangements to eat in the café across the road. Lupin said he would find a magical place on his own, and he was also the one who went into the shop and told Harry and Malfoy where they were going. Sirius was already off to order food, Ron claimed that electronic equipment brought back traumatic childhood memories, and Hermione did not want to look at them again until she had figured out what was going on, and how on earth she could fix it.

\* \* \*

Draco kept it on his lap even when they were in the café. Harry had foreseen this from the minute he had stopped beside it in the shop, as if listening to some arcane call.

"And what do you call this?" he'd asked.

"An espresso machine," Harry had answered in fear.

"Espresso machine," Draco had repeated thoughtfully. "What does it do?"

"I'm warning you in advance, Draco, if you go into strong hysterics I will abandon you here."

Harry had told him what it did.

"You don't even like coffee very much, Harry," Ron pointed out in puzzled tones.

"I forbid you to say such terrible things about Harry," Draco instructed, running his hands lovingly over the box. There was a strange and terrible look in his eyes.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I like coffee all right."

"Well, but," Ron persisted, "If it's yours, and it's for your flat, why is Malfoy holding it and -"

touching it like that?"

Harry could hardly blame Ron for looking disturbed. Draco was cooing to the box now.

"I am keeping it safe for Harry. All safe and sound and full of sweet, sweet unexplored caffeinated potential."

Harry reached out and stilled one of Draco's stroking hands. "It'll be safe under the seat," he promised.

The summer-morning light was soaking through the café like butter through a crumpet, and Draco's eyes were wide and appealing. The back of his hand rested warm, unmoving under Harry's palm.

"Weasley might kick it," he pleaded. There was a dent on his lower lip, slightly to the left where his smiles and sneers always began, that was pleading: kiss me, kiss me, kiss me. Harry smiled resignedly, stretched and took the box out of Draco's hands, depositing it under his seat.

Draco brooded on his wrongs and his menu at the same time. "Weasley, your dark suspicions of me are quite correct. I do know all manner of revolting Dark Arts spells."

"Really?" asked Ron.

"Yes. I shall use them all on you if you let your oversized feet flail in the direction of the precious box."

It was hard to maintain hostility towards a man who was patently in love with an espresso machine. Even Sirius said: "Bet I know more Dark Arts spells," in a tone that was quite amiably competitive.

There was a radio in the café, and that attracted Draco's attention as well. He was pleased enough about it, and the espresso machine, that he was almost as relaxed as he might have been with Slytherins. His only trace of unease showed in the way he kept close to Harry, and it wasn't as if Harry minded.

They got plates of bacon and muffins and tea and Draco's cherished coffee, and Ron talked about keeping the plastic menu for his dad. Sirius helped himself to a lot of coffee, and Harry wondered if it might be a genetic thing. Even Hermione smiled when Draco progressed from tapping his fingers on the table to singing, in a small voice, into a spoon he was pretending was a magic microphone.

"It was the dungeons that did it," Harry said comfortably, while Draco sang quietly about how it had been so long since somebody whispered. "Full of Potions fumes. Very bad atmosphere. Turned his brain."

Ron snickered into his bacon.

"His brain wasn't that strong to begin with. The inbreeding, you see," Harry went on sympathetically.

"Hey," said Sirius.

"Shut up," Draco chimed in, and hit him on the shoulder with his spoon.

He let his hand rest there afterwards, wrist on the edge of Harry's shoulder, warm and close. He reached with his other hand for the end of Harry's croissant, and Harry stole a piece of toast in retaliation. Draco caught his eye and smiled permission, then relaxed against him further. It was a nice day, and they had slept in late, and it was wonderfully easy and pleasant to lean lazily and all murmur good-natured commonplaces between munching.

"Afterwards we can go see about renting a car," Draco announced. "Professor Lupin said."

Harry smiled at the sheer delight in Draco's tone. Draco smiled back at him, a secret gleaming smile that the coffee cup made private between them, and it struck Harry that there might be another reason for Draco staying close by.

A holiday while you can still have something you want.

The idea seemed full of real promise for a moment.

Then Lupin came in through the café door, his face drawn and grey. He had the Daily Prophet in his hand.

\* \* \*

Harry and Malfoy were still making a display of themselves when Professor Lupin came in. He went to stand beside Sirius, discreetly angling the paper towards him, which manoeuvre became less subtle as Sirius leaned in to read it and hissed between his teeth. Hermione frowned, not close enough to see, and then felt Ron go still beside her.

"What's -" Harry began on the other side of the table, but it was Malfoy the brat who reached over to take the paper.

Ron grabbed his wrist. "Malfoy, no," he said, and Hermione went cold at the sympathetic horror in his voice.

Malfoy looked pinched and spiteful suddenly in the bright light, mouth curling at the tone of Ron's voice. He shook off Ron's hold disdainfully and held his hand open, imperiously, for the paper.

"Let me talk to you outside, Draco," Lupin said in a quiet voice, looking at him as if he was a wounded child.

"I require neither your conversation nor your sympathy. I only want the paper," Malfoy returned sharply.

Lupin looked older every moment, but he nodded and gave Malfoy the paper. Malfoy held it without a tremor in his thin, grasping fingers, his face unmoved except for the narrowed eyes.

"I see," he said after a moment. "Excuse me," he added, and threw the paper down on the table as he rose.

"Draco, wait -" Harry said, grabbing the paper.

Malfoy paid no attention to him, and in a moment they saw him cross the road from the café

window. Cars screeched as he strode back towards their bed and breakfast.

"What does it say, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"I'm going after him," Harry said curtly.

None of them argued. Hermione had learned in first year that when Harry spoke like that, the best thing to do was get right out of the way. She looked up at the determined set of his mouth as he went and thought that perhaps, if Malfoy needed comfort, they should send someone else too.

First she snatched up the paper.

*Dark Mark over Malfoy Manor: Nobody left inside.*

*The discovery, early this morning, of the disappearance of Narcissa Malfoy and the students who had taken refuge in her home, has caused widespread dismay. "We must remember," said an influential member of the Ministry, "Mrs Malfoy was rumoured to be closely affiliated with You-Know-Who in her time, and most of these students belong to families who have been called into question... It is quite possible they fled to join him, to swell the ranks of his army before a decisive move against us."*

*"We utterly deny these allegations," stated Mrs Parkinson, mother of one of the missing girls. When asked why Pansy Parkinson did not return to her home after Hogwarts was closed, she declined further comment.*

*Whether this is a mass defection to You-Know-Who, or a kidnapping on the greatest scale yet seen in a private residence, this paper feels unable to say. There are, however, reasons to believe that some of those missing at least were abducted against their wills. Aurors at the scene report signs of a struggle, and there are grave suspicions that the Unforgivable Curses may have been used. Readers of this paper are urged to stay at home, and strengthen their wards!*

"Oh God," Hermione said. "Oh - God. Poor Malfoy. We have to go after him."

Sirius was saying something in a low dazed voice about broomstick rides with his cousin when they were children. Hermione thought he had gone quite mad before she realised that Mrs Malfoy was his cousin.

She put her hand on his arm.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "I'm so terribly sorry - we should all go after Malfoy."

"I'll get his coffee machine," Ron said eagerly. "He'll want that looked after. I can do that: my dad taught me all about eckeltricity."

"Do you think," Lupin said, still standing and looking as old as Dumbledore, "that Draco will appreciate a whole bevy of sympathisers? Particularly ones who have, in the past, exhibited no particular liking for him? I don't know him as well as I might wish, but I know the boy is proud. He would see it as charity, and he would make himself extremely unpleasant."

"Professor Lupin," Hermione said desperately, "you don't understand. Harry is useless at this sort of thing, he's crazy - no, I don't mean that, I mean - he was brought up in a cupboard, he's not sure what to do with people! Malfoy will need someone who knows what to say."

She'd seen Harry try to comfort people - she'd been the person Harry was trying to comfort. She didn't think Malfoy needed someone fumbling for words right now.

She was ready to go, but Lupin's gaze held her in place.

"Draco is not very emotionally mature himself," he said gently. "I doubt he'd know what to do with a normal response, but I think they might understand each other. More than that, Draco has always been entirely ruled by his emotions -"

Surprise at hearing nasty Malfoy described like that must have been written all over Hermione's face, because Lupin nodded to her.

"He listened to his father and Professor Snape, and I think - I think he might listen to Harry."

Hermione still wanted to go, to fix things, to do something instead of sitting there and thinking that shutting down Hogwarts had not stopped the disappearances for a day. She felt cold in the warm sunlight streaming through the window, and only distantly heard the voices of Ron and Sirius, arguing over who would take best care of the espresso machine. Lupin reached over and touched her hand.

"Have a little faith in him, Hermione," he said. "We can go see if they are trying to kill each other soon."

\* \* \*

Harry caught up with Draco at the door of the bed and breakfast, grabbing him by the elbow and turning him around. Draco looked at him as if he could not imagine a more loathsome sight than Harry.

"Come running after me again?" he snapped. "Should have known it."

Harry kept quiet and kept hold of Draco's arm, pulling him through the door and then into the dingy little sitting room where residents could go while their rooms were put in order. By then he had fought down the urge to snap back, and deliberately looked away from Draco's expression, which invited not so much sympathy as immediate offence.

"Draco, I'm so sorry," he said, and felt suddenly sick with panic. There was nothing he could say that would make this better, and he should be able to do something - for Draco, he should be a support.

"Harry, go to hell! It's all over. Do you have any idea what it's like?"

"Well -" Harry said.

"You don't have any idea!" Draco snarled. "To be a failure? I tried and I tried, I've worked so hard,

you saved the day over and over again, you always won, and I couldn't even keep them safe!"

"You're not a failure," Harry told him in a heated voice.

Draco's mouth twisted. "You call this a success, I suppose? My mother - my mother - you," he demanded abruptly. "You had bad dreams last night. Was she in them?"

Harry stopped and breathed in. He had been trying not to think of it, the swirl of blond hair and the scream that cut through the night. Ever since he had seen that paper, he'd been trying not to think of a day in Hogsmeade, and Narcissa Malfoy on the pier. He'd almost - he hadn't understood her, but he thought he had liked her.

Draco's face was the same ugly demand it had been when he held out his hand for the paper.

"Don't be kind to me," he said.

"Yes," Harry snapped. "Yes, she was there. I didn't know it was her at the time, but I think it must have been. There were screams, and I think - I think she was being tortured. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

Draco stood still in the centre of the dull little room, in the midst of Muggle mundanity where Harry had never been able to picture him. His skin and hair looked washed out under the fluorescent lights, and his eyes were narrowed down further to cruel slits.

"Don't worry about what I want," he said. "At least I had parents."

"Draco, for God's sake -"

"My mother's going to be fine, you must have read the paper. She's known to be connected with the Dark Lord. She's not like one of your sainted heroes, Dumbledore's little pets, the ones who bleated the party line and -"

"Shut up about my Mum and Dad!"

"- died without ever having a thought of their own because they were pathetic and stupid!"

Harry punched him.

Draco reeled back, blood bright at the corner of his mouth, and while Harry was trying to piece together, through his anger, the thought - what have I done? - he smiled.

"Oh," he said. "I'm so glad that you did that."

He was still bent from the shock of the blow, and he simply threw himself at Harry, scoring a savage elbow in his stomach as they tumbled down to the floor. Harry sucked in a sick, shocked breath and while he was doing so Draco hit him in the face.

He registered a moment to be thankful that he had lost his glasses when Draco tackled him, and then he punched Draco in the stomach and tried to shove him off.

"I knew this would happen," Draco snarled, his voice thick with blood. "I knew, I knew this was going to happen, I knew I was going to fail, I knew they'd all be taken, and now I'm just left with you, all I have left is you, and you're going to die!"

"I'm not going to die," Harry growled, grabbing a handful of Draco's shirt and shoving his fist up hard into Draco's ribs, trying to force him up.

Draco stayed on his chest, a weight that was all vicious elbows and grasping hands.

"Yes, you are," he gasped furiously. "Yes, you are, you stupid, stupid idiot, of course you are. You have to stop believing in all of that, in stories, in lies. The side with the most weapons and the most numbers is going to win, and there are no heroes. Nobody's been able to stand against him, we're going to lose, and you're crazy and you're going to die!"

"I'm not afraid."

"I am!" Draco shouted. "I should have - I did know this would happen. They're all gone, you blind, stupid fool, and you're going to die!"

He thumped the top of Harry's breastbone hard, leaving Harry dizzy from lack of breath, and Harry swung up wildly and heard rather than felt his fist connect with Draco's nose. Draco rocked back briefly, and Harry seized the moment to lever himself into a position where he could sit up, holding the front of Draco's shirt to hold him in place.

Draco's gaze wavered, uncertainty breaking up the pain that always made his face look hateful.

Harry suddenly realised why nobody had approached him while he was depressed. It was awful, rough, too much like fury and too unlike the moderated vent of Hermione's crying. Draco had just lost his mother and they'd been hitting each other, what was the matter with him? He didn't know what to say.

He had always been paralysed whenever someone cried, though, and he didn't feel paralysed in the slightest now. The blood was pounding in his veins, he was staring up at Draco's face, and Draco's heart was hammering insistently under his closed fist. Draco had approached him, after all; Draco had understood.

"Draco," he said softly. "I'm not going to die."

He pulled Draco in hard, and kissed him. Draco made a small desperate sound and took Harry's face in his hands, tilting his face up to his own, and kissed him hungrily back. Harry could taste the blood at the corner of Draco's mouth, the cut opening again as Draco opened his mouth, and he was dimly concerned somewhere at the back of his mind. Not concerned enough to stop, though, not concerned enough even to pause when he was biting and licking at Draco's lips, and Draco was kissing him fiercely back. They only just retained enough presence of mind to be careful of Draco's nose, and only parted because they had been panting for air before the kiss and Harry thought his lungs might explode. Harry didn't move and wouldn't let go even when he was gasping for breath, and Draco only moved up to Harry's swelling cheekbone. He licked that, breath harsh against Harry's skin, and the lick burned, it felt like a slow tease, Harry wanted it to go on and had to pull Draco's mouth back down to his at once.

When they had to pause for breath again, one of Harry's hands was inside the collar of Draco's shirt. Draco's chest was rising and falling, his skin was warm, and his breath was a steady rhythm against Harry's cheek. They were both alive, they were both safe for now, even if the brush of Draco's kiss-close mouth held him caught in a continuous wildly nervous moment.

"It's okay," Harry lied in a low voice. "It's okay, it's..."

He barely moved and he was able to kiss the soft, trembling corner of Draco's mouth. He turned his face into one of Draco's hands, bent his head a fraction and bit gently into Draco's wrist. Draco's moan was a long helpless sound.

Harry lost it completely and grasped Draco's hair in one hand, pulling his head back for another kiss and scrambling to get just a little bit closer, to have just a little bit more of him. Draco slid his arm around Harry's neck and pulled him in closer, teeth sliding over Harry's lower lip, and Draco's back was against the dingy sofa and Harry had his hand at the buttons of Draco's shirt, almost had it open and had Draco's mouth under his and Draco's skin under his hands, and...

Lupin opened the door, stood frozen for an instant, and then said: "I'm terribly sorry, I didn't know -" and exited precipitately.

They heard his voice outside assuring Sirius that he didn't think the boys needed any help. Harry let go of Draco's shirt.

Draco leaned his forehead against Harry's and whispered: "I am so embarrassed."

"Thanks very much," Harry said, and felt himself go somehow even redder.

"I didn't mean that," Draco responded, and Harry was relieved to hear him manage something like a drawl. "It's just - caught by a teacher. It's shameful. Slytherins are supposed to be sneakier than this."

Harry puffed out a cautious laughing breath against Draco's cheek, and when Draco removed his arm from round Harry's neck he did it slowly, and only moved back far enough to get a good look at his face.

Harry looked in return. Draco's nose was swelling and his lip was still bleeding, and Harry felt a pang of guilt before he realised that one of his own eyes was sealing shut.

"How many medical spells do you know?" he asked.

"Plenty," Draco said briskly. "I spent my entire childhood dashing about the countryside on my broom, you know. After an incident with a helicopter - an incident in which I was heroic, dashing and unafraid, despite the fact the thing was quite clearly trying to murder me - my... mother made me learn all sorts of spells in case I ended up stranded miles from home with a broken leg."

He leaned into Harry as he extracted his wand from his back pocket. Harry ignored the impulse to turn his face into Draco's neck and got out his own wand.

The swelling on his cheek removed, he placed the wand gently on Draco's swollen mouth, and



whispered a spell. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you even dare say anything filthy, Draco Malfoy," Harry commanded. "If Lupin's listening at the door, I'll die of embarrassment."

"Would I?"

"You'd better not, or I'm not fixing your nose."

Draco pursed his healed lips and looked considering. "Maybe you should leave that for an expert."

"So I can look like I came in to beat you up. Thanks," Harry said dryly.

"Well... just be careful to spell it straight. I'm particularly fond of my nose."

"I don't see why," Harry said, grinning. "It's not at all your best feature." He grinned wider as Draco spluttered with protest. "I've heard it called pointy," he went on affectionately. "Very pointy. Like a rat's, you might say."

"I hate you, Harry Potter," Draco said with conviction. "I've always hated you, and I hate you more every day."

Once his nose was fixed, he grabbed on to Harry's wand hand, fingers closing tight around the wrist.

"I don't want to see them," he said in a tight voice. "I don't want to see any of them."

Harry wanted to hold him back, but wasn't sure if it was allowed. "You don't have to. We'll stay here."

"I don't want them to know I don't want to see them!" Draco snapped, as if it should have been obvious. "I'm not scared. I'm going."

"I'll stay with you," Harry said, and Draco dropped his eyes and nodded, getting to his feet and letting go as he rose. He made for the door.

"Besides, I don't want Professor Lupin thinking shocking things about me," he said over his shoulder. "He might talk, and then my reputation would be compromised."

Panic set in, and Draco turned at Harry's silence.

"Um," said Harry at last. "I don't know... I don't want... I didn't, um, take advantage of you or anything, did I?"

The fluorescent lights were still glaring, the sofa and carpets still shabby and grey, and Draco still very white. Harry thought he would never forget the way Draco looked at him, for that torn tender moment.

"No, you didn't." He paused, one hand on the doorknob and the other behind him, touching Harry's sleeve. He smiled. "Pity," he added lightly.

They went out, and Harry saw the others' faces, framed over the taut line of Draco's shoulder and full of pity.

Draco squared his shoulders. "How will this incident affect the people on the field? It can't be good for morale."

\* \* \*

They talked strategy, and nothing but strategy, for hours. It reminded Hermione of those nights in Malfoy's bedroom, being a group of schoolchildren trying to plan away everything. She had almost liked him then.

He was very different now. He kept talking, in a hard, practical way, very matter-of-fact and as unlike Malfoy's usual swagger as he could have been. Hermione kept faltering when she could have replied, but Harry backed Malfoy up. He offered opinions as he always did, voice diffident and sure at once, and after he spoke Malfoy seemed to gain heart and go on. Malfoy never looked at him, though. They never even touched, not gently, so Hermione might be guessing wrong.

They reached for a piece of paper at the same time and knocked wrists hard. They kept knocking elbows and wincing: it was obviously real, it obviously hurt.

Once Harry said: "It might help... get these parents on our side. These are their children, and they've been taken. It could make anyone reconsider their loyalties."

"Even Slytherins," Malfoy murmured. "And you don't think any of them went willingly?"

Harry met Malfoy's eyes steadily. "No," he said. "No, I don't think they would."

Malfoy smiled a thin smile, and leaned back into Harry so they hit shoulders hard.

It was a stupid idea. Malfoy at least had surely been close to someone before, at some time. They couldn't both be that tense and awkward and desperate. It was stupid to think that the only way they knew to get close was by hurting each other.

At various points through the day, Sirius and Lupin went for sandwiches. The cartons of juice and plastic straws puzzled Ron badly, and when Hermione glanced over she saw Harry had taken the carton off Malfoy before he could even try.

"I would've figured it out eventually," Malfoy claimed loftily.

The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. "Of course. You're so well-versed in Muggle culture."

"I'm fairly knowledgeable, yes."

"Especially about ties," Harry remarked. Only Hermione saw the protective fierceness of the look he gave Malfoy, as Malfoy bowed his head and muttered darkly about Harry's clothing. Malfoy's mother could be dead, and they were teasing each other and hurting each other. It couldn't mean - even these boys couldn't be this stupid.

They sat around all day, discussing tactics and trying to predict the future. Hermione wanted to say

something, or wanted Malfoy to be different so she could provide a comforting touch. She wanted something normal, but Malfoy seemed to want it this way.

When Harry said he was tired, Malfoy said he was too. They got up and Hermione saw them exchange a tired smile, as if Malfoy had succeeded in something. As if they understood each other.

Hermione didn't understand. She was about to ask where Malfoy was planning to sleep, when Lupin looked over at her and gave a tiny shake of his head.

Harry and Malfoy went into Harry's bedroom together.

\* \* \*

Harry woke the next morning, and did find Draco beside him.

Last night in the dark, Draco had been able to reach out, put a tenacious arm around him and say "Not a word, Harry," menacingly into the back of his neck, but that had been last night, and they had both been tired enough from pretending to be fine that they had gone to sleep almost immediately.

It was bright morning now, and Draco was curled up on the other side of the bed, clearly not used to being close to someone else. Harry had not the faintest idea what to do.

He didn't know what to do with someone in his bed. He didn't know any of the comforting, proper things to say to someone who had just been bereaved, and the worried lines between Draco's eyebrows as he slept didn't make him feel kind. He wanted to go kill Voldemort, and then come back and tell Draco. That might make him feel better.

He was useless at this kind of thing. It was pointless to just lie there and feel angry and watch Draco sleep with that miserable look on his face.

Harry reached out and touched his face, screwed-up with anxious sleep as it was. It was a stupid impulse, and he was clumsy enough about it to wake Draco instantly.

They hadn't even shut the curtains last night. The room was filled with uncompromising sunlight, tearing shadows from every corner, making every white crease of the sheets glare. Draco did not even lift his head from the pillow, just stared up with wide grey eyes.

He said coolly, "Why is it that you never try to take what you want?"

Harry didn't know what to do with that. So he answered softly, "Shut up, Draco. I am."

He still felt self-conscious, in a bed, in bright daylight, with Draco traumatised or something, but he wasn't going to back down. He wasn't going to take anything back.

He felt like he should be careful.

He looked back at Draco, and brushed his hand over the line of his jaw, his cheekbones, his forehead. The worry lines softened and disappeared under his hand, and that seemed - encouraging, so he didn't stop. He stroked the side of Draco's face, and it wasn't particularly soft or anything, it

was only skin, but it was Draco's skin, and Draco was allowing this, his indecipherable gaze steadily fixed on Harry. He brushed the hair from Draco's eyes, and that was soft.

Draco reached out silently, clasped a hand at the back of Harry's neck, and drew him down. Harry's breathing came quick and hesitant as their mouths touched once, briefly, and then again more surely.

The light wasn't so bad, really. Seeing everything seemed like a really good idea as Draco let out a long sigh and let his eyes fall almost closed. His lashes were a silvery haze when he was this close, and he opened his mouth under Harry's, and stretched out. Harry hovered over him for another uncertain moment, and then somewhere in the long kiss he ended up with Draco pressed against him.

Light pooled like water in the shallow curves of Draco's collarbones as he rubbed his face against Draco's neck. He opened his mouth against it, tasted smooth skin and salt, and felt the shift of Draco's muscles as he moved under him.

Draco's hand on his upper arm drew him back up a little, back to Draco's mouth and another long, slow kiss. It was warm and almost dreamy, but Harry was still shivering, and he could feel the hitch in Draco's chest as he breathed. Heart and imagination were both racing, were tripping over themselves, and he could not stop touching him.

He touched very, very lightly, still testing to see if he was allowed and not quite believing that he could be. He ran the back of his fingers against the curve of Draco's throat, and over his warm trembling chest. He pressed his knuckles against Draco's ribs. Draco's hands stroked over the muscles of his back, slowly, hesitating like Harry was but never stopping. The kiss was an offering, stretched out warm as Draco's body, a promise quivering in the air.

When Harry opened his eyes Draco was looking back at him, so close their eyelashes tangled together. Their lips brushed and pressed against each other, and as they looked Draco stroked along Harry's ribs too, a light touch that sent shivers chasing after each other down his skin. Draco drew his fingers down to rest on the hollow of Harry's hipbone.

He kept looking at Harry. It was almost a question.

Harry closed his mouth over Draco's again, felt Draco's body rising under his, felt the inside of his lip and the edge of his teeth slide against Harry's tongue. Draco's fingers slipped an inch under Harry's waistband, and Harry's breathing went desperately shallow. There was a knock on the door.

"Harry? Draco? Are you up?" asked Lupin.

Draco removed his hand hastily and Harry scrambled off him, feeling all the blood come back up to flood his face. He heard Draco give a very different and exasperated sigh behind him.

"This is getting beyond a joke," Draco said crossly. "Er - come in, Professor Lupin!"

Harry crawled back to sit against the headboard, hoping that Lupin would attribute the slightly dazed look to sleepiness. He did his best to look casual and newly woken, and as he was crawling back his hand brushed Draco's and Draco glanced at him, warm as the accidental touch.

Lupin came in with a paper clenched in his fist. Any emotion but fear drained away from Harry's chest, and left him cold, waiting to hear the worst.

He heard it.

"This is an emergency Owl from Dumbledore," Lupin said bleakly. "The plan has totally failed. He's recalling us to Hogwarts - and, as far as he knows, we are the only group left."

# Chapter Twenty-One: The Spy at Hogwarts

*It's always darkest in the light  
Hold on so tight your fists turn white  
And your soul may be blown wide open...*

The train journey back was almost exactly like the one to Surrey. They were all tense and miserable, only more so. Ron kept trying to put his arm around Hermione, but she was hunched and twitching away and he flinched back every time. Lupin and Sirius looked grey. They were the only ones left. Dumbledore had sent them away to get picked off piecemeal, and they all knew he hadn't meant it to happen but it had, and Harry had known they shouldn't do it! He had promised Natalie that he was going to kill Voldemort and that there was no reason to be scared.

He was going to kill *someone*. He was sick to the teeth of being angry and not doing anything about it. As soon as they were back they could all sit down and make a plan. They could talk about what the Aurors were doing, they could all join the Aurors. He could finally do something.

They could get them all back. They would.

Draco was drumming his fingers on the window. Harry thought he would be cheered up if he was irritating someone, but nobody had noticed. He glanced over and Draco nodded.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," Draco announced. "Because I require stretchy legs."

"Yeah, me too," Harry said.

He got up and followed Draco into the corridor. Draco started to tap against the window there, too.

"Stop it," Harry said, mostly to make him happy.

"Don't humour me, Potter," Draco returned. He gave him a half smile all the same, stopped tapping, and leaned against the window instead. "So," he said. "Dumbledore sent off Owls and got no responses, and he thinks everyone's been taken. Not the spy, though. Obviously, they turned in everyone they were with and went underground, and we will never know who it was. Unless..."

"Draco, *stop*," Harry said violently.

It had to have been that way. Someone in one of the groups had turned them all in. Ginny might have seen the face of her betrayer and it must be horrible, to see a friend you trusted turn into the spy in the night...

"Unless it was one of us," Draco continued remorselessly. "Don't you find it a little strange that we are the last ones? Nobody in the Dark Lord's gang said wait a second, hang on, who got that speccy boy - name's on the tip of my tongue -"

"Draco, shut up. None of us did it. Lupin didn't do it, Sirius didn't do it, Ron and Hermione certainly didn't do it and you -"

After all this time, after everything he'd said, there was still a tension about Draco's shoulders. Harry took hold of one, hard, and shook him.

"Draco," he said. "You didn't do it either."

"Who's talking about me?" Draco asked. "It's clearly you. It's always the one you least suspect."

"Draco, shut up." He took hold of the other shoulder and shook them both. Draco and he exchanged exhausted smiles.

"You've been plotting it since first year, it's obvious," Draco continued. "Behind those round glasses works the mind of an evil genius." He took them off and through the sudden blur Harry thought he saw him peer exaggeratedly. "Yes, I see it now," he concluded.

Harry leaned in and then Draco's face was clear, much closer than he'd planned. Draco blinked once, slowly, and when Harry let one hand fall uncertainly from Draco's shoulders Draco caught it. They stood, Draco leaning against the glass and Harry leaning against Draco, and Harry realised they were breathing in time when they were both caught on a shuddering exhale.

"Definitely evil," Draco murmured.

Harry was not sure how much weight attached to his argument when he had Draco pressed up against the glass, but he thought he should try.

"Look, I don't want to - at a time like this, I know you're confused -"

Harry was confused, furious and restless and lost because Draco was so close. Draco's breath was coming fast against his cheek, and he felt like his heartstrings were doubled up, tangled in his chest. He wanted to push Draco up harder against the glass and do - something, anything, then go out and kill something, fix something, and come back to Draco and rest.

"You're the one who's confused," Draco snapped at him. "Do you remember what we were talking about last time on the train - about us - about what you wanted?"

Harry's fingers were locked over the back of Draco's hand, pressed against the slick cold glass of the window. He looked at Draco, who looked sullen and awkward, and he thought of all the things in the world worth killing to protect, worth dying for. The grey shape of Hogwarts looming in the distance like home. Sirius doing his best and failing, Hermione looking up from a book and smiling at him, Ron at eleven years old with a grubby nose.

"Yeah," he said.

"Chances are good we're going to die soon," Draco told him, thoughtfully. "Even I can't let you down in the amount of time we have -"

"Just because you think we're going to die - you know you don't have to do anything you -"

"Harry, shut up!"

Harry stared at his sharp, wilful face, and thought of all the things worth killing for in the world.

And this, he thought. And you.

"I *know* I don't have to," said Draco. "I -"

He reached out with the hand that still held Harry's glasses hooked over two fingers, and Harry felt the scrape of the glasses against the back of his neck as Draco kissed him. The kiss was forceful even if Draco was shaking.

Restraint completely failed Harry and he moved in, pushed Draco harder up against the wall, felt Draco's mouth slide open hot under his own as their locked hands held fast against the glass. He held Draco pinned against the window with the other hand, felt Draco pull his hair as they kissed.

Draco moved, struggling against being pinned, and Harry might have thought he actually wanted to get away except for the deep, ragged gasps that were Draco's breaths and the fingers tightly tangled in Harry's hair.

Harry tried to push in closer, rubbed helplessly against Draco's body as Draco writhed and trembled against the glass and sank his teeth into Harry's lower lip.

"Oh, honestly," said Hermione.

Harry spun around and felt himself go scarlet under her gaze.

"Er, Hermione. Look. Let me explain," he said, and then looked over at Draco to make sure he knew Harry wasn't going to lie. Draco was breathing hard and looked a bit amused.

"Don't bother," Hermione said. She looked tired. "This isn't the time and besides, I've known for months. If you hurt him, Malfoy, I swear to God I'll kill you."

"It hasn't been going on for months," Harry protested, outraged. "And I don't need you to look after me, either."

Hermione folded her arms. "Oh, really? We're the only group left, Harry, doesn't it strike you as a bit suspicious -"

"We're the only group left, Hermione, so doesn't it strike you as a bit counterproductive to start hurling accusations at each other?" Harry snapped.

"And then there's the possibility it's all a trap," Draco said.

Hermione glanced at Draco, and then said in a grudging voice: "What do you mean?"

"Dumbledore's an important man. You think documents in his handwriting aren't easily accessible to the entire wizarding world? I could copy his writing. That Owl could be a fake, and we could be walking right into a trap."

Hermione and Draco both looked very grave, but something about the thought made Harry smile.

Let them try. He wanted the chance to do something.



"Could be," he conceded. "But we still have to walk into it, just in case it's not. So - how're everyone's Unforgivables?"

Hermione had gestured that they should all go back inside, but she stopped with her hand on the door when Harry said that.

"Harry, besides anything else - they don't always work. You have to really mean -"

"Then I suggest we do," said Harry. "After you."

Hermione went in. Harry paused before he followed her. "Before," he said, and stopped. "Did you mean that? That you'd be - that you'd *want* to be -"

Draco looked at him almost defiantly, and then kept looking for a moment. A slow, hesitant smile crept over his face. "I did."

Harry realised they were still holding hands, and he tightened his grip. "Okay," he said. "Good."

They went into the carriage and Sirius grimly volunteered to be put under the Imperius curse. The train journey back was almost exactly like the one there.

But not quite.

\* \* \*

Platform 9¾ was a still, empty stretch of concrete walkways and rail. No gleaming red Hogwarts Express could be seen, and none would come, no matter how long they waited. Sirius and Lupin broke efficiently into the store-room where magical engineers kept brooms in case they needed to fly to a place where there was a malfunction and no Apparating possible.

A little of the seething tension within Harry was relieved by the pressure of a broom handle against his palm. A little more was relieved by the thoughtful smile that appeared at the corner of Draco's mouth.

"Follow my lead," he said softly. "And try not to fall off."

"I'm worried, Draco," Harry returned, leaning in and not kissing him, but filled with the consciousness that he could. "I could end up so far ahead I won't even see you fall."

Draco's mouth twisted with appreciation of the challenge, and Harry kicked off and into the wind. There was nothing in the sky but the gleam at the edge of his eyesight that was Draco catching up with him. Draco shouted something Harry could not hear and Harry almost laughed, the knot in his chest eased for a few moments.

As they approached Hogwarts, even that relief was gone, and he was grounded with all his fury and fear before the school doors.

\* \* \*

Harry had never seen Hogwarts deserted before, but now it stood black against the dimming sky.

There were no owls flying to the Owlery and no lights shining in any window and the familiar shape of towers and slanted roofs seemed suddenly sinister, far too quiet, like the still shell of someone you loved.

They stood in a small, close group outside the door, quivering as if they might fly apart at any moment. Harry felt uncertainty in the push of Ron's shoulder against him, and the press of Draco's elbow on the other side. Now they were here, they all wanted to leave. He remembered Draco's words about this being a trap, and he remembered that McGonagall's murderer was in there, and he could lose them all.

They had lost enough people.

"What would you all think," he said, "if I went in first and - sort of had a look around?"

"Harry, no way," Hermione exclaimed.

"No, I'll do that," Sirius put in quickly.

"Do you have a moral objection to thinking up a plan?" Draco asked. There was a taut sound to his voice that the others did not have, and he was slightly drawn when Harry looked around. Harry recalled that Draco had a lot less experience with life-threatening situations than the rest of them, and - for just a moment - recalled a first year in the Forbidden Forest uttering trembling complaints. He pushed his shoulder, solid and reassuring, against Draco's.

"Any brilliant ideas, Malfoy?" Ron asked, and it was a measure of his desperation that he only sounded a bit sarcastic.

"Unusually, no."

Sirius' black brows drew sharply together. "Harry's right, someone should go in. I'll do it, I want to do it -"

"Sirius -"

"I think Harry's plan has merit," Lupin said slowly.

Everyone, including Harry, stared at him.

He went on. "I'm sure it's occurred to some of you that this is a trap. If it is, there's no sense all of us walking into it. One person can go in, and if they don't come out, Sirius can get in contact with the Order of the Phoenix - or what's left of it." He paused, and added: "Of course, I should be the one to go in."

"It was my idea!" said Harry.

"I cannot allow anyone else to go in!" Lupin returned, and it was the first sharp note Harry had heard in his voice for years. "It's right for me to be the one, at least I've lived. I wasn't trapped in Azkaban for twelve years, and I'm not a child just beginning on adult life -"

"I'm not a child -" Harry argued.

Lupin's face looked greyer and more tired than ever in the gathering twilight. "You're still a student, and you are my responsibility. I will not let anyone else go in there. I am going in."

"Let me go with you."

Harry saw the matching expressions of astonishment on the faces of Sirius, Ron and Hermione before he looked at Draco. Draco himself bit his lip, and met their startled eyes defiantly.

"Let me go with you," he repeated, more quietly. "I won't be mis-"

Lupin looked just as unsurprised as Harry was. "Don't be ridiculous, Draco," he said. "Of course you would be. And of course I won't allow anything of the kind. I am going in by myself."

He stopped, not uncertainly but as if waiting to answer more argument. Harry looked at him helplessly.

Lupin nodded, as he used to when all business was settled at a meeting of the Young Order of the Phoenix.

"Give me half an hour, and then get away as fast as you can," he said, with that same air of concluding everything. He walked up to the large doors of Hogwarts that Harry had rushed through a thousand times, and pushed it open. Then he turned around for the last time. "It's been an honour to know all of you," he said, and disappeared into the darkness.

The door shut behind him.

\* \* \*

Draco had cursed after the door closed, and after that nobody spoke for some time. Sirius was engaged in what seemed to be a staring contest with the door through which his last friend had disappeared, and Ron was engaged in a battle not to let anyone see what everyone had already noticed, that his eyes were full of tears.

Harry sat down before the door of Hogwarts with his hands locked around his knees, trying not to punch anything. He gave up after fifteen minutes and punched the stone wall. He hit the wall hard and felt his skin break against the stone, the hot bite of blood like getting a little of his anger out. Draco knelt beside him and took his hand, pulling it away from the wall.

"Don't do that," he said. His voice was distant, and his face looked cold.

"Why the hell not?" Harry asked roughly. "I might be in too much danger from this stupid wall?"

Draco's attention was apparently caught by Harry's tone, and when he looked properly at Harry his eyes warmed. "Let me rephrase," he said in his most condescending manner. "Don't do that, *you idiot*, because you might need your wand hand."

His fingers were biting into Harry's wrist and he was the most unsympathetic person in the world. Harry was aware, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he was ridiculously glad Draco was here.

He couldn't quite reach that feeling now. All he could think about was Lupin going through that

door in his place. He could have borne anything but this, he thought, anything but being kept safe.

"You're the idiot," he said, his voice rough. "I would never have let you go in there without me."

Draco bowed his head with a small sound. "I'd like to see you try and stop me," he said, almost tenderly.

Hermione had her arms tight around herself, as if clutching herself together. Her mouth was shaping spells but she tried to smile around them when Ron glanced at her. Sirius never looked away from the door.

Draco kept his head down with his usual dread of showing the emotions he always betrayed. Harry looked around at all of them and wished he could say something appropriate like Lupin had - but what he really wanted was to do something.

Being the person he was, in the world they lived in, he'd say *I love you* by killing anything that tried to touch any of them.

He was just thinking that when, somewhere inside the castle, Lupin screamed. It sounded close and it sounded bad, and if not for that, perhaps Sirius would have stopped a moment and done what Lupin said, taken them all away to the Order. But the scream was still in the air when Sirius dived for the door and disappeared inside.

"Sirius, wait -" Hermione cried, far too late.

"We can't let him go alone," Ron said.

Harry was already on his feet. "We don't know where the Order of the Phoenix are. Our only choice is to go after him and try to save him at least."

He would feel sick that he was able to plan for Lupin's death later. Now it was time to act.

"I hate Gryffindors," Draco said, by way of assent. He was white to the lips.

"C'mon," Harry ordered, and they all went inside. Harry felt everyone else at his back, rushing in together so they would have no chance for second thoughts.

Inside, the castle was dark. There was no sign of Sirius.

\* \* \*

Harry saw the others hesitating, caught in the gloom like flies in amber.

"We have to do something *now*," he said. "We have to find Sirius, he can't have gone far."

"We'll have to split up," Draco announced in a thin voice.

*No*, Harry thought instantly. That was how they had all gotten into this mess. You split up and the spy picked you off one by one. But Draco was talking fast.

"I know what you're thinking, but it's the only way. Like you said, he can't have gone far, but now if we all choose the wrong direction they could both be killed or - put with the others - It's not a good choice, but it's the only one we have left! If we all meet back here in twenty minutes..."

He stopped, because he knew there was a chance none of them would get back to the meeting point. Hermione gave a small, decisive nod.

"All right, then. Come on, Ron."

Harry thought fast. If he had to bet, he would bet that the scream had come from lower down in the castle.

"You go upstairs, and then up another floor if you don't find anything. I'll search here and then in the dungeons, and that will take up all the time we have. Then we all come back here. Be careful! I'll be fine."

"*We'll* be fine," Draco corrected him, on a note of steel. Ron and Hermione nodded together, with no time left for words, and they ran up the stairs as they had a dozen times when Ron had forgotten his scarf, or Hermione urgently needed a library book.

Hogwarts was dark now, all memories tainted, and Harry thought of the third task of the Tournament and went cold. It had been another world where all your fears came true, and now fear had taken over his world.

He was so angry there was almost no room for fear. He and Draco walked through the Hall and its adjoining rooms, finding only shadows, and Harry almost wanted to stumble upon an enemy.

This was *his* place! The only place he'd ever had!

No-one had a right to take it away.

The only thing that laid claim to Hogwarts was the shadows, and Harry could not fight them. He and Draco exchanged quick glances and began, quietly, to descend the stairs to the dungeon.

They had just reached the bottom when voices and steps were heard, close by. Harry grabbed his wand. Draco grabbed Harry, and pulled him into an alcove that Harry could have sworn was not beside the bottom of the stairs a minute ago.

"Be *still*," Draco commanded, his voice a hiss on the cusp of hearing, his mouth against Harry's ear. "We're here to *find* people, not fight!"

Harry went still, every muscle in his body protesting. Cheated adrenaline beat a hot path through his body, and he pressed his palm hard against his wand and turned his face against Draco's. They tried to breathe stealthily, and it came out harsh.

The people around the corner were Death Eaters, a bunch of them walking in the robes, hoods drawn over their heads so Harry was reminded of nightmare monks. Sirius and Lupin were not among them.

Harry's locked muscles screamed at him to move, but he stayed still, Draco's chest hitching against his back. The Death Eaters, in a few endless moments, passed on. Harry and Draco waited until even the sounds of their footsteps had faded.

Then Draco let go of Harry's arm, and gave a long, shuddering breath.

"That settles it," he said. "Let me go on by myself."

"*Are you crazy?* Lupin went in by himself -"

"And it was the right decision, if Black hadn't charged in after him! And this is the right decision. You saw me just now, Snape's showed me every secret place in the dungeons. I can hide here better than any other Slytherin I know. If Black or Lupin is here, I can find them, and I can do it fastest by myself!"

"And what am I supposed to do while you're running around alone and in danger?"

Draco gave him a look that did not so much suggest as shout that Harry was being an idiot.

"We all left everything magical bar our wands at school so we wouldn't blow our cover," he said, and on Harry's puzzled nod he hissed, "Don't you think the Cloak and the Map might prove useful at a time like this?"

Harry did not waste time calling himself an idiot. "You're right. Stay right here and I'll get the Map and we can look together."

"We're a bit pushed for time, in case you didn't notice," Draco snapped. "If you have the Map, you'll know where to find me, and them, and everyone. I'm going to try here, and you're going to go there. I want to do something, I'm *not* scared -"

"I didn't think you were," Harry said.

Unexpectedly, Draco smiled at him. "I'm a liar. You should know that. But I want to go anyway, and I think it's our best chance."

He could see it once he was looking, in the tight line of Draco's jaw. Draco was scared. Being scared seemed remote to Harry, with nothing but a buzzing urge in his blood to act, but... scared and thinking, Draco had remembered the Cloak and the Map.

He held Draco's arm hard. He almost wanted to bruise him.

"I'll kill anything that tries to touch you," he said against Draco's ear. "Go."

Draco stepped away from him and blinked rather than look directly at Harry. Then he stopped blinking, and did it.

"Do not do anything stupid," he said at last, his voice hard.

He took Harry's face in his hands and kissed him, and that was hard as well. There was no time and no space left on the edge of danger for gentleness, and Harry's back hit the wall as Draco's teeth

grazed the inside of his mouth. He could not let himself moan, so he grasped Draco roughly against a moan and against the thought of death. He tipped his head back against the wall and pulled Draco in, so all he could feel was stone and the planes of Draco's body against him. His back under Harry's hands, under his shirt, was slick with sweat.

Harry wanted to leave bruises all over him. Harry's own back was painfully pressed against the stone and his thighs were strained, bearing Draco's weight, and he didn't care. Draco pushed him harder against the wall, as if he wanted Harry to be in pain, wanted him to ask for mercy. Harry's hips rose against Draco, his breath coming uneven as a plea.

He didn't want mercy. He swallowed a hungry sound but not the desire to eat Draco alive.

Draco might be scared, Harry thought dimly, but there was the same thrill of excitement in his blood as there was in Harry's, the same urge to do something, anything, *God*, and if Draco stayed there and shoved against him for another moment - but Lupin and Sirius were in danger. Draco's teeth dragged light and sharp over Harry's lower lip, fingers curling tight in his hair. Then he pulled back.

"Don't you *dare* die," he ordered, and whirled away.

Harry went up the dungeon steps and towards Gryffindor Tower.

\* \* \*

The Fat Lady had no dust on her, not yet, but she still had a dazed look about her when Harry ran up to her and said the password.

"Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," he whispered, remembering the Third Task. He had said those words then too, when he should have recalled that you only needed the password to get out. He had had things backwards all along.

He knew the common room would be cold and still, with everything everyone had left behind lying like relics in the grey light of approaching night. He did not spare a glance for Hermione's discarded book, or the stairs to the girls' dormitory that he could have safely gone up to because all the girls were gone. He had other things to worry about now.

He ran up the stairs, and with his eyes already adjusted to the night, he made out the shapes of all the empty beds at once. His own looked forlorn, a corner of the sheet tucked back invitingly by house elves, and the chest at the bottom of his bed... ransacked.

Harry dropped to his knees. His books were tossed around, his broom broken, and his Invisibility Cloak was gone. His breathing harsh in that deep, lonely silence, he grabbed *Flying with the Cannons* and opened it at the place where he kept the Map hidden.

It was there.

Harry unfolded the map quickly, the parchment shaking in his hands. When the familiar black lines and dots scratched their way across the yellow parchment he followed each line avidly with his eyes.

Ron and Hermione, safe on the first floor. Draco, apparently safe in the dungeons with no-one nearby. Sirius and Lupin were there, alive, but almost lost in separate groups of Death Eaters, and clusters of Death Eaters or what Harry presumed were Death Eaters were scattered all over the castle. Wormtail was there but not near either of them and... In one of those groups Harry saw the floating words *Tom Riddle*.

Voldemort was in Hogwarts.

Harry's thoughts spun wildly out of control and into panic. It was all happening, all really happening, and there was nothing he could do and no help anywhere, for any of them...

The lines and dots chased each other to an end, and Harry saw help.

He snatched up the Map and ran, ran, ran as if all the Death Eaters were already chasing him out of the horribly deserted Gryffindor rooms and through the dark, echoing corridors to the place where a stone gargoyle waited.

There was no need for a password. The gargoyle leaped aside as Harry approached and as soon as Harry stepped onto the ascending spiral staircase he remembered the Third Task again, and the appearance of Voldemort, and he closed his fingers tightly about his wand as Dumbledore's gleaming oak door came into view, the griffon doorknocker glistening in the half light.

The door swung open, and Voldemort was not inside. There was only Dumbledore.

"Oh, Harry," he said. "I was wondering if I would get a chance to talk to you."

\* \* \*

The circular room was as lost to darkness as the rest of Hogwarts. The silver instruments stood dull and silent, and the pictures of past Headmasters and Headmistresses had been stripped off the walls. Dumbledore was sitting in the dark at his huge desk, staring at a pile of ashes in front of him.

"Fawkes," he explained, misinterpreting Harry's stare. "It's very sad, but even phoenixes die and do not rise in the end."

He looked small and hunched in his high-backed chair. The moon was out now, a gibbous thing peeping through the windows, and its light made a faint, tired halo of his white and straggling hair. His chin was almost touching his chest, but the light-blue eyes that watched Harry were as sharp as ever.

Harry breathed hard. "Professor - sir, please, Voldemort's in the school!"

"Of course," Dumbledore said gently. "I invited him."

His voice was so calm that Harry's first feeling was one of relief. It was all right, Dumbledore had a plan, and as his breathing came more regularly and the first rush of adrenalin faded, he began to feel cold.

"I invited you all back to meet him," Dumbledore went on, still so serene. "Are you beginning to



understand now, Harry?"

His heartbeat had slowed down now, slowed down so a terrible thought could occur between each beat. His chest felt like there was cold water dropping at regular intervals inside it, dropping and hollowing out a stone.

He remembered the images in the Somnasieve, and saw what his dreams had been trying to tell him.

When Draco was swimming in the lake in his dream, he'd whispered the first password Harry had ever heard for Dumbledore's office. *Sherbet lemon*.

The faces of the dangerous creatures in his dream - griffon, chimera, basilisk. All things that had threatened him... all save the griffon. The griffon that was Dumbledore's doorknocker. The refrain in his last dream, the one McGonagall had seen something in, and died. *Don't you know?*

Harry knew. At last, he knew.

"You're the spy," he said slowly. The words felt strange in his mouth, as if he was speaking a foreign language, a Parseltongue that would never make sense because the whole world suddenly made no sense.

"You're too late. What good does knowing this do you now?" Dumbledore asked. "You never were quite quick enough, Harry - but I'm sure you did your best."

He made a soothing gesture with his hands, pale skin twisted like crepe around the blue knots of his veins. They looked frail and old, his hands, invested only with the authority of a kindly grandparent.

Harry could not piece words together without effort. Even language seemed to have turned against him.

"But... how?"

"It was very easy, Harry."

It would have been. No matter how hard Harry had studied the Marauder's Map searching for the spy, he would never have thought to question Dumbledore's presence anywhere. No student would have been alarmed at the sight of Dumbledore, no student would have made an outcry when Dumbledore raised his wand.

He thought back, numbly, to the leaks of information. Lupin had said he was consulting members of staff. Anyone would have told Dumbledore anything he wanted to know. None of them would ever have dreamed of putting Dumbledore's name on a list of suspects. Only one person had, only one and why hadn't he *seen* it? McGonagall had not gone flying to the Headmaster with her revelation. She had asked Harry for Lupin, and she had said something about the book Hermione had chosen in Harry's dream...

The old book, Harry remembered now, that they had examined in first year. About Nicolas Flamel... and his partner, Albus Dumbledore.

The sick, shocked disbelief broke into rage.

"You killed Professor McGonagall!" Harry shouted. "How could you - how *could* you? We trusted you and you - you're *evil* - you've been evil all along -"

Dumbledore's tranquillity did not change. He still sat there, hunched, head down, old and untouchable and pitiless.

"Not all along, Harry. Not even now, not really."

Harry was outraged to discover in himself the furious, confused impulse to burst into tears. He wasn't a child anymore, damn it, but he felt like a child, staring in utter incomprehension at an adult he had trusted.

"How can you say that?" he asked. "You killed -" His voice broke as he spoke, and he swallowed hard. "You killed her! You took all those people!"

"You're such a child, Harry," Dumbledore said, more in sadness than in anger and as if he could read Harry's mind. "You're so very young, and you think everything is so straightforward. Do you have any idea of how long I've lived? Do you have any idea of what I've seen?"

Harry was cold again, using everything he had to swallow down tears. The night was as grey and lifeless as the phoenix's ashes.

"I am over a hundred years old, and I know there is no way to conquer evil. I conquered Grindelwald, and Voldemort rose. Before Grindelwald, there was another, and throughout history there have been evil leaders and wars in which both sides had to embrace evil and if you did not you died, and all good has ever been in the whole history of time is a dream, a wish, a fragile construct built up in a lull between two evils and then inevitably destroyed. I know this. I have learned this. I was young and stupid and hopeful, and I won so many victories, but all that fades. Evil is the only thing that lasts, and so I... decided to give up, and survive."

"You decided to be on Voldemort's side!"

"I decided to live. I stopped struggling, and negotiated a treaty. For the price of my life, I began to drain Hogwarts dry. I handed over students to Voldemort - but I never handed over you, or any friends that might help you. Even now, you have your chance to stand against Voldemort, just as the prophecy said." He leaned forward, his eyes pale and watchful. "But you're not going to win, are you, Harry? We both know that. I set you the Third Task in the Tournament to see what you could possibly do if confronted with Voldemort, and we both know you could do nothing. That was when I lost all hope, but after all, it matters very little."

Harry remembered reading about battle fatigue in Muggle books, and tried to think of it spread over a century of struggle. He could not imagine how incredibly tired Dumbledore must be.

He could not bear the sight of this wizened old man, with all that had been glorious about him worn away.

"The best and brightest are always taken, and every generation is poorer than the last. You should

have met Nicolas Flamel in his prime. You should have known your father, Harry. I loved him. Did you ever have the strength to make anything like the Map in your hand, or become a secret Animagus? You never did. There was never any hope."

"You say you loved my Dad," Harry said, and let his voice tremble. The Marauders' Map fell from his hand and floated gently down to the floor. "And you'll let his death mean nothing?"

Dumbledore had never been the man Harry believed, all the time Harry had known him. That man had been as dead as Harry's parents, all the years of Harry's life.

"Death always means nothing, Harry. It reduces people's whole lives to nothing, and it always happens. Your parents, other students of mine, all the friends of my childhood... They are nothing now, nothing but words on a page, ashes on the wind. I was sorry to kill Minerva, but what did it really matter if she died then or a little later? I am the one with the Philosopher's Stone. I am the one who is going to live forever."

"You have the Philosopher's Stone?" Harry whispered. "But you said -"

"I said I destroyed it, but you did not see me do it. You never questioned it, though, any more than you questioned any of my convenient absences. You were never clever enough not to rely on other people."

*That was because I trusted you,* Harry thought. He felt he had gone through fury and betrayal, and out the other side. He wasn't cold, or hot with outrage. Everything was still, and he only felt sad.

Dumbledore sounded mildly regretful, as if they were talking about Harry's bad performance in his NEWTs.

"I am going to live, and life is better than death, and anything is better than the constant grinding struggle against something that is everywhere. I am going to live, and perhaps after a time I will forget the best people I have ever known, all destroyed by this world, but even if I do not... your death will only be a small regret next to James', next to Minerva's. I've done what I could for you. I thought you might like an explanation. It's all been very sad, but there is nothing that anyone could have done."

He seemed to be finished. He folded his hands and watched Harry with a certain incurious, weary patience. Harry knew he would not be moved by either rage or tears, by any emotion at all.

He was all that remained of perhaps the greatest wizard that had ever lived. Harry realised for the first time that he had loved him. He had loved him, and there was something gibbering and crying inside Harry now, but all he could reach was sad certainty. He remembered, with perfect clarity, killing the snakes he had thought were the spies because they were too dangerous to be allowed to live.

Dumbledore's wand was out on the desk, but Harry had his tightly clasped in his hand. He raised the wand and for the first time saw real emotion on Dumbledore's face.

"But there is," Harry said slowly. "There's something I can do."

They found Lupin in the Astronomy Tower.

Hermione had thought they should check it, since they had a few spare minutes before meeting up with Harry and Malfoy, and they were only just inside when they heard footsteps coming towards the door.

Ron seized her hand and dragged her up the stairs to the observation balcony, where some telescopes still stood at windows. They ignored them and knelt, and Hermione hoped they would be hidden by the railing even while they peered over it.

That was when the Death Eaters dragged Lupin into the tower in chains.

Hermione recognised the leader of the little group, too. It was Wormtail.

"Who else came in with you?" he demanded as they flung Lupin down on the floor.

Lupin grunted as he hit it, his hair in the dust. "Nobody. I was by myself the whole time."

"We know you were sent into the Muggle world with Harry Potter!"

*How did the spy know that?* Hermione thought frantically. *Who could it be?*

"They stayed there. I came alone, Peter," Lupin responded evenly.

Wormtail flinched. "You needn't - you needn't speak to me like that! I never did anything to you - I left you out of it!"

"You're most kind," Lupin said dryly, from his position chained up on the floor.

"I - I'd be happy to leave you out of it again, Remus," Wormtail quavered, "but we have to know where Harry Potter is."

He turned away, unable to look at Lupin any longer, and Hermione saw his face properly for the first time. It was twisted into weak, ugly resolution.

"Otherwise," he continued softly, "it will have to be torture."

"Then it will have to be torture. Go ahead. I was never a coward."

Ron jumped in horror and Hermione pulled him down, pulled him close, and felt his mouth make shapes of horror and despair against her neck. She stroked his hair with frantic gentleness, clung to him closely, and thought if they had seen Ron they would have to rip him away from her.

She shut her eyes and hid her face in his hair, trying not to think of what they were going to do to Lupin.

Then she realised she was being stupid, and she looked over the railing again. Lupin was looking up at her, his eyes wide, and her hands tightened on Ron's. But nobody else had seen them.

Perhaps she and Ron could catch them by surprise...

No sooner did Hermione feel her heart rise with the beginnings of a plan and hope, when the door opened again.

She recognised the pair who walked in as surely as she had recognised Wormtail. One was Voldemort, and she felt her heart race like a rabbit's, as if it would burst out of her chest and flee somewhere safer.

The other, not restrained, not a prisoner, but walking willingly and casually beside the Dark Lord, was Draco Malfoy.

"Still working up your courage, Wormtail?" drawled Malfoy, his voice as unmistakable as his hair. "Let me show you how it's done."

He drew his wand and pointed it at Lupin.

Then he said easily, "*Crucio*."

Lupin's body twisted in a spasm of agony.

# Chapter Twenty-Two: The End

*I recognise the way you make me feel  
It's hard to think that you might not be real  
I sense that now the water's getting deep  
I try to wash the pain away from me*

Hermione clutched harder at Ron to keep him down. Her mind was fragmenting into panic, every shard unacceptable. She couldn't look at Voldemort – God, he didn't even look *human*, he looked like one of those creatures from the cartoons of her childhood made flesh – and she couldn't look at Lupin, writhing with his eyes shut and foam at the corners of his mouth. She tried to look at Malfoy, see his face and catch some expression that might mean there was an explanation, and realised only in the sudden rush of betrayal that she had really trusted him.

"I'll kill him," Ron snarled into her ear.

"Hush," she whispered desperately. Who knew what Voldemort could hear? How were they going to get out?

"Commendable though your enthusiasm is," said Voldemort, and his voice made Hermione shudder; it had the quality of Parseltongue when he was speaking English. "I think we can continue questioning the werewolf along with his precious friend Black. You will bring them to my room." Hermione saw Peter Pettigrew's quick look, and Voldemort explained with a note of weariness. "You might know it better as your Charms classroom, Wormtail."

Pettigrew's head bobbed nervously. "Oh yes, my Lord. Of course!"

"As for you, Malfoy –" and at that point hope drowned in Hermione's outrage – "I like to see your viciousness, but it can be put to better use. After all, I think we all know Harry Potter is close. We only have to wait for him to come to us."

He beckoned as he swept out, and Malfoy followed. Hermione watched them leave with relief, feeling horror and betrayal recede so she was left with the single urge: to find a way out of this.

Ron lifted his head incautiously again. Hermione pulled him down hard, but she saw Lupin's eyes widen and was sure that this time, at least one person had seen them.

"I will tell you one thing, Peter," Lupin said conversationally, though his voice was still weak with pain and foam lingered at the corner of his mouth. "You always thought that being a werewolf was much like being an Animagus, only – less pleasant, and less voluntary. That's not true."

Peter Pettigrew trembled, uncertain, glancing at his fellow Death Eaters for help.

"It isn't?" he said at last.

Lupin rolled, rising and breaking his cuffs in one smooth motion, and then stood facing Peter. Hermione had never seen her mild professor look like this: the set of his shoulders and glint in his reminded her of a savage animal.

"No," he said, and his voice grew thick. "I'm a werewolf all the time. And neither cuffs nor Cruciatus can slow me down for long."

He looked up for just a moment. Hermione saw his lips move quite clearly. He mouthed, '*Run.*'

Then Lupin sprang, and as Peter Pettigrew went down beneath him and all the Death Eaters levelled their wands, Hermione hauled Ron up by main force and grabbed their moment of distraction to flee down the stairs and out of the Tower.

They staggered once they had gone down a few corridors, out of the mindless desire to escape and into their own terrible thoughts.

"I'll kill that bastard Malfoy," Ron said, and sounded like he meant it. "I'll go after him and kill him. What has he done to Harry?"

"Nothing," Hermione answered. She caught Ron's startled glance and threw him back an impatient one. "He would've told Voldemort - no, honestly, Ron, I will say it - he would've told him if he knew where Harry was. They must have split up, and that means we have to get back to the Great Hall and tell Harry at once."

She suppressed a shudder at the thought of telling Harry. She, Hermione Granger, supposedly clever, had actually trusted that bastard Malfoy, and God knew Harry had done more than that.

She couldn't think about this now. She had to plan. Lupin had given up his one chance at escape to give them theirs.

They walked to the Great Hall quickly. Hermione tried not to think every noise was a Death Eater, and kept searching her mind for spells. It had never seemed so empty. When they heard the noise from above Ron seized her shoulders and tried to push her behind him. She pushed him away and grabbed for her wand.

Then they both actually looked, and it was Harry. His wand was drawn, and one black sleeve was ripped and hanging to show a bloody gash along his arm. The set of his shoulders reminded her of Lupin about to spring, and his eyes burned strangely in a white, set face. She had never seen Harry look like this.

For a moment she thought he knew, and found herself speaking rapidly, hopelessly, so they would not have to talk about it.

"We've seen Lupin. They have him and Sirius, they're taking them to the Charms classroom, Voldemort is there too, Voldemort is *in Hogwarts*, Harry, what are we going to do? We haven't seen Dumbledore. I don't think there's anyone here but Death Eaters."

She wished she had not opened her mouth when she heard how bleak all she had to say was, and then she looked at Harry's far bleaker face.

"I've seen Dumbledore," he said, his voice flat. "He's dead."

The enormity of this disaster swallowed everything else. Hermione stood still, all thought lost.

She tried to gather words from a sea of despair. "Then there's nobody to help us."

His white face was transformed by rage, like fire sweeping over oil. Hermione almost shied away from him. She felt for an instant that Harry was one of the things to be feared in this place of horrors that had been Hogwarts, that anything which got in his way might be consumed.

"Who ever helped us?" Harry snarled. "When did Dumbledore ever help us? We're on our own and I like it better this way. We can do this. Now where's Draco?"

Hermione had almost forgotten. She closed her hands, tight, as if she could crush this thing before it could hurt Harry.

Ron spoke before she could. "Malfoy's probably off torturing Lupin some more. We saw him do it the first time - while he was standing practically arm-in-arm with You-Know-Who."

\* \* \*

Harry did not absorb the words at first. Part of him was still far away in that room looking at that withered old face, locked in that last stubborn determination to live. Part of him was still thinking, if his wand had been in his hand, I'd be...

He just stared stupidly at Ron for a few minutes, and then suddenly he was all there, in this moment, and absolutely furious.

He grabbed Ron by his shirt and threw him up against the wall.

"Take that back!" he shouted.

"No! Let go, are you crazy? We both saw him, Hermione, tell him -"

"It's not true! Say it's not true!"

"Please, be quiet!" Hermione hissed, grasping ineffectually at Harry's hands. "Please, please, stop. Harry, it's true. I saw it. I'm so sorry, Harry, but it's true."

He let go of Ron's shirt and stepped back, panting. He looked at her distressed face and wanted to run away from them - his best friends! - and put his hands over his ears. It was *not* true.

"Why would he torture Lupin?" he demanded.

"To find out where you were," Ron said.

"Don't be bloody stupid! He knows where I am."

"Yes, Harry," Hermione answered tremblingly, and he fixed his eyes on her face, praying for to think of some explanation. She only stared back at him with pleading eyes. "Only - Voldemort said they *did* know where you were, and that Malfoy was being vicious. Which he can be, Harry, you know that -"

"That's not the same as torturing Lupin! He likes Lupin!"



"Harry," Hermione exclaimed, her voice ragged. "I can't think of any other explanation. There's no reason for it to be Polyjuice, and Voldemort called him by name. He cast Cruciatus on Lupin. I saw him. It was him, and I kept trying to look at his face, to see if it was a plan, but I don't see how it could be. Harry, I know how you feel about him, but he's the spy."

"No he's not," Harry said automatically, and then stopped because he did not know how to tell Ron and Hermione who the spy was.

As he paused, doubt flooded through him.

Who was to say there was only one spy? Didn't it almost make sense? Nobody would ever have questioned Dumbledore's presence... except for a Slytherin. The Slytherins had always been more hostile to Dumbledore, the Slytherins could have been a weak spot... unless someone they trusted absolutely was helping him.

"You didn't see his face," he added, more uncertainly, but he did not need Hermione's sad face to answer his unspoken question. He remembered recognising Draco departing in the night once, in first year. Draco was pretty much unmistakable.

So there had to be an explanation.

"I know him!" he protested violently to his own thoughts.

"Yeah, you've been friends with him for what, six whole months," Ron snapped. "We've been your friends for seven years, and we're all in a bit more trouble than Draco Malfoy could make for us. We need to decide what to do."

Harry felt the clean rush of determination overwhelm all thought. He was so grateful for that: for the chance to escape thought in the call to action.

"You're right," he said briefly. "We need either Sirius or Lupin: we know that. If they're together, we can get them both - and then we'll see. I've got my Invisibility Cloak. Let's go to the Charms classroom."

As he unfolded his Cloak, Hermione's eyes lit up. "Do you have the Map?"

"I -" Harry remembered the Map, lying yellow on the floor of that room, and cursed himself. He was not going up there again, and Ron and Hermione could not see what he had left behind him. "It's gone."

Hermione looked disappointed, but she nodded. He looked into her absorbed face and saw she was already lost in calculating their chances of success.

He was going to succeed. There was no other choice.

He cast the Cloak over them all, and as he put an arm around Hermione it occurred to him what his hands had last done, and what her face would look like if she knew. Draco would understand - but Draco was...

They walked close together up the stairs and through the corridors of Hogwarts, conscious that the very echoes of their steps could betray them, but Harry could not stop thinking of a very different sort of betrayal.

The day they left Hogwarts, Draco had been writing a letter he had not wanted Harry to see. He'd said it was for Narcissa, but he'd Owled his mother the day before.

If it had been a lie. If it had all been a lie.

Draco hadn't shown any interest until - well, until Hogwarts had broken up, and he had lost direct contact with the Slytherins. Until Hogwarts was broken and Harry, perhaps, became a more important bargaining chip with Voldemort and got upgraded from friend to...

He had to *stop* this!

Exactly why had Draco changed his mind? Dumbledore had never loved him, any more than the Dursleys had. It wasn't likely that Draco had been overcome by Harry's appeal.

Hermione's fingers closed on his arm a second after he saw the Death Eaters. He levelled his wand and Petrified the first one.

The second spun around and Hermione caught him with the same spell, Ron the third, and Harry seized the cloak of the last one as he retreated and cast the Petrifying spell one last time.

Then Harry went over to the first one, lifted his head by the hair, and smashed his head hard against the stone.

*"Harry!"*

"Anyone could come by and reverse the spell," he explained unemotionally. "I doubt they have many mediwizards, and I want every Death Eater possible out of commission. We're fighting a war here."

Hermione licked her lips. "Don't hit them too hard. You could cause brain damage."

"I don't think they'd be so touchingly concerned about you," Harry said. He felt numb as he looked at the horrified expression on her face. He didn't see why she had to look like that. He was only talking sense.

Don't think about Dumbledore. Don't think about Draco.

He drove the second man's head into the wall.

Once he was done, he got to his feet. Hermione shrank back from him slightly, but he felt a hand against his shoulder. He blinked, startled, into Ron's eyes.

"Don't take it so hard, Harry," Ron said. "We're with you."

"Of course we are," Hermione rejoined, her voice gaining strength as she spoke. "You only did what you had to do."

"I know you're with me," Harry told them. "Thanks."

It was just the three of them, the friends he could trust completely, and that felt good. It felt right. He was able to walk on, into Voldemort's lair, and be certain that they had his back. They stopped outside the door of the Charms classroom.

"I still don't believe Draco did it," Harry said in a low voice, and opened the door.

\* \* \*

The empty, darkened room was something of an anticlimax. They stood under the Cloak for a few minutes, hesitating and taking in every detail of the room. The chairs and desks of McGonagall's classroom had been cleared away, and the room looked far larger than it had before.

At the far end of the room stood a throne, and what almost looked like a sceptre, standing fixed to the floor.

Harry felt at a loss. He had expected - something to be there, something to fight, and all he could do was stand here wondering if this was a trap, or if they had moved Sirius and Lupin somewhere else.

It was Hermione who broke the cover of the Invisibility Cloak, and walked out into the Charms classroom. She glanced over her shoulder at them, her eyes wide.

"Oh my God," she said. "It can't be. The Captus charm."

"The what now?" Ron asked.

But Harry remembered. He remembered a Young Order meeting, with speculation on what Voldemort was doing with the missing students, and Hermione and Draco brimming over with knowledge about this one charm.

That didn't mean Draco was guilty. Hermione had known as well.

He could hear Draco's voice so clearly in his mind, drawling and precise. *It's thought that Dark Magic has recently been used to create prisons within spheres. A thousand tiny Azkabans You-Know-Who can keep in his pocket, that Dementors can patrol and nobody can ever escape from.*

He left Ron with the Cloak and walked to the spot where Hermione stood, stared where she was staring. There it was, the Captus sphere, left alone and unguarded. It was a round, dull-blue sphere, mounted on its metal plinth. Voldemort's version of a sceptre, with a stone containing hundreds of souls.

Draco's voice came back to him again. *The advantage to us is that - perhaps we can get them back.*

"If I smash the sphere," Harry heard himself ask, "are they free?"

"Harry, don't you dare!" Hermione exclaimed. "That could kill them all. This is very old magic, and I have no idea what to do to free them. We have to get it to the Order of the Phoenix: they will know what to do. This makes finding Lupin or Sirius even more urgent. All their lives depend on it."

We all have to get out of here."

Ron was folding up the Cloak: Hermione was staring at the sphere. Harry looked at them both, judging their possible reactions, and then decided he didn't care.

"Yes, we all do," he said slowly. "Including Draco."

"Harry, for - !" Ron exploded. "He handed over all his precious housemates to be put in that! I know you liked him, but you have to face the *facts!*"

Yes, the facts. Draco had never been interested in making friends, until the Triwizard Tournament - which Dumbledore had engineered. Draco had written a letter and lied about it. Draco had admitted he was racist. Draco had never been interested like that until Harry was the last thing left for him to use...

He remembered Draco's face, sharp in some moment of unbeautiful intensity.

*Don't you dare die on me.*

He *didn't* believe it.

But if Dumbledore could betray them, so could anyone.

Harry hesitated.

"Step back from the Captus sphere, Mr Potter," said a voice from the shadows. "I wouldn't want you getting any ideas."

Harry knew the voice at once. It had been years since he heard it, years, and the hatred of years unfolded in his chest, building into murderous rage, as Voldemort stepped out of invisibility, into the light.

He stood and stared down at Harry with those unblinking, slitted red eyes. His face was almost too inhuman to register triumph.

All that Harry wanted in the world, in that moment, was to kill him.

*You killed my parents. You killed Cedric. You laid waste to my world and destroyed my school and I'm going to kill you, you bastard...*

Then he saw who was behind Voldemort.

Still walking into the light, his white-blond head bowed, with that characteristic saunter. He carried himself with all his usual aristocratic poise.

He could see why Hermione and Ron had been so sure, even without seeing his face. But Harry knew Draco better than that.

It came as no surprise when his eyes met icy grey ones, and he looked into Draco's face, but older, and changed, as if someone had made deliberate mistakes.

"Hello, Potter," said Lucius Malfoy.

\* \* \*

The Death Eaters were slowly coming out of their invisibility spells, one by one, and growing at the back of Harry's mind was a realisation of how utterly he had been tricked, and a growing determination to take down as many as he could.

Centre stage was the one stunned thought running over and over again through his mind.

*This will kill Draco.*

It would kill him. Somewhere even further back in his thoughts was satisfaction that Ron and Hermione could see now Draco was innocent, but innocent or not, this would kill him. Death was imminent and he was worrying about Draco's feelings.

At least Draco was safe - and please, let him *be* safe, because he was sure now that Sirius and Lupin were in the sphere already, and Ron and Hermione were caught in this trap with him. Everything he loved, bar that one person, was here - and the Death Eaters were closing in. Harry drew his wand.

"Now, now, there's no need to be hasty," Voldemort told him. "Kill the other two if he moves," he added casually to the Death Eaters, who closed in tighter around them. Harry felt Ron and Hermione draw closer to him, standing warm at his back. "This is no little squabble, no secret meeting in a graveyard that could be disrupted. I've won, Harry Potter. The wizarding world is mine. And I intend to enjoy this."

"Why?" Harry shouted. "What, it makes you feel *important*? You came back from the dead to stand around in a big gang of bullies and torture people who're smaller than you? That's pathetic. You're pathetic. You always have been."

He saw Voldemort's long fingers reach for his wand, and braced himself. He almost wanted Voldemort to perform Cruciatus. It would just be another reason to hate him. He stared into those red eyes, daring him to do it, and then heard the door behind him open.

"Harry!" Draco said, sounding irritated and ordinary. "Why on earth are you shouting, the Death Eaters might - oh."

Harry turned away from Voldemort and saw Draco, going ashen as he took in the situation.

"On the other hand," Draco said carefully, "I can see you're busy. Perhaps I'll just go away."

*I will bloody kill anything that even tries to touch him.*

Harry had thought that earlier, and not quite known what he meant. He knew now: he had said the words and meant to kill, and he had seen the limp thing after and known it was his doing.

He still meant it.

Nobody tried to hurt Draco. Voldemort tilted his head. "It's young Malfoy, isn't it?" he said, as if they were playing meet-and-greet at a tea party but with awful amusement behind his manner. "Do

come in. This should be interesting."

Draco advanced warily. He was so pale he looked ill, and Harry remembered this was the first time he had ever seen Voldemort, and imagined that the sight would fill your eyes and thoughts to the exclusion of all else, until...

Until Draco looked beside Voldemort, and his whole face changed. Harry did not think he was aware of Voldemort any more, or Harry, or anything but the joy and disbelief chasing each other over his face and making him smile, very hesitantly, as if he thought someone might steal the smile from him if he made it too obvious.

Draco breathed, "*Dad?*"

Harry looked at Lucius' face, and was violently aware again of how alike they were, this face that he loved and the other that he hated. Lucius' face was only more composed, with features perhaps less pointed, more conventionally handsome. There was nothing of Lucius in the sharp, hungry look of Draco, like a starved animal searching for a home. There was hunger and hope in Draco's face now. Lucius stared at him coolly.

"I - I mean Father," Draco faltered briefly, his eyes still fixed on his father's face. "I thought you were dead," he went on in almost a whisper.

"Clearly not," said Lucius. "You never did know when to shut up, Draco. I'm sorry to see the years haven't changed you."

"I'm sorry," Draco said automatically.

He still looked dazed, but he was the only one moving. Everyone else seemed caught, still in the face of Draco's utter refusal to recognise that anyone but his father existed in the world. Harry saw a few Death Eaters move, but Draco was Lucius Malfoy's son and they seemed uncertain of what to do.

Not so Lucius. "Come here, Draco. This is no time for your incessant chatter."

Draco's face was clearing. "I thought you were dead. You - I saw you die!"

He did not say it with suspicion. *Harry* had only met Lucius Malfoy a few times, and he was certain. Nobody playing a father would think that the appropriate emotion to display toward his long-lost son was annoyance.

"Yes. You proved an excellent witness. All we had to do was create a storm, spell the boat to break up, create an illusion of the Dark Lord and you reacted quite predictably by overreacting."

It was strange. Harry had only seen them together once before, in second year when his main concern had been Draco laughing at him because he had soot in his hair. Now they were all standing in front of Voldemort and his minions, who kept appearing round the room in greater and greater numbers, and through his rising anger Harry could still see... why Draco was the way he was.

Not because Lucius was evil, but because he had a politician's trick of seeking out the weaknesses

of those he came in contact with. He had not missed a single weakness in the only person in the world who loved him. He saw them all and he'd made Draco suffer for them all.

He'd missed the whole *point* of Draco, and Draco was still moving towards him, like a bird hypnotised by a snake. Why wouldn't he? Harry had sat beside him and stroked his hair while Draco poured out all his delusions about his father, and Harry had never corrected one of those statements Draco wanted so desperately to believe. He'd thought it would hurt less for Draco to believe the lies, thought it wouldn't harm anyone.

Dumbledore had thought deceit was for the best, too.

"Why would you do something like that?" Draco asked.

Voldemort spoke then, as if offended that anyone would question his decisions. "Your father had rather too high a profile and rather too black a record to be of use to me in his position. Moreover, he has never been one of my more trustworthy servants. I required him to prove his loyalty, and I required an assistant slightly more competent than Wormtail." He spared Lucius a casual glance. "I suppose he has proved his worth, such as it is."

Even the Dark Lord did not move Draco's gaze from his father, but as Voldemort spoke his face changed.

He addressed Lucius. "You faked your own death so you could act as the *help*?"

Harry almost laughed out loud. It was so absurd and so like Draco, and Lucius had raised so much more than he'd bargained for.

"Lucius," thundered Voldemort. "Will you muzzle your insolent brat, or must I?"

"I apologise, my Lord," Lucius said quickly. "Draco, I know you are not this unintelligent. You've shown me that much at least over the last two years."

"Really? I thought all I did was overreact." Draco's voice was dry, but he was still moving towards his father.

Harry could not move, could not grab the idiot and hold him back, because the Death Eaters were under orders to kill Hermione and Ron if he stirred. He could only watch.

"No," Lucius said smoothly. "You surprised me, actually. You didn't consider your actions, of course, but you did *effect* something, Draco. You rallied your peers behind you. No matter how wrong-headed your actions, you did something, and you did it well - and you did it for an admirable reason. For family, and to avenge me."

"I did," Draco answered slowly. "I did do it for you."

Harry had never heard Lucius speak like a politician before, like an orator, his voice rich, rolling and convincing. He suspected that neither had Draco - at least, not when Lucius was speaking to him.

"But you see now it was not necessary. You never wanted to ally yourself with blood traitors, with

fools who sink the wizarding world in the mud with every stupid concession they make for the Mudbloods. Now is the time to leave them, Draco. Now is the time to show me what you can really do."

It was probably the most praise Lucius had ever given his son, but Harry realised that Draco's eyes had finally found something more worth looking at than his father. The Captus sphere.

Just like Hermione, he recognised it at once.

"You people took my Slytherins," he said, pretending to acknowledge other people when really he was only speaking to his father. "You took my -"

And then another unexpected appearance was made. The invisibility spell faded to disclose another dozen Death Eaters coming into view as if invisibility was a tide receding from the room.

Narcissa Malfoy appeared behind her husband.

Harry felt another weary pang of betrayal. He had liked her. God, they had all been stupid and blind.

Only... no. In his dream, she had screamed. She had been tortured. She had not been taken willingly.

She held herself a little stiffly, as if her body was aching still, but she stood by her husband's side and her face was calm.

"Draco, please come here," she said, and the quality of her voice changed as if her throat was tightening. "I know you may not like the idea, but we have no choice. He's won, and we have a chance to survive. So do the children you sent to me - as long as we choose the winning side."

So she had not gone willingly. She was using Dumbledore's logic now, the logic of survival. Harry could not see if it was affecting Draco or not. His eyes kept moving between his father and his mother.

The Lestranges had materialised behind Draco's parents now. He could see the curl of Draco's mouth on the mad face of Bellatrix Lestrangle. They were all of the same blood, and blood had always meant so much to Draco.

"Now is the time to choose your family," Lucius said in his compelling voice. "Besides - you don't think this craven bunch of Mudblood-lovers ever really thought you were one of them. They never trusted you. You've slaved for them and they all thought you were the infamous Hogwarts spy."

Draco moved then, and not towards his father. He turned and cast a look over his shoulder at Harry, warm as a kiss.

"Not Harry," he answered, certain as the sun. "He's my friend."

Not even when his father spoke did Draco look away. He still looked sick with shock and fear, but there was trust hard as steel in his eyes.



Now was the time to say *something*, to accuse Draco's father though he never had before, to say he hadn't ever really thought... Now was the time, with Draco in the balance, when Harry had to speak.

He had no idea what to say.

"Are you sure about that, Draco?" Lucius inquired. "I heard them talking. Do you think your - friend Harry Potter will tell you that he never doubted you, not even for a moment?"

A question clouded Draco's face, and when Harry did not speak, just kept staring with the intensity of a prayer, the trust in his eyes shattered.

"You were never one of them, and they knew it. You're one of ours. You're my son. You only have your family. Don't let me down, Draco. Come here!"

*You have to speak*, Harry thought to himself furiously, but he felt too sick of words to open his mouth. Dumbledore had talked, and Lucius, and Narcissa. It didn't prove anything. It didn't mean love.

Draco turned his face away from Harry a little, and Harry saw his face grow darker as he did so. A slow, cold smile came over his lips, like the one on his father's face, like the one on Bellatrix's. He looked in that instant like the perfect product of their pure blood, a mirror held up to his forebears.

"I'm coming, Father," he said, and walked the few steps to his father's side.

"How very touching," Voldemort remarked. "Now, unless another of my Death Eaters feels like staging a dramatic family reunion, can we perhaps attend to business?"

Harry was still watching Draco. He had his eyes lowered, like shutters slammed hard over windows, and he was standing with his family. The only trace of expression on his face was spiteful.

He'd been betrayed over and over, and if Harry knew him at all he was seething with it and with fury, waiting to lash out at something. Draco had never been good at hiding anything for long. Harry watched, and Draco did lift his eyes. He did not look as if he was prepared to forgive Harry for doubting him. He looked helpless, and torn, and ready to kill.

Harry met his gaze with a fierce thrill running through him. *I do know you.*

"I clung to the driftwood for hours before I was rescued," Draco remarked reminiscently.

Even Voldemort looked at him when he spoke, unable to believe he had chosen this time to start complaining. Draco's eyes were still locked on Harry's over Lucius' shoulder.

Harry took a cautious step forward. Nobody noticed.

"I shouted for you until I lost my voice. I thought... since you were dead, I might as well be dead, and this was hell."

Harry took another step forward. Voldemort's eyes narrowed for a heart-stopping instant, and then they turned to the sound of Lucius' exasperated snap.

"What is your *point*, Draco?"

Another step with Draco's narrowed eyes on him, and no-one else's. Another step closer.

*Harry, don't you dare!*

But someone had to.

*That could kill them all.*

Emotion leaped into Draco's face, white-hot feeling that could have been love or hatred or sheer relief that he could act at last.

"Go to hell, Dad," he said, and hit his father in the face.

Lucius fell at the feet of his Dark Lord, who was almost knocked off balance, and Draco stood over him looking ready to hit him again. The Death Eaters surged towards their master in a disordered rush.

There was only a moment.

You made your choice, and took your chance.

Harry leaped forward and dashed the Captus sphere down from its pedestal and onto the floor. It smashed into a thousand pieces.

\* \* \*

She had been Confunded. Ginny remembered that much, remembered all the lists of symptoms her mother had shown her. This is what strangers might try to do to you, this is how you'll feel, you must try to think clearly, you have to protect yourself!

Simple as Muggle mothers teaching their children not to accept lifts from strangers. Only she had not been able to protect herself.

She had seen - she would never have dreamed she was in danger, and then...

But everything else she thought she remembered was impossible. Her misty horror was the product of a spell, and their situation. She could not allow herself to get lost in dreams of horror. Not when Dean was always beside her, and needed her help. He was more disoriented than she by the Confundus charm and what had happened to them, and that made her think of her mother too.

The Muggleborn were sheltered by the lack of magic in their childhood. Their instincts were not the same, their lives were untouched by the shadow of the Dark Lord. One part of them would never believe there was danger.

It filled her with tenderness, and she held on past the fear to his hand, murmuring nonsense words of comfort. He replied in kind, and through the days they kept up a conversation that meant nothing.

It was so dark, and time passed in endless confusion. Trying to think was like trying to move underwater, and the other prisoners were almost all as helpless as Dean. She thought she heard a girl whispering to some children a few times, her voice angry and persistent, but mostly people were silent, out of despair or magic-born confusion.

She had been Confunded, and now she was imprisoned. That was all she knew.

All she felt, besides confusion and affection, was that they were being watched. That was another reason they were all crouching in darkness and semi-silence: they could all feel the malicious eyes watching them, as if they were being kept as pets, to look at.

They were like goldfish in a bowl, with prison their whole world.

Then the world was smashed. She could feel it breaking apart around her, along with the last effects of the Confundus charm, and wild fear rose inside her. She could feel the world breaking, and surely the shards of such destruction could kill them all.

Ginny kept tight hold of Dean's hand, gasping as if freedom had become an alien atmosphere, and as her eyes adjusted she saw where they were now.

There were Death Eaters everywhere, some fallen among their fallen as if they had exploded into their midst. Ginny could see Hermione and Ron, who she was absolutely sure had not been taken, and she would have run to them if she had not had to keep hold of Dean. She could see Voldemort, who looked just like the bogeyman her brothers had described him as through her childhood and nothing like Tom Riddle.

Harry Potter stood at an empty stone plinth, with glass and liquid scattered about him. Ginny stared at the pieces at his feet. They had all come out of that, she thought, amazed, and then she was more amazed that her immediate reaction on seeing him had not been relief. His face was white and grim, and ready to kill; he did not look like a boy hero any longer.

Draco Malfoy was standing beside Voldemort and beside the Lestranges. His father - *his father?* - seemed to have been one of those knocked down by the prisoners' eruption into the room, but it looked as if Malfoy had chosen his side.

As the room slowly began to arrange itself into sides, Ginny saw that the captured Slytherins had come to the same conclusion. A hush of dismay hung over them all, and they stayed in the centre of the room as everyone else chose.

Some of them were looking to Malfoy for clues, but he was staring down at his father. Some of them clearly recognised family faces beneath those black hoods.

The silent hesitation lasted only a few moments, but at a time like this moments became heavy with significance and passed slowly.

A girl picked herself up from the floor. Ginny recognised her black hair and hard face: it was Pansy Parkinson.

"I don't care," she said, and Ginny realised with a shock that the stubborn voice talking to the

children in their little prison had been Pansy's. She looked at Malfoy, and then at one particular Death Eater, and then she went on. Ginny had never thought she would hear a Slytherin's voice breaking. "I don't want to -"

She stopped, face twisted as if she was holding back tears by main force, but she walked away from the little knot of Slytherins and toward the side of the room that constituted the side of light.

She stumbled as she reached them, but Ron stepped forward and caught her. Ginny's big brother kept his hands steady under her arms until Pansy was on her feet and facing the Death Eaters with the rest of them.

The Slytherins began to trail after her.

Those who were holding back hesitated again when Malfoy looked up from his father and saw them. Ginny saw the flash of pride in his face when he saw where Pansy stood, and realised she had made a mistake.

Lucius Malfoy struggled to his feet. He had a bloody lip, and Ginny wondered stupidly how it had happened for a moment. Then he launched himself at his son.

It was the cue for chaos.

Everyone broke from uncertainty into violence and the room seemed suddenly to be full of shoving bodies, and the air of curses. Ginny saw the contingent of Slytherins in the middle, being led by someone she thought was Blaise Zabini, towards Voldemort - and then she squinted and realised they were going there for Malfoy.

Someone grabbed her arm and she had her wand out in a second, before she looked up and saw that she was once again pointing it at Ron.

"Ginny," he said, and the force of her name meant that he loved her and he had been scared to death. "Are you stupid? We need to fight!"

"I will!" she shouted. "I need to get Dean to safety, he's still Confused -"

"No," Dean replied, his voice dazed and close to her ear. "No, I'm all right, I can help -"

She turned around gladly as he spoke, and looked into his clearing eyes for one moment before a Death Eater shouted "*Stupefy!*" and he fell to the ground at her feet. The Death Eater was closing in, sights aimed on the easy prey of a trembling girl and an unconscious boy.

Ginny was getting very tired of being frightened.

She cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx on him with the reflexes born of a lifetime with Fred and George, and when he almost toppled onto Dean she hit him very hard. With her wand. He went over on his side, eyes closing as he fell, and she stooped and gathered up Dean half into her lap as best she could with one arm, staying crouched above him with her wand at the ready.

She thought Ron might help her, but when she looked he was going down under three Death Eaters.

She had a moment of fear for him, but then she saw that one of the Death Eaters already had Pansy Parkinson on his back, clubbing him around the head with her wand, and Hermione was advancing on another with a purposeful look in her eye.

That left her without allies. She had no choice but to protect Dean herself. People who had fallen were being crushed underfoot. Perhaps the man she had brought down was being crushed now... but he deserved it, and Dean did not. She was damned if she was going to let anything happen to him.

Ginny raised her wand and fired off every curse she could think of.

People were screaming and dying around her, there were very young Confused students about. She saw Professor Lupin snarling as he defended eight of them, and Professor Black laughing and cutting down whoever threatened Lupin when he was distracted. There were children gathering around Pansy Parkinson, and Ron was sticking with them. Ginny looked down once, and saw two first years, one trying to shield Dean's head, but both really just trying to be close to her.

She thought they outnumbered the Death Eaters, but so many on her side were confused, so many were helpless.

So she had to keep fighting.

She only just missed cursing Hermione, who clutched her arm as she went by. Hermione's hair was a seething mass about her wild face.

"I can't see Harry!" she exclaimed. "What's *happening* to him?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Ginny said briefly. Hermione could even look scandalised in the middle of outright war. "I mean - I do, of course I do," Ginny amended, "but... I can't help him. I *can* help them."

Hermione stared at her, then nodded and pushed her way savagely through the crowd and towards Harry. Ginny wished her luck.

"Ginny?" she heard Dean say softly from the ground, struggling back towards consciousness. She stood over him, waiting for the next threat.

"Yes," she said, pleased to find her voice as steady as her wand. "I'm with you."

\* \* \*

When Hermione saw the flash of white-blond hair her heart leaped: surely Harry would be close to Malfoy.

As she fought her way closer, she saw that this was not true. Malfoy and his father were throwing each other about the place. Locked in his struggle, he had probably not even noticed leaving Harry behind.

Someone had to protect the younger ones, someone had to fight Lucius Malfoy. But someone had to get to Harry. If he lost, the war was lost, did nobody else realise that?

*Where was Harry?*

"Nox," Hermione hissed, waving her wand in front of a Death Eater's suddenly-blind eyes. Malfoy wasn't even using curses on his father. They were rolling together, exchanging real blows, spilling blood, as if they hated each other too much even for the distance of a wand. Hermione hesitated, waiting a moment to see if she could curse Lucius and be sure of not getting Draco by accident.

Then she saw Peter Pettigrew creeping up behind Draco, and levelled her wand there instead - only to find him going down. Narcissa Malfoy stood over him with her own wand raised. She said, "Don't you dare touch my son."

Lucius Malfoy spat blood down onto his son's face. "So my family is a pack of traitors," he began, when Draco lunged up, catching him off guard with a blow that left him stunned. Then Malfoy was up and hurtling towards her, and Hermione froze in shock as he pointed his wand and shouted:

*"Incendio!"*

She turned in time to see Bellatrix Lestrange's hair burst into flame, and then turned away from the screams to the pressure of Malfoy's shoulder against hers.

"Watch out, Granger, you stupid bitch!" he snapped. His lip was split in two places, his face was bruised and there were red marks on his throat from when his own father had tried to strangle him.

There was time to hit Mr Lestrange over Malfoy's shoulder with a Stupefying curse. She let the corners of her mouth turn up.

"Watch out, Malfoy, you stupid bastard."

Malfoy's eyes glittered and moved from his fallen father to her, quick as beetles in a sudden rush of light. Hermione was astonished to find she felt safer with him at her side, as if he was as much of an ally as any Gryffindor.

"Harry'd murder me if I let a hair of your frizzy head be harmed," he murmured, and then his voice grew sharper. "Harry. Is he *by himself*?"

"I was a little occupied! Hundreds of people exploded into the room!" Hermione shouted above the sounds of battle.

"We have to get to him. Let's go now -"

He caught the look on Hermione's face before he saw anything himself. She was frozen for a crucial instant at the sight: at Narcissa Malfoy on the ground with blood on her bright hair, and Lucius risen from the floor, his face cool and his wand pointed at his only child. She wanted to shout out to Draco, but her throat was dry and he could see, they could both see. It was just, as she realised in this fraction of time, that there was no time, and Lucius Malfoy was determined.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

*He did it. Draco's his son and he did it, something in Hermione's mind screamed, wanting to run*

back to her parents and be safe, have this whole thing a nightmare, not have to watch Malfoy die before her eyes.

Someone had seen the danger before either of them. Even as Hermione watched, sure of what she would see, the corner of her eyes registered two bulky shapes running towards them faster than she had ever seen them move before.

Crabbe was too late.

Goyle somehow got in front of Malfoy before the curse hit, and suddenly Malfoy had not died before her eyes. He was kneeling on the ground beside Goyle, and Goyle was dead. Hermione's hand went over her own mouth to stop her scream. She bit on her palm and tried to hold her wand ready, and all the time she looked at Malfoy's white pinched face and thought ridiculously: he looks so *young*. She'd thought he could be all these sinister things, but he was only young and stunned at how much the world could hurt him, and Gregory Goyle, lying there, was just a big boy.

Hermione wanted to cry. She met Crabbe's eyes and saw her own horror reflected there: and then she looked at Draco's face again.

He stood up, leaving his dead friend on the ground. The look on his face reminded her of Harry's earlier, the look of someone who had gone through the fire and come out like steel. He didn't look young or sorry any more.

The triumph was fading from Lucius Malfoy's drained face. He doesn't have the energy to cast the Killing Curse again, it dawned on Hermione slowly. He doesn't have the magic, he doesn't have the power.

Draco looked desperate and wretched and furious and sure. He did not hesitate, out of either love or pity.

*"Avada Kedavra,"* he returned.

There was a burst of green light.

It was not until Lucius was on the ground that Hermione became aware that she had never thought Malfoy could actually mean the Unforgivable Curse. Not with blood and magic, not enough to kill his own father.

He had meant it, though, and now he could never pretend to himself that there had not been one moment when he wanted his father dead more than anything in the world. At the next moment, the Order of the Phoenix burst through the doors like a miracle, and began to cut a swathe through the Death Eaters. Snape was in the lead.

Hermione would never forget Draco's face when he realised that if he had waited an instant longer, he might not have had to do it.

She hovered, torn between fear and sympathy, which was when they heard the terrible cracking sound from the other end of the room where Harry and Voldemort stood facing each other.

Draco's eyes, fixed on some cold remote place, snapped back into focus. He grasped Crabbe's arm, fingers white as they dug into his skin.

"Stay here," he ordered. "You're not to go into danger for me!" He looked at Crabbe's speechless, mulish face and shook him. "You stay with *him*," he snarled. "Someone has to stay with him. You can't let people walk over him and crush him."

"What about your father?" Hermione blurted, and then wanted to bite out her own tongue.

"He deserves it," Draco snarled. "He deserves worse. We need to go help Harry."

Then the noise became a thunder and they exchanged looks and began to run, even though Hermione was sure there was no helping Harry now.

\* \* \*

In the end, as in the beginning, it was just them.

Harry saw the memory of the beginning in those narrowed, watchful eyes, saw Voldemort's fingers wrap around his wand with lingering little touches, like a man with a long-desired lover, and over the abiding fury he felt a rush of sheer irritation.

This thing had been allowed to define his life for almost his entire life. He'd wondered, sometimes, if he was able to kill. Now he already knew he was. He'd killed Dumbledore. He'd *loved* Dumbledore.

He'd had to do it.

This creature had killed his parents and taken his friends and caused this war that had threatened everyone he loved and he was vermin. He had to be destroyed. It was all very simple.

Harry held onto his wand and remained calm, searching the face before him for his next move.

Voldemort looked grotesque, he realised in this new, cool place. He had walked through blood and risen from the dead to become this thing when once he had been human, and he stood there looking pleased with himself. Where was the victory in that?

"I've been waiting a long time for this," Voldemort whispered, voice pitched low and almost intimate.

"I did say you were pathetic," said Harry.

His mind was empty of everything but this one urge to kill, and all the ways he could do it. It was going to be something simple. Like a mother defending her child. Like before, when Dumbledore's wand had been just out of reach.

... and without that chance Harry would have died, because Dumbledore had been too powerful, just like Voldemort was now. This wasn't going to be some game with props and the headmaster watching, like taking a sword out of a hat. Harry had taken advantage of a small thing and then he'd wanted to shut his eyes but he couldn't, he had to keep focused, and he was looking into his



eyes as he raised his wand and said...

The sound of the Killing Curse was in the air, as if providing Harry with a prompt, and Harry felt a pang of fear for who it might have struck down.

There was no way to see, and the Killing Curse was not going to work here. Voldemort was waiting for it, and he had his wand in hand. But there was a problem Voldemort would have duelling Harry, and that might give Harry a chance. Voldemort waited, but Voldemort had been waiting years to kill him and it must be getting old. He lifted his wand and opened his lips, and Harry, waiting for this moment, lifted his wand and spoke as well.

Then their wands were frozen, magic trembling in stasis just as it had been in fourth year, and Voldemort stood with his magic locked with Harry's and no other defences. The battle had centred in the middle of the room, and even Nagini was slithering and biting among the bodies.

He had no magic, and he had no minions.

Harry had killed Dumbledore. This was *nothing*.

It was very clear suddenly to the killing machine that had been his mind. Voldemort was physically vulnerable. Sixteen years ago, it'd been his body that was destroyed, and his new body, bought with Harry's blood, meant he was flesh and blood again.

Anything that was flesh and blood could be killed, and he was ready to do it. He wanted to do it. He thought suddenly of how people who magic had warped were killed in Muggle stories: never with magic, always physically. Push them in the oven, roll them to death in a barrel, come hurtling out of the sky and *crush* them...

A plan began to form in Harry's mind.

There were screams behind him, screams and curselight making a battlefield within what was supposed to be a classroom. People were dying. He had to stop this *now*. The ghosts were squirming out of Voldemort's wand now, but he had killed enough people over the years so that they were strangers, pale strangers whispering encouragement he did not need, people he could not save.

Dumbledore had never expected him to try and fight him. There was one thing these people did not understand.

The line of magic between the wands was quivering. It would not hold.

Voldemort saw it too, and he began to smile, a slow, terrible smile.

"Do you have any last words?"

He didn't want his last thoughts to be of Voldemort. Voldemort wasn't worth that, so instead in that split second before pain and darkness he thought of everyone lost in the screaming tumult of war. He didn't have time to wonder if they were all right, he could only call up their names, to remember they existed as well as Voldemort, and they were more important.

*Ron, Hermione, Sirius, Draco.*

"Goodbye," said Harry. He broke contact by a fraction, and pointed his wand at a spot just over Voldemort's head. "*Accio wall!*"

He brought the entire south wall of Hogwarts tumbling down on them both.

\* \* \*

People stopped as the stones crashed around them, when Hermione and Draco were already running toward the sound of the wall going down.

"Support spells!" Lupin shouted at Sirius and the world in general, and as Hermione and Draco ran Hermione became aware that it was the spells of their own side that kept up the stone floor they were racing along, and kept the ceiling from falling.

Ahead of them was rubble, and beyond that the night sky. Stars looked impassively in on the ruin of Hogwarts.

The Death Eaters were not casting spells. Those left alive had dropped their wands, and were holding onto their arms where the Dark Mark lay as if their master's death left an ache behind. The Order of the Phoenix, without missing a beat between battle and arrest, began to round them up.

Hermione wanted to be lost in triumph. She wanted to find Ron and punch his arm and cry and say, *He did it, I knew he'd do it!* Instead she ran beside Draco Malfoy towards the heap of stones - the cairn, she kept thinking, while her mind tried to hide from the word - that Harry had made.

They reached it much too soon. Hermione could see the huge blocks that had held up Hogwarts, a heap on the flagstones, and she knew that anyone beneath would have been crushed.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

She heard someone cry out behind them, and recognised Pansy Parkinson's voice. She must have found Goyle, Hermione thought dully.

There was only the suddenly-quiet night and this heap of huge, stupid stones. It was never supposed to be like this.

She reached out and touched Draco's arm.

"He did it," she whispered, and was suddenly fighting back tears. "*I knew he'd do it!*"

Draco gave her a cold look.

"Don't be more absurdly sentimental than you can help," he sneered. "*I knew he'd do it, too. Now let's get him out.*"

She stared at him, not wanting to say the obvious, not when the ugly strained calm on his face was clearly the edge of despair, but others began to mass behind them and someone spoke.

It was Blaise Zabini. "What, dig him up so we can bury him again?"

"Shut up now!" commanded Draco, wheeling on Zabini with an almost relieved burst of savagery. "He's *not* dead!"

"Draco," Hermione said, and Draco looked at her.

Even with death all around them, she could see part of him was surprised at the unfamiliar intimacy of his name in her mouth. Hermione did not care. She was too busy trying not to hear what she was saying.

"I think... he's right. These stones are enormous. They would have crushed his spine - they would have broken every bone in his body -"

He would have known that, before he brought them down. Hermione pressed her hand over her mouth as she tried not to think about it, tried not to imagine what Harry must have felt. She was so grateful for Ron's strong arms suddenly sliding around her, and Ron's hands closing over hers. She felt him tremble with the same horrified grief.

Draco looked vicious. "I don't care! We're wizards, Granger, in case you forgot. It doesn't matter if his skull was caved in, as long as we can get to him on time. Now help me get him out!"

Hermione leaned back into Ron's embrace for a swift, sweet moment, as if winning meant that she could rest. Then she opened her eyes and looked at the night and the wounded and the dead, and Draco Malfoy covered in blood and dirt, cutting open his hands as he tried to lift a stone by himself.

"We're wizards," she said. "We can do better than this."

They all began to levitate stones. At first it was only Hermione, Draco, Ron and Pansy Parkinson, but others started to join in. Soon the night was full of flying rocks, some thrown against the other walls in their haste. Those crashes and the murmurs of the wounded were the only sounds as they worked on, in silent, desperate haste.

Then they came to the first body. It hung like a doll, like a huge black puppet used to frighten children at a party, and for a moment all of them hung back, not daring to touch it. He was supposed to come if you called, and he never died...

Hermione was abruptly furious with herself for being so silly.

She took a step forward, and realised Draco had taken one at the exact same time. He looked more apprehensive than she felt, but his face was grim. She felt Ron at her back, and all three of them together lifted the inhuman, broken thing and threw it aside like rubbish. And that was the end of the wicked wizard.

Harry was beneath him, his face bloody. He was very still.

Hermione was filled with tenderness, raw as a wound. She wanted nobody to touch it: she did not want Ron to comfort her, she did not want to look at Harry anymore. He had broken his glasses again, she thought stupidly. He was always breaking his glasses.

She was crying. Draco was swearing, kneeling beside the body - *Harry* - his breathing like sobbing but his eyes tearless.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," he snarled at everyone, and grabbed Harry's arm.

Hermione screamed as the bones in Harry's arm crunched together, making the rasping sound of something too shattered ever to be put back together.

"Can't you show some respect?"

"No," Draco said. "No, I won't. He's not dead, he's not dead because I say so! Damn you, Harry, open your eyes!"

This was nothing like victory as Hermione had imagined it, with their castle half in ruins and people still dying around them.

There was no miracle. Harry did not open his eyes.

But when Madam Pomfrey pushed away a crying Hermione and a swearing Draco, took Draco's place at Harry's side and pressed two fingers briefly against Harry's neck, she said she could feel a pulse.

# Epilogue

*Here is what I know now  
My salvation lies in your love*

Harry opened his eyes.

He blinked and tried to focus. It was a cloudy grey morning, he saw through the infirmary windows. The sunlight did not even appear to be trying, and fell far short of his bed. He felt as if someone had been grinding his bones with a pestle and mortar.

Draco was sitting in a chair beside his bed, leaning forward and watching him with pale eyes. He reminded Harry a bit of a vulture, hunched over in a tree and waiting with intense patience for his intended meal to die.

Harry smiled at him as best he could, and the tension flowed out of Draco's shoulders.

"Draco," Harry said, testing his voice and finding it cracked but still working. "What happened?"

"Well, I don't really know how to tell you this, Harry, but after you killed Voldemort Peter Pettigrew took the leadership and won the day. We were allowed to live to be his slave boys of evil."

Harry laughed cautiously, even though he had a dire foreboding that it would re-break his ribs. Draco's face softened further, smoothing out lines of bitterness and weariness until he looked almost normal, familiar and beloved.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, and in the absence of hostility or humour his tired drawl sounded almost sweet.

Harry levered himself up with great care, then relaxed into a sitting position against the pillows. "I'm... a bit surprised not to be dead," he answered honestly. "Why do you think that is?"

"We think Voldemort saved you," Draco said. "He fell on you, and the man was seven feet tall with an oversized head. His body protected you from the worst of it. Please don't die of the irony, Harry."

Harry only raised his eyebrows. He was still trying to test out all the bones in his body, which kept insisting they were broken and that being healed was a hollow illusion, liable to disappear if Harry made any sudden movements. If he had been protected from the worst of it, the worst must have...

Crushed someone to death.

Yes, Harry remembered. *I did that.*

Good. It had needed doing.

"Who - who else died?" he asked, dreading the answer.

"Weasley and Granger are all right," Draco said at once. "So are Professor Black and Professor Lupin."

Relief was all he felt for an instant before he remembered that this time it had not been a small group in danger: that this time, it had been war.

"Who died?"

"Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown," Draco answered flatly. "Natalie McDonald - we think she and Malcolm Baddock were trying to protect each other. Neither of them succeeded. I don't know which other Gryffindors you know."

"Tell me all the names," Harry said.

He sought cold comfort in the idea that this would be the last list of people he had not been able to save.

Draco complied, his voice toneless as if he had memorised the list already. Harry listened, catching names he did know among the strangers he had not saved. People from school. People from the Order of the Phoenix.

"Wait," he said. "What? The Order of the Phoenix? How did they get there?"

"Oh, it was a miracle, they appeared in the nick of time, it is a sign from above," Draco answered glibly. At Harry's extremely sceptical look, he added: "And I Owled Snape from the Owlery when we split up. I... nobody was supposed to know where he'd gone, he cast spells so nobody would find him, but he gave me an address and I gave my word I would never tell anyone. So - I lied to you about the letter I was writing, and I lied to you about why I wanted to split up. It was stupid. You were right to doubt me."

Harry did not ask how Draco had known Harry'd suspected about the letter. He suspected that Draco had been thinking over all the reasons Harry might have had to distrust him, as well as learning lists of the dead by heart.

"No, I wasn't," he said, and reached awkwardly for Draco's hand. Draco moved his hand away slightly, and returned to reading his invisible list. Harry let his hand fall.

Ernie McMillan. Nymphadora Tonks. Millicent Bulstrode.

"Is Pansy - ?" he asked when Draco paused in the seemingly interminable list, and then did not end the sentence. If so many people could be dead, Harry felt like saying the words could make it true.

But Draco said, "She's all right. She'll be touched you care, though I'm afraid nothing is going to drop Weasley from the top of her Most Likely Gryffindors list at this point. She clearly took a blow to the head which has gone untreated."

"Ron? Really?" Harry asked, blinking.

"Don't fret. I don't believe she's planning to break up Granger and Weasley, especially considering

the fact she was wondering whether she should let her bit of Hufflepuff knock her up so she could get out of the NEWTs."

"The NEWTs?" Harry repeated. "We're still having the NEWTs?" He was too tired to muster up any real indignation, but he felt it was a bit much all the same.

"Spending all summer in school to do it," Draco confirmed. "Granger is disgustingly happy. I blame our new headmaster for everything."

Harry's head was starting to pound, as if all this new information was battering down a door in order to enter his mind.

"Who's our new headmaster?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Professor Lupin."

"Oh," said Harry, and then with faint, gathering pleasure: "Oh. Good."

"I thought you would be glad. Of course, I consider it a scandal. It should have been Professor Snape. At least he might get the Defence Against the Dark Arts job, now that Dumbledore's dead."

It was as if someone was opening and closing blinds in Harry's mind. Open, he saw this mercifully still infirmary and closed, nothing but the memory of that night when Dumbledore...

"So you know," he said slowly.

"I know he's dead," Draco answered. "I know the cleansing spell to lift the record of spells you've cast from your wand. Snape taught it to me. It comes in very handy."

He took Harry's wand out of the belt loop of his jeans and, after a moment, Harry accepted it.

"All the people taken were Confunded," Draco went on. "Nobody's quite sure of what they saw. Nobody would believe you. I didn't suspect - and I never liked him, and I suspected *everybody*. He died in battle. That's all we need to say."

Harry cleared his throat and spoke the whole truth to Draco, because Draco would understand it completely.

"I killed him," he said. "I had to."

Draco nodded, in easy acceptance of the rage that would have made anyone else back away. Something disturbed the calm of his face, but the emotion passed too fast for Harry to identify it.

"I killed my father," Draco returned. "I wanted to."

Harry wanted to say something. That he was glad Lucius was dead didn't seem appropriate, and the silence stretched on, drawing tight as a pulled string in a musical instrument until a broken noise must emerge.

Draco made it. "He killed Goyle," he went on, and his voice broke. "He meant to kill me, and Goyle

got in front of me, and I don't know why he did it!"

"Your father?"

"Goyle! I can't understand. He's dead because of me and I still don't understand why he *did* it!"

Harry didn't know if he did. He certainly didn't know how to say the right thing, not with Draco drawn with pain and confusion, and looking to him angrily for answers.

"He loved you," he said.

Draco's eyes were bleak.

"I loved my father," he said. "I can't... I never knew how to love anyone else. He watched me and trained me when I was young, and I thought that - I don't know, I thought that he would love me if I could only make him proud enough! He was a bastard, and he was ready to crawl and kill to get what he wanted, and I understand killing now but I'm damned if I'll ever understand crawling. He never could have loved me, and Goyle died for me, and I had it all wrong."

Harry reached out, testing a sudden theory, and saw Draco move his hand away again.

"You understand more now."

"I'm still who I am," Draco said. He looked pinched and miserable, as if he was bullying himself and being extremely cruel about it, as if his father's voice was still ringing in his ears. "I would have been a Death Eater if he hadn't gone. I would have done it, to win some approval from him. I would have gone down that path, thinking he knew best, and by the time I learned otherwise it would have been far too late. I still don't know how to do it right. I still don't know any of the words."

"My friend died for me, because I told myself stupid, pathetic lies about my father and I didn't kill him the moment I saw him, and I don't even know why anyone would have done that for me!"

Draco avoided his eyes and tried to resume his calm. "Not to enact you a three-act drama when you're still hospitalised," he said after a moment. "I just wanted to tell you why... you know. It wouldn't work."

There was a silence. Harry waited until Draco gave him a cautious look, and then he glared at him.

"Why are you talking such total crap?" he demanded.

\* \* \*

Hermione, on their hourly Harry check-up, opened the door and saw Harry and Draco in the middle of what looked like an intense conversation. Her first thought was that she was going to Stun Draco and put him in a corner somewhere to think about why harassing invalids was a terrible idea.

Her second thought was to close the door as tactfully as possible, and lean back against it. Ron stared at her.

"Why aren't we going inside?"



"What? Nothing! No reason. Let's take a walk!" Hermione suggested brightly.

Ron eyed her dubiously. "I think I want to go inside," he said, in a tone that indicated Mrs Weasley hadn't raised a fool.

"You can't! Er, I mean, Harry's awake!"

"So?" Ron said. "That's good news. We get on quite well when he's conscious, remember?"

"All right, Ron, listen to me: you're not to get upset."

"Upset?" Ron exclaimed. "I'm not going to get upset. Why?" His voice was rising with each word. "What is there to get upset about?!"

Hermione took a deep breath. "Nothing," she answered. "I didn't like it myself - well, I'm still not sure I like it, but Harry's serious about it, and it's not as bad as I thought. They have a strange way of getting on that does seem to be working and at least now I'm sure that -"

"Hermione, if you're trying to tell me that Harry's having a personal moment in there, you only had to say."

The corridor outside the infirmary was not large enough to contain all of Hermione's surprise. Ron looked ever so slightly smug.

"I did figure it out. I'm not stupid, you know."

Hermione could not seem to shut her mouth. It hung open uselessly. "You did?"

"Well, Harry said there was someone and after that I would've thought it was fairly obvious."

"I - I suppose so..."

"And I think you're right," Ron continued blithely. "It could be worse."

"You think so?" Hermione had the horrible thought that perhaps he was considering Snape.

"I'm not crazy about Slytherins, but, well, if you chose the right side I suppose it doesn't matter which house you belong to. Anyway, Harry's been camped in the Slytherin dungeons half the time for months." He gave her a little, teasing smile. "It doesn't take a genius to put the pieces together, you know."

"Well... well, no, of course not," Hermione answered, and was able to regain control of her facial muscles enough to give him an approving smile. "You're being very sensible, Ron. I must say, I wouldn't have expected it."

He tugged down the frayed sleeves of his jumper, which she thought was the Ron Weasley equivalent of preening himself.

"I'm tolerant, that's what I am," he informed her. "Anyway, really, I quite like her. She needs to get new friends, of course, but Harry's friends with Malfoy too, so it won't bother him."

It took an instant to sink in.

"Sorry?" Hermione said. "*What* did you say? She - who are you talking about?"

Ron blinked at her. "Pansy Parkinson, of course. She's the only girl in the group of Slytherins Harry's been hanging around, right?"

In the space of two minutes Hermione came up with a hundred sentences that began: *That's absolutely true, Ron*, but...

"Are you taking my name in vain, Weasley?" asked a cheerful voice, and Hermione lifted horrified eyes from her intense contemplation of the floor to Pansy Parkinson, coming down the corridor.

Frankly, Hermione preferred Draco. At least Draco cracked a book once in a while, and didn't wear those shocking skirts.

While Hermione fought off hideous visions of Draco Malfoy in a shocking skirt, she heard Pansy strike up what appeared to be a friendly chat with *her* boyfriend. One part of her mind noted that Ron had said he quite liked her. Hussy that she was.

"I'm bringing chocolates," Pansy informed him. "I've hardly eaten any at all, too. I saw, um... girl Weasley and Patil carting their wounded around the lake in some sort of love fest for our war heroes, and I thought this would be a good time to feed the silly twit."

"You know Harry's awake?" Ron asked.

"Is he?" Pansy inquired. She paused thoughtfully. "I expect they're busy in there, then. I shall just have to eat these myself."

She flipped open the lid. Hermione noticed that Ron was looking even more confused than before.

So Seamus and Dean were both up and about again. They had been the last of the badly hurt, besides Harry. Seamus had been forced to re-grow the bones in both legs, and Dean had been in bed getting over Cruciatus for two days. Ginny had slept on her cloak beside his infirmary bed.

Perhaps Seamus could comfort Padma a little. She'd been so quiet, ever since...

Hermione wrenched her mind away from the thought of Parvati, and thought about Seamus and Dean again. They were walking, and Harry was awake. It was more than they could have hoped for less than a week ago.

They were healing. They were all going to recover.

She felt fond of everyone, even Pansy Parkinson, who now seemed to be taunting Ron with her chocolate box.

"He doesn't want any," she interposed firmly.

"That's right," Ron said, staring at them with a wistful air. "I don't even want one."

Pansy had caught the edge to Hermione's tone. "Don't worry," she said, sounding maliciously amused and thus rather like Draco. "I'm quite happy with my Hufflepuff."

"Zacharias Smith?"

Pansy selected another chocolate. "Sure, whatever."

Ron's mind, briefly distracted by chocolate, veered back to his original point. Hermione had known this was coming.

"Wait," he said. "If you're here –" Pansy smiled and toasted him with her box of chocolates – "Yes, but if you're here... then who's in there with Harry?"

Hermione precipitately spread-eagled herself against the door again.

"Don't go in there!"

"Do," Pansy urged him, and then seemed struck by a pang of conscience. She held out her box of chocolates. "You'd better take a chocolate first," she added kindly. "Take one of the ones with alcohol inside. I think you're going to need it."

\* \* \*

"Pardon me?" Draco said, with awful and icy politeness.

Harry looked at him, and had none of the right words. He was sure, all the same.

"You're right, you are stupid," he said.

"You're a romantic, that's your trouble," Draco remarked dryly.

"So you loved your dad. Most people do, and he was a bastard, and you did the right thing. It doesn't matter what you think you would have done if things were different. You did the right thing."

Draco looked as if he had a reply already burning his lips, but he never got a chance to deliver it. Madam Pomfrey added the final touch to the charm of the grey infirmary by walking out of her supply room with a vat of stinking liquid.

"Where's that Dean Thomas? He's not skipping his Fortifying Syrup again," he announced briskly. She gave Harry a scrutinising look, and delivered her medical opinion. "You're awake."

"Er, yes."

"Good thing too," Madam Pomfrey said severely. "Now perhaps Mr Malfoy will go to his *own* bed, and get some *sleep*. Excuse me."

She left the room, intent on fortifying Dean by any means necessary. They heard her scolding some students for loitering around the infirmary, and the door shut with a bang. Draco was a little bit pink.

"I merely dropped by briefly on my way somewhere else. This is my first visit, as a matter of fact," he assured Harry. "The woman is mad. Stays in her supply room all day long mixing up her syrups and possets and suchlike... It's the fumes," he added peevishly. "They melt the brain. Stop smiling."

Harry didn't. It was only a small smile, all he could manage when the list of people he had not saved kept repeating in his mind, but he had just recaptured the feeling he'd had, just before that night full of death, that someday he was going to be ridiculously happy. There was time now, all the time in the world. The lingering horror would not stay forever. He could work up to it.

He realised part of the reason the sky was dark was because there were huge stones being levitated in the air past the window. There was a noise, suddenly, like... someone playing bumper cars with enormous slabs of granite.

"Watch what you're doing, Black!" Snape's unmistakable voice snapped from below.

"Who said it was an *accident*?" Sirius crowed. "Got you again!"

Contentment rolled over Harry like a wave of warm water as he realised what they were doing.

Hogwarts would be restored. They were rebuilding.

"Anyway, someone had to stay here and prevent innocent children from accidentally seeing your pyjamas!" Draco announced, with the air of one producing his trump card. "I thought I'd burned all the things like that in your closet, but no, Granger comes up with that - that monstrosity, and claims it's your favourite pair. I screamed and tried to rip it off, but Granger misinterpreted that completely."

Harry looked down at his pyjamas, and remembered hiding them under a pillow to save them from their fiery fate. That had been - God, it felt like years ago.

Some things were still the same.

"You're not taking it back," he said abruptly. "I won't let you. You're bloody mine."

Draco stared at him. "Tell me that I don't have to explain to you that - what I said on the train wasn't an actual proposal of marriage. Tell me that, Harry."

"You didn't really say anything on the train, you know."

"I never do. I told you," said Draco. "I don't know the words."

"Doesn't matter. I understood what you meant," Harry said. "And you did mean it. The only thing that's different is that we're not going to die. Are you scared?"

"You've seen me fail," Draco told him, with his father's mocking twist of a smile. "It's one thing I do really well. My failures are *spectacular*."

"I'll take my chances."

Draco was eyeing him as if he was a wild animal escaped from a cage. "You'll change your mind."

Harry noticed that he did not say *he* would change his mind.

"Draco Malfoy, you stupid git. You're so lucky that I'm even more stubborn than you are."

He grabbed the bedpost and hauled himself up, his back giving a silent, prolonged scream of agony. Draco got off his chair, his voice suddenly sharp with concern.

"Harry, stop that! We had to re-grow almost every bone in your body - Harry, you'll hurt yourself!"

Every bone in Harry's body shouted vehement agreement with him. Harry winced as his feet hit the ground, and then he tried bearing his own weight. It worked, just about.

Draco was standing up, looking at him uncertainly. Harry imagined he was torn between the logic that said not to touch Harry and an irritated impulse to throw him back on the bed.

Unfortunately, Draco did not give way to his impulses. Harry took a step towards him, and then faltered from mingled pain and sudden, real doubt. He was sure, but... what if...?

"Where are my glasses?" he demanded. If he could see, he might be certain.

Certainty came over him, as warm and enveloping as contentment, when Draco suddenly spoke in a more decided tone.

"You don't need glasses," he said. "I'll come closer."

He stepped into Harry's personal space, so close that Harry felt the hitch of breath in his chest. His hands were held up in a gesture of surrender, a fraction from Harry's skin.

Harry put his hands on Draco's hips and pulled him in that extra fraction. Standing up was sending a dull ache all through his body, but his palms were pressed against the hot line of skin between Draco's jeans and his T-shirt, and Draco's breath was against his cheek. It was sort of worth it.

"It wasn't your fault about Goyle," he said softly. "It's - God, it's bad, but it wasn't your fault. I trusted someone too much as well, but I'm not going to stop trusting everyone. I can't - you idiot, d'you think you're the only one who's bad at saying things? I was raised in a cupboard, I couldn't - I don't want anyone normal."

He was sure Draco was raising his eyebrows at this oddly worded compliment, but even pain was fading to the back of his mind as Draco breathed in, slowly, and then suddenly had his hands gripping tightly at Harry's shoulders. He held on too hard. Harry liked it.

Draco moved his face into alignment with Harry's, slid his mouth over his for a sudden, slow kiss. Harry's grasp of his hips turned possessive: he was sure now.

"There's more," Draco breathed into the kiss. "I'm disgusting. I'm embarrassed to know myself."

"What else?" Harry pursued. His chest felt full and warm, somehow: his blood was thrumming with the urge to act, and yet he was happy to just stand there and watch Draco fumble for his words.

"I," Draco said. "I, there's something I should - I like the stupid way you dress. I even like the way

your hair is always horrible. Harry, I'm a very sick man."

Harry leaned back about half an inch as realisation of what Draco was actually saying dawned.

"You like me," he said, and almost laughed.

Draco looked mortified. "It was fairly obvious."

"Yeah, absolutely. How could I be so blind? It was so obvious that 'don't talk to me, don't touch me, don't look at me' meant 'Come to me, I want you'."

Harry might have been snickering a bit. Draco was going more and more pink.

"Shut up. Go back to bed," he muttered. "I thought you were mad about me. Where's the adulation? Where's the worship? I thought I was going to be your *alabaster idol* -"

Draco kissed him again, possibly to stop him laughing so much.

"No you didn't, and don't ever say those words again," Harry instructed him.

Draco took shameless advantage of his weakened state by taking a firm hold of his shoulders and pushing him down onto the bed. Somehow Draco ended up on there too.

Harry was extremely grateful for the softness of the pillows beneath him, but a bit more grateful for Draco on top of him, giving him a very disappointed look and fiddling with the buttons on his pyjama top.

"By the way," Draco remarked, "I've decided that since we're having a new summer term and everything, any Quidditch matches are null and void. Which leaves Slytherin still in the running for House Cup. We'll get it this year. Just you wait and see."

Harry's pyjama top was open now.

"You're a dirty cheater, Draco Malfoy," Harry said.

There was light in the infirmary now, because of the lack of flying stones in the sky. Lupin had probably called a halt to rebuilding in order to tell off Snape and Sirius. There was enough light to see something as plain as this.

He was already breathing hard, but he lifted his hand and pushed a strand of Draco's hair back for the distracted, surprised look that came over Draco's face. Over something as small as that.

Saying things deliberately was hard, but he did want to mark the moment.

"Draco," Harry said. "I -"

"Shut up," Draco told him, and at Harry's quick frown he laughed and kissed him again, teeth lingering on his lower lip as if he did not want to let go of the kiss. He was laughing and breathless and caught in the kiss as he looked down at Harry, the light turning his hair gold.

"I meant, not *now*, Harry," he murmured. "I want to learn the words."