

## Second Chances

by Kishijoten

**Rating:** R

**Spoilers:** PS/SS, CoS, PoA, GoF, OotP, QTTA, FB. Written between Goblet of Fire and Order of Phoenix.

**Genre:** Romance, Slash

**Era:** Multiple Eras

**Main Character(s):** D, H

**Ship(s):** None

**Summary:** For the first time in more than a decade, Harry Potter crosses paths with Draco Malfoy. Both have changed a great deal, but what do those changes mean to them - and to each other?  
\*\*slash\*\*

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### Chapter One

Draco Malfoy stood before the full length mirror, struggling to get his ruffled silk cravat to lie down properly against the front of his new dress robes. He had been fighting with the cravat for a full fifteen minutes, and it simply refused to cooperate. With a frustrated scowl, Draco ripped the offending garment off and threw it down onto the dressing table in disgust.

Smiling slightly, Lucius turned his son to face him, retrieved the cravat, and made quick work of settling it into place.

"There," Lucius said, turning Draco towards the mirror. "You look quite handsome, Draco. At least you would if you would stop grimacing."

"Sorry, Father," Draco mumbled, trying to tame a stray lock of hair.

With a little 'tut', Lucius righted his son's hair as he had the cravat. "Honestly, Draco, I've never seen you in such a state," he rebuked mildly.

"Yes, well, I've never been about to be married before," Draco retorted sharply.

Lucius' eyes darkened slightly at Draco's insolent response. "One would think you were having second thoughts."

"One would be right," Draco muttered. He turned to look into his father's eyes, searching there for answers to the questions that troubled him. "Marriage is meant to be a promise of eternal love. How can I make such a promise when I'm not even certain I know what love is?"

"Don't be melodramatic, Draco," Lucius said, his brow furrowing and jaw clenching slightly in annoyance. "Marriage is a business venture. A contract. It has nothing to do with love, eternal or otherwise."

Pushing aside his worries, Draco gave his father a small, forced smile. "Sorry, Father. I suppose I'm just nervous."

Lucius returned the smile. "I recall feeling more than a little nervous on my own wedding day. The prospect of marrying a woman like Narcissa Black was rather daunting. Thinking ahead to your wedding night helps," he confided with a wicked little grin.

Draco turned pale. The last thing he wanted to think about was having it off with his wife, but he certainly didn't want to try to explain that to his father. He glanced at the clock, wishing there was a way off of this path he had been made to tread.

"It's time," Lucius said.

*'It's time,'* Draco thought, the words repeating in his head, sounding his doom. Time to go and stand and wait for his bride to join him at the altar. Time to speak his vows. Time to let go of his own hopes and dreams and settle into the life his parents had chosen for him.

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Pansy Parkinson Malfoy was radiant in her snowy white wedding robes. She clung happily to her new husband's arm, smiling brightly. She, at least, had no qualms about the marriage.

Draco pretended to listen to the small talk going on around him, but his mind was on other things. Mostly he considered the vows he and Pansy had taken, the promises they had just made to one another. Pansy, he knew, would never 'obey' him. He wondered if her breaking that vow would cancel out the fact that he had promised to love her but never would.

The wedding reception seemed to last forever, but at last the proprieties had been observed and Draco and Pansy were ushered off to begin their life together.

When the couple reached the elegant hotel where they would spend their honeymoon, Pansy smiled coyly at Draco and excused herself to 'tidy up'. Fighting down a wave of nervousness and nausea, Draco dug through his luggage. He quickly located that which he sought - a small vial filled with rose-coloured liquid.

Draco unstopped the vial and downed the potion, grimacing slightly at its sickly sweet taste. By the time he and Pansy had both finished showering and dressing for bed, the potion would be working. He thanked Snape silently for being such an effective potions teacher. With the help of the potion, his bride would never know that he couldn't stand the thought of consummating their marriage.

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The two week honeymoon passed quickly, although not as quickly as Draco would have liked. By the time they returned to Malfoy Manor, his potion stores were almost entirely depleted, and he was beginning to despair. Once they were ensconced in the manor, however, Pansy found other ways to occupy her time, and the two fell into a comfortable routine of ignoring one another almost completely.

If Pansy ever noticed that her husband never initiated sex, she kept her mouth shut about it. She did, however, begin to complain about how he never spent time with her, about how they never went out to the big soirees that she and Narcissa both loved, and about living with his parents. Eventually, Draco tired of her complaints and agreed to move into a home of their own.

Initially, Narcissa and Lucius were less than pleased with the idea of their son and daughter-in-law moving from the family home. A few days later, however, Pansy announced that she was pregnant,

and the older couple quickly changed their minds. Neither of them really wanted to deal with a crying baby at their ages.

Draco hoped fervently for a son. If his firstborn turned out to be a boy who would one day inherit the Malfoy fortune and who could carry on the Malfoy name, then his conjugal duties would be complete and he would no longer be obligated to have relations with his wife.

Fate plays by its own rules, however. The child was a girl, small and pink and perfect. Draco fell in love with her the moment he first looked down at her tiny face. He forgot to be disappointed that she was not the son he had wanted.

Pansy wanted to name their daughter 'Rose'. Draco laughed at the irony, which Pansy would not appreciate if she knew of the rose-based potion he had to dose himself with to be able to create this tiny little miracle.

"I think not," he said simply. "Her name shall be Seraphine. Seraphine Angelica Malfoy."

He silently dared Pansy to argue with him, but she agreed readily. She almost always did. It was one of the things that most annoyed Draco about his wife.

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Seraphine grew, as children do, and Draco enjoyed every moment to the fullest. Pansy, however, took little interest in the child. In fact, she was quite jealous of all the time that Draco spent with his infant daughter - time that Pansy felt he should be spending with her.

"We have house elves to look after her, Draco," she told him often.

He ignored her and continued to care for his daughter himself.

Seraphine's first word, unsurprisingly, was 'Dada'. She soon learned to say 'Mama' as well, but only because her father wished it of her.

On Sera's first birthday, Pansy informed Draco that she was pregnant again. Again, Draco hoped for a boy. This time Draco got his wish - in spades.

Before Sera had been in the world eighteen months, Damien and Adrian Malfoy were born. Before the twins were six months old, Draco had moved into his own bedroom.

Life continued on, Draco busy with his three children, Pansy busy with her high society goings on. Despite their paper marriage, Draco was quite happy. He needed nothing beyond the small, warm, wiggly bodies that begged to be picked up and cuddled on his lap.

When Seraphine was three, she was - as all three year olds are - inquisitive, impulsive, and headstrong. Her two year old brothers were very much the same, and the three of them together could overwhelm anyone. Draco was no saint, and sometimes he lost his temper and raised his voice to his precious babies, but there was never any doubt of his love for them - or of their love for him.

Pansy was a different story. She wanted nothing whatever to do with her children. In Draco's opinion, she did not deserve the title of 'Mother'. Although his own mother had often been distant, he had at least been certain of Narcissa's love for him. He felt his babies were missing out on something very important, but he didn't have any idea what to do about it.

Just a few days before Sera turned four she decided to try out her mother's cosmetic potions. Pansy caught her at it and flew into a rage at seeing the child covered in gobs of very expensive personalised creams and salves and reeking of designer perfume.

"What do you think you're doing?" Pansy yelled. "You never ever touch anything that doesn't belong to you! You are never to come into my rooms again!"

She jerked the girl up from her chair, shaking her violently as she screamed into her cherubic little face.

Draco, drawn by the shouting, rushed in and snatched his daughter from his wife's vice-like grip.

"What the fuck is the matter with you?" he cried. He cradled his daughter to his chest, stroking her soft blonde curls in an attempt to calm the sobs that racked her small body. "It's all right," he crooned, striding out of the room.

Once he was certain that Sera hadn't been hurt, he cleaned her up and turned her and the twins over to the house elves so that he could have a talk with his wife. He confronted her about her earlier actions, hoping to see some sign of remorse. Pansy held her ground, however.

"I'm going home," Draco informed her. "You're welcome to stay here - in fact I'll sign the house over to you. But the children and I are going back to the Manor."

"What are you talking about?" Pansy wanted to know.

"I'm leaving you, Pansy. Is that clear enough for you?"

"You can't!" She screamed. "You can't leave me! The marriage contract..."

"I can and I am," Draco cut her off. The finality in his voice shut her up momentarily, and he stalked out before she could say another word.

Truthfully, Draco had no desire to return to Malfoy Manor. He knew his parents adored their grandchildren, but he also knew they would be unable to endure them on a daily basis. As he supervised the house elves in packing his and the children's things, he tried to decide what alternatives he might have. In the end, he decided to go back to the Manor and adjust his plans as needed.

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Lucius and Narcissa greeted their son and grandchildren with open arms. Within a few days, however, the children had begun to grate on Lucius' nerves, and he began giving Draco advice on discipline and training.

Draco didn't want his children growing up as he had - controlled mostly by fear of his father. He no longer feared the man - he knew that as Lucius' son he was mostly safe from the man's temper - but years of living under the shadow of that temper had left its mark on him. He wanted better for his children. He simply could not bear the thought of subjecting Sera and the twins to Lucius' childrearing methods.

After consulting with his mother, Draco decided to take advantage of the family fortune. He and the children would travel, spending time in the Malfoy-owned homes scattered across the globe.

"Stay away until this Voldemort mess is over and done with, Draco," Narcissa advised him. "Your father says the man's gone a bit mad, lost his focus. He isn't at all certain that Riddle isn't going to be brought down. Should Dumbledore win the upcoming confrontation, your absence will keep you safe from the Ministry. Should Voldemort win....should Voldemort win, Draco, I must ask you not to return. If the man is as far gone as your father believes, Britain will no longer be safe. I won't have my grandchildren's lives risked needlessly."

Draco eagerly complied, whisking his children away at once. When Seraphine reached an age to begin school - at Hogwarts or the foreign equivalent - he would settle down again, but in the meantime, they would see the world and he would teach them what they needed to know.

Taking his mother's advice to heart, Draco considered what Voldemort's downfall would mean. Likely most of the Dark Lord's followers - Draco's father among them - would end up dead or in Azkaban. Those left behind would have to keep their noses clean and play at being 'politically correct.' In order to fit into what Draco privately thought of as 'Dumbledore's New World Order', he would need to learn to co-exist peacefully with Muggles and Mudbloods - no matter how distasteful that thought might be.

As he traveled with his children, Draco began to teach them and himself as much as possible about the Muggle world. They stayed for a time in an upscale Muggle hotel, discovering the delights of electricity, television, McDonald's hamburgers, and Muggle music. The more Draco saw of the Muggle world, and Muggle ingenuity, the more he developed a grudging respect for the magically impaired.

Freed from the constraints of polite society and the shadow of their overbearing mother, the children blossomed. They all showed signs of magic early on, to their father's delight, and they were quick to learn their lessons.

Seraphine showed an affinity for reading, writing, and drawing. She surprised her father one day by announcing, quite unexpectedly, that she would be Britain's Minister of Magic one day. Of course, within a few days she had decided she would rather be a prima ballerina, and soon afterwards she wanted to be an astronaut. No matter what her dream job of the week was, all of Sera's goals had one thing in common: they involved going farther, moving faster, working harder, and doing more than anyone else. She simply wanted to be the best.

Adrian, an affectionate little scrapper, was closer to his sister than to his twin. Often Adrian turned to his sister, rather than his father, when he had a bump or a scrape. He was steadfastly loyal to her - and his father and brother as well. He was also fearless, and often frightened his father by putting himself into death-defying situations that he always managed to come out of with hardly a scratch.

Damien developed a love for music and Muggle television early on. Although Draco didn't want his son becoming too attached to anything that was strictly Muggle, he indulged the child and let him watch entirely too much television. Damien continued to cling to his daddy such that Draco hardly ever had a moment to himself, but the telly would often buy him a little time. Sometimes Draco wondered if the clinging wasn't just an act that Damien devised to make certain that Draco allowed the boy to watch his beloved cartoons.

Life was far from perfect for the little family. They had their share of fevers, nightmares, disagreements, temper tantrums, and - in the case of the twins - even the occasional fistfight.

Adrian, for the most part, was a good-natured child, loving and eager to please. He would occasionally do something- like trying to ride a wild Granian foal - which was stupid and life threatening, but not strictly forbidden. Typically, Draco was so relieved to have his son alive and intact that he forgot to punish the boy for his escapades.

Damien developed a bad habit of talking back to his father, something Draco would never have dared to do as a child. Sometimes the urge to slap the boy's insolent little mouth almost overwhelmed

Draco, and he had to force himself to walk away and count to ten before continuing the confrontation and doling out punishment.

Sera remained headstrong and insatiably curious. When she took apart his brand new racing broom to see how many straws it took to make one, Draco had to vent his anger loudly and abruptly to avoid spanking her, but avoid it he did.

Pansy had been quick to resort to slapping or spanking, although she knew Draco disapproved. Only upon leaving Pansy did he realise how horribly she had treated his children. Often he regretted not having left her sooner, before those slaps grew more violent. Draco had vowed to himself that he would never - under any circumstances - put himself on her level.

If he sometimes felt that something was missing from his life, Draco never said anything. He loved his children, and he was quite happy being a single father. He was proud of his daughter and sons and delighted in their small triumphs. All in all, he felt that he had been given a better life than he had ever dreamed of.

A few months after her eleventh birthday, Seraphine received her acceptance letter from Hogwarts. Voldemort had recently been vanquished, making it safe for them to return to Britain, so Draco left the choice of schools up to Sera. She decided at once that she wanted to attend the same school her father had. Draco and the children again moved into Malfoy Manor on a temporary basis, just until Draco managed to purchase a moderately sized home for the four of them near Hogsmeade. He was unable to bear the thought of being far away from any of his children.

Draco managed to procure a portkey to take them to the train station so that Sera could make the customary voyage to Hogwarts. She thought it daft, but he put her on the train anyway. He stood at the station and watched her go. Beside him, Damien watched with excitement flashing in his eyes. On his other side, Adrian was clinging to him for support and crying openly.

Seraphine was sorted into Slytherin, much to the surprise of no one. She did well in her classes, avoided getting any detentions, and made a few friends. She was happy at Hogwarts, but missed her father and her brothers - and told them so often in her letters.

That first year of separation was hell on all of them, but they somehow made it through. The next September, the twins accompanied Sera to Hogwarts, and Draco was left feeling bereft.

Damien joined his sister in Slytherin. Adrian, much to the boy's horror, was placed into Hufflepuff. He wanted very much to be with his sister, and his brother, and begged his father to make Headmistress McGonagall place him in Slytherin.

After a brief visit with McGonagall in which he expressed his concerns for his youngest child and shared his letter with her, but made no request to change his son's House affiliation, Draco wrote a reply to his son. He encouraged Adrian to walk his own path, and reminded him that even though the other two were not in his same House, there was nothing to keep them from spending their free time together. He reminded Adrian also that he, Sera, and Damien would all always be there for him if he needed them.

On October 31<sup>st</sup>, Draco celebrated his thirty-second birthday alone. Owls brought him handmade birthday cards from his children and well-wishes from his parents. To his great surprise, another owl arrived, bearing the Hogwarts seal and strangely familiar handwriting.

To his even greater surprise, the letter was signed *'Harry Potter'*.

## Chapter Two

Harry Potter slid into his seat at the High Table in Hogwarts Great Hall, cursing his luck that he had come down late and ended up having to sit next to none other than Severus Snape. In his opinion, having to sit beside Snape was a poor beginning to his teaching career.

It had been twenty years since Harry had first set foot in the Great Hall as a student. More than ten years had passed since the last time he had been there. To return now - as a teacher, no less - seemed surreal and made him more than a little nervous.

Professor McGonagall, who had become Headmistress the previous year after Dumbledore died in the final confrontation with Voldemort, had offered Harry a position at Hogwarts after the war. She had, in fact, begged him to accept the position. The previous year's Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher had been prone to nonsensical ramblings and was forced into a long over-due and much needed retirement.

Everything that Harry had endured during the second war against Voldemort had caused him to rethink his career as an Auror, and he was grateful for Minerva's offer. Although excited by the prospect of filling young minds with practical knowledge, he wasn't sure he was up to the task. He worried that he wouldn't be a good teacher. Minerva was quick to remind him of how he had undertaken the role of Defence teacher once before - when he was only fifteen - and in the end he had accepted the position.

As he watched the fresh batch of first year students file into the Great Hall, he found himself thinking back to his own first day at Hogwarts. He recalled how nervous he and his new friends had been as they worried over what the Sorting might entail. He remembered fighting with the Sorting Hat to not be placed into Slytherin.

Professor Sprout, who was now Deputy Headmistress, began to call the children forward to be sorted. "Andrews, Reese," became the first new Gryffindor that year. Harry watched the boys and girls move one at a time to sit on the stool and be sorted into their Houses, trying to concentrate on the faces and names, but feeling almost dizzy with the newness of seeing the ritual from a teacher's point of view.

When "Malfoy, Adrian," was called, Harry snapped out of his daydreams. His eyes narrowed as he watched the round-faced, curly-haired boy perch nervously on the stool. Professor Sprout dropped the Hat on Adrian's head, and for long moments, silence reigned.

"Hufflepuff!" the hat proclaimed. Harry watched as the boy's mouth turned down in a frown and tears formed in his deep blue eyes. Reluctantly the boy slipped off of the stool and made his way toward the Hufflepuff table, his eyes straying longingly to a stunned looking blonde-haired girl sitting amongst the Slytherins.

"Malfoy, Damien," Professor Sprout called, and Harry turned his attention away from the Hufflepuff and to the small boy sauntering up to the stool. Damien Malfoy was the spitting image of his father, from his flaxen hair and grey eyes to his arrogant strut and that damned infuriating smirk. Like his father, Damien was placed into Slytherin House.

Harry's eyes darted back to Adrian Malfoy, and he watched with great sadness as tears filled the child's eyes and spilled over the rims to cascade down his rosy cheeks. Harry tried to imagine how Fred and George Weasley might have felt had the hat put them into separate houses. He couldn't even begin to comprehend how bereft that child must feel.

Harry vowed to keep an eye on all of the Malfoy children, for more reasons than one.

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When Harry was a student at Hogwarts, his first and second year Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers had been worse than hopeless. Harry and his classmates had learned very little during those two years. Only when Remus Lupin came to Hogwarts in Harry's third year did Defence classes become worthwhile. Remus had taught them all about magical creatures, including boggarts, hinkypunks, and grindylows. Harry chose to pattern his curriculum based on his own experiences and started his first and second year students out with magical creatures.

Harry also considered it wise to throw boggarts at the children before their fears matured to things best kept outside of the classroom.

The very first Defence Against the Dark Arts class that Harry taught turned out to be second year Slytherins. Seraphine Malfoy reminded Harry a good deal of Hermione Granger. She knew all the answers, was polite and well-mannered, and paid close attention to his lecture.

The similarity to his childhood friend took him by surprise - especially since the girl was, after all, a Malfoy - and he felt a momentary pang of loneliness. For years, he had Hermione and Ron by his side. Now Hermione was busy with her research and Ron with his Ministry job, his wife, and his ever-growing brood of red-haired children. Things would never again be as they had when the three of them were young, and unless he kept himself busy, he missed his friends so much he could hardly bear it.

Later in the day, Harry met Damien Malfoy for the first time. The boy did not seem to be quite as much of an arse as his father had been at his age, and Harry was more than willing to give the boy the benefit of the doubt. Damien seemed to have a lot of potential, and he, like his sister, paid attention in class.

Only when Adrian appeared in the Dark Arts classroom the next day did Harry encounter a Malfoy that gave him cause for concern.

Adrian was not disruptive or disrespectful, but neither did he volunteer any answers or pay particular attention to the lecture.

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry said, gaining the boy's attention. "Perhaps you could tell the class how to banish a boggart?"

The boy just stared. No shrug, no scowl, no snarky comment or dismissive gesture. Just a blank stare.

Harry moved up beside Adrian's desk and crouched down so that he was eye-level with the boy. "I'd like an answer of some sort, Mr. Malfoy. I won't resort to threatening to take away house points, as some do, but I do expect my questions to be dignified with a response," Harry said quietly. "Do you know how to banish a boggart?" he asked again.

Adrian nodded. Harry was not surprised that the boy knew how to accomplish the simple task. He decided to chance another question.

"Will you tell the class how it's done?"



Adrian shook his head slightly to indicate that no, he would not tell the class.

"All right," Harry acquiesced. "Are you ill? Do you need to go and see Madame Pomfrey?" he asked, although he was fairly certain as to what was troubling the boy.

Again, Adrian replied with a silent negative.

Harry returned to teaching his lesson, and did not call on Adrian again. He promised the class that he would try to procure a boggart for them to practice on before the next lesson, and then he dismissed them. As he watched Adrian slip silently out of the classroom, Harry couldn't help wondering what form the boggart would take when fueled by the boy's fears.

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As the days turned into weeks, Harry was pleased to see his students learning - and enjoying the learning process. His first and second year students tackled various dark creatures, coupling lectures with practical lessons.

As it turned out, it was several weeks before Harry could find the promised boggart for his students to practice on. Near the end of October, however, he happened on one and, after a brief review, turned the creature loose on his armed and prepared students.

Harry was disturbed to see Seraphine's boggart take the form of Pansy Parkinson Malfoy. He didn't make any comment, but praised the girl for successfully banishing the woman by picturing her bald, wrinkled, and dressed in a burlap sack.

When Adrian's class faced the boggart, Harry attempted to capture the creature before Adrian had to encounter it. He knew the boy would make no attempt to chase the boggart away; although the boy's essay and exam scores were near the top of his class, he rarely if ever spoke, even to cast a spell.

The boggart slipped away from Harry, and soon Adrian found himself staring down his worst fear: the creature transformed into Seraphine Malfoy, and then slowly and deliberately turned its back on Adrian.

"FUCK YOU!" Adrian yelled, jumping to his feet and hurling his heavy Dark Arts textbook at Harry's head. He turned and fled the classroom.

Harry, shell-shocked by the sudden outburst from the usually silent boy, merely stood and stared after him for a long moment. The boggart, changing from one fear to another, went largely unnoticed. At last it ended up in front of Harry and changed into a figure that looked suspiciously like Snape but had vivid green eyes. Not wanting to explain *that* to his students, Harry cast Riddikulus and nipped the boggart back into the box he had dragged it from.

After his students had all left for their next class - one of the boys was good enough to gather up Adrian's things and promise to return them to him - Harry sat down at his desk and rested his head in his hands. He was at his wit's end. Adrian needed help, even though none of the teachers Harry had talked to felt there was anything to worry over. Harry was on his own, and he knew what he must do.

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Draco was shocked to receive a letter from Harry Potter. He was even more shocked to learn that his ex-arch-rival was teaching his children. None of them had mentioned Professor Potter. Of course, they had mentioned precious little about any of their teachers or classes. Still, to find that Potter was responsible for educating his babies disturbed Draco profoundly.

In the letter, Harry had expressed concern for Adrian's behaviour and asked that Draco meet with him at his earliest convenience. Adrian's behaviour had always been above reproach, and Draco automatically assumed that whatever it was that concerned Potter was likely the product of anti-Malfoy sentiments. Still, he hoped that the meeting would allow him to see his children, and so agreed to meet with Potter on Friday afternoon.

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A knock sounded on the door to Harry's office at promptly five in the evening on the Friday following the boggart incident. Harry rose to admit his guest.

Draco reminded Harry very much of his father, Lucius Malfoy, with his long, flowing platinum locks and his expensive, well-tailored black robes. He stood with an air of command, his head held at an angle that clearly said he felt himself far superior to any mere mortal.

Drawing himself up to his full height, still some six inches short of Draco's impressive stature, Harry faced the man with every bit of poise and self-confidence he possessed - a not inconsiderable amount.

"Malfoy," Harry greeted civilly, hiding his aversion to the other man's unwarranted arrogance. "Thank you for meeting with me."

"Potter," Draco replied somewhat icily. "What exactly is this all about?"

"Please, have a seat," Harry offered as he returned to his own chair. "Would you like some tea?"

"I would like some answers," Draco shot back as he carefully removed and folded his cloak before taking the offered seat.

Harry sighed and sat back in his chair, his elbows propped on the arms and his fingers steepled together in front of him. "As would I," he said quietly.

Raising an eyebrow querulously, Draco made another attempt to get the conversation rolling. "May I ask why you've brought me here?"

"As I said in my letter, I'm quite concerned about Adrian," Harry began. "Until recently, he's been quiet to the point of being almost invisible. He rarely participates in class, but his essays and test scores indicate mastery of the theoretical part of the course. I had hoped that in time he would work out whatever was bothering him and could make up the practical parts of his lessons. I have every faith that he knows the practical as well as the theoretical, but that he is merely refusing to perform in the classroom setting."

A frown creased Draco's brow, pulling his pale brows down. "Adrian's been silent?" he asked. "He never shuts up."

"I believe the only words I've heard him speak all term are 'whatever, sir' and 'fuck you'."

Draco's eyes widened in shock. "I beg your pardon?"

"The first was in response to my telling him to go to Madame Pomfrey when he was burning up with fever. That was near the end of September, I believe. The latter was on Tuesday of this week, and prompted my letter to you."

"Whom was he addressing?" Draco asked, his jaw tightening in a way that reminded Harry very much of Draco's father.

"Me," Harry admitted. "He yelled at me and tried to kill me with his textbook."

"Shame he missed," Draco said, before he realised what he was saying. He shook his head. "I apologise," he said automatically, sounding like he meant it.

"Old habits," Harry returned with a grin.

"Obviously, I'll go along with whatever punishment you deem necessary. That type of behaviour..."

Sitting forward, Harry held up a hand, asking Draco for silence. "I'm not going to punish Adrian. I'm worried about him. I believe that his withdrawal and his anger may be signs of depression."

"Depression?" Draco asked, incredulity ringing in his tone. "He's eleven!"

"Yes, he is. He's eleven years old - on the cusp of puberty, which if you recall is a very confusing and emotional time. On top of that, he's been taken from the familiarity of his home and routine and thrust into a world that overwhelms him."

Draco raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly. "Are you certain we're talking about Adrian?"

Harry scowled. "I'm certain he's not the only child who's ever felt this way, but yes, I *am* talking about Adrian." He paused for a moment to let his words sink in before continuing. "Has he expressed any unhappiness to you?"

Draco nodded solemnly. "At the beginning of term he wrote, asking me to intercede on his behalf and have him re-sorted into Slytherin."

"Why?" Harry asked, settling back in his chair again. "And what did you do about it?"

"He didn't want to be separated from Sera and Damien. I talked with Professor McGonagall, and we agreed that re-sorting him would be blatant favouritism - which I, of course, had no qualms about - and that it would likely not be in his best interests. I reminded him that he would still be able to spend his free time with his siblings, and assured him that we'll always be family and always look after one another," Draco replied matter-of-factly.

Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I honestly don't know how to proceed," he admitted. "But I'm truly worried for Adrian."

"Why haven't any of the other teachers noticed this? Why hasn't Snape? Why haven't any of them contacted me?" *Why did it have to be you?*

"Potions is one class in which silence is golden. Adrian is quiet but does his assigned work. He's at the top of his class, actually, so Severus thinks I'm imagining things. Herbology also doesn't require incantations at this level, so Sprout just assumed Adrian was unusually quiet. Again with Astronomy, and History of Magic. Damien is in his Charms class, so he does well there. As for Transfiguration, the Board of Governors overrode Minerva's decision as to who to hire as her replacement. The stupid cow they hired wouldn't know a troubled student if one walked up and bit her on the ankle."

Draco found himself shrinking back involuntarily from the heat in Potter's voice. Clearly, he did not approve of the Transfiguration teacher or the Board of Governors. "I see," he replied, unsure what else he could possibly say.

A moment passed in silence.

"What do you suggest?" Draco asked at last.

"I wish I knew what to suggest," Harry replied. "Taking him from Hufflepuff House seems so drastic. I believe he could excel there if he would give himself the chance. Yet, he seems so much more alive when he's with his twin that I can't help wondering if they shouldn't be together."

"It's Sera he misses most," Draco replied absently. He stood and began to pace around Harry's rather small office. "I should have taught them myself, or taken them abroad. Hogwarts and its damned Houses!" Suddenly he threw himself back into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

Harry fought back the sudden unexplainable urge to comfort Draco. "Is there anyone he would open up to, other than you or Seraphine?"

Draco scrubbed his hands across his face and leaned back in his chair. "...I don't know. He's never really been much for making friends outside the family."

"I think perhaps he would benefit from regular sessions with a psychotherapist."

"A what?" Draco asked, looking completely perplexed.

"A psychotherapist."

"I heard you, I just...he's not crazy, Potter!"

"No, he's not," Harry agreed. "Visiting a therapist could very well help him keep his sanity, Malfoy. I think you should consider it."

"I think the notion is ridiculous," Draco said. He stood and wrapped himself in his cloak. "If that's the only suggestion you've got, I'll bid you good day." He swept out of the room in a swirl of robes and cloaks, and Harry dropped his forehead onto the desk with a rather loud thump.

Adrian was no better off than he had been before the meeting.

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The next week, Adrian seemed to make an effort. He gave one or two monosyllabic answers in class, which was more than he had ever done before. Harry was certain his father had spoken to the boy about his behaviour. He hoped that Malfoy hadn't been too hard on Adrian -and since the boy seemed slightly improved, Harry had to give Draco the benefit of the doubt - but there was simply no way of knowing.

The weeks passed by, and soon the school was gearing up for end of term exams and the Christmas holiday. Adrian seemed torn between anguish over the verbal exams and pleasure at the prospect of going home for the holidays.

Just days before the exams were scheduled to begin, Adrian came into class looking more glum than ever. One of the boys in his dormitory explained that the Malfoy children had received word from their father that they were not to come home for Christmas. Draco had contracted a fever and was highly contagious; he didn't want to risk his children's health by bringing them home.

On the bleak, wintry Tuesday on which Harry was to administer the Dark Arts end-of-term exam to his first year Hufflepuffs, Adrian Malfoy did not come to class. This was the first time the boy had missed any of his classes, and Harry was greatly concerned. Torn between the duty of his job and the obligation he felt towards Adrian, Harry mulled over his alternatives as he handed out test papers.

At last he trusted the students alone with their exams long enough to go down the hall and fetch Snape to watch over them. Severus was more than a little irritated at being called out of his office during his free period, but he reluctantly agreed to watch Harry's class anyway.

Harry all but ran to the Hufflepuff dormitories, his heart pounding in his chest. He took the stairs two at a time, the way he had as a student, barked the password at the portrait guarding the common room entrance, and barged inside. Hoping that the Hufflepuff house's layout was similar to that of Gryffindor tower, Harry charged up a set of stairs, tossing open doors and checking the dormitory rooms. One after another, they all turned up empty.

Then, at the very top of the stairs, he opened a door to find a pale blond boy sitting with his knees drawn up and his back against the headboard of one of the massive four-poster bed. The child held an empty vial in his hand, and he was shaking as if with sobs or pent up anger.

Crossing the room quickly, Harry sat down on the edge of the bed. Adrian glanced up at him with red-rimmed eyes, his lower lip trembling slightly. Harry laid one hand on the boy's shoulder in a comforting gesture and with the other he took the vial from Adrian's hand. Carefully he sniffed the vial before stuffing it in his pocket.

"What was it?" he asked.

"Sleeping potion," Adrian answered automatically.

"Don't lie to me, Adrian," Harry said gently. "I know what sleeping draughts smell like."

"*Silens Mortis*," Adrian whispered.

Harry swallowed thickly. Things were worse than he had assumed. "How long ago did you take it?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes before you came in." He looked up at Harry, his innocent eyes filled with fear. "I didn't know what else to do. I'm scared. I...I don't really want to die, but I just didn't know what else to do!" he sobbed.

Hugging the boy to him awkwardly, Harry let out a relieved sigh. "You'll be fine, Adrian," he said softly. "Let's go and find Snape so he can fix this mess, all right?"

Adrian nodded, tears spilling from his eyes.

Harry left Adrian standing just outside the door to the Dark Arts classroom, in plain sight so that he could keep an eye on him. In whispered tones, he explained the situation to Snape who sprang into action. By the time that Harry was able to get away from his classes, Adrian was firmly ensconced in an isolation room in Hogwarts infirmary. Snape himself had sent an owl to Draco, urging him to come to Hogwarts if his health would allow it and consequences of contagion be damned.

## Chapter Three

Harry sat by Adrian's bedside, feeling somehow responsible for the boy's rash actions. He should have been able to see that the child was feeling so desperate. He should have been able to intercede before Adrian was pressed to the point of attempting suicide.

Raised voices and a harsh, rasping cough drew Harry out of his reverie. He turned in his chair as the door opened and Draco Malfoy swept into the room.

The man looked a mess. His normally sleek hair was stringy and tangled, his face was shiny with sweat, and his pale grey eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with red. His alabaster skin had taken on a greyish tone, and the hand that held a handkerchief to his cracked lips shook slightly.

Harry rose quickly from his chair - the only one in the isolation room - and Draco collapsed into it, reaching out with his free hand to stroke his son's cheek tenderly.

"What happened?" he rasped, the brief sentence sending him into another coughing fit, which he tried to muffle.

Adrian stirred slightly in the bed, but didn't wake. Mindful of the sleeping boy, Harry moderated his tone carefully as he replied to Draco's query.

"He tried to kill himself," Harry hissed angrily.

Draco turned to look up at Harry, his eyes wide, frightened, unbelieving. "What?" he managed to croak, sounding as confused as he looked.

"He didn't come to class this morning, so I went looking for him. He had attempted to poison himself - *Silens Mortis* to be exact."

"How..." Draco began, only to be cut off by another round of harsh coughs.

Again Adrian stirred, and Harry felt his anger turning to white-hot rage. He snatched Draco up by the front of his robes and marched him from the isolation room.

Draco leaned heavily against Harry, feeling dizzy and weak. He forced himself to speak. "How did he get it?"

"Adrian brewed the potion himself. At least that's what he told Snape. Any idea where he would have learned such a thing, Malfoy?" Harry snapped accusatorily.

"What are you implying?" Draco asked, the heat taken from his voice by the fact that he couldn't speak above a hoarse whisper.

"I'm not implying anything Malfoy. I'm asking you a question. Unless he's managed to sneak into the Restricted Section, which is damned hard to do, Adrian didn't get that potion recipe at Hogwarts."

"And you think I'd keep something like that lying around where my children could find it?" Draco asked incredulously, anger flashing in his eyes.

"What evidence do I have that you wouldn't? You certainly weren't worried about your son's well being when we spoke six weeks ago."

"How dare you?" Draco spat, drawing himself up to tower menacingly over Harry. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Potter!"

"I know that if you gave a damn your son wouldn't have tried to kill himself," Harry replied coldly.

Pain filled Draco's eyes and he staggered a few steps to sit on the edge of one of the infirmary's beds. "I didn't know... he never said..." He tried to stifle another fit of coughing. "I was wrong, Potter," He admitted quietly when he was able to speak again. "I was wrong, and it nearly cost my son his life."

Malfoy buried his face in his hands, his body trembling with repressed tears. Harry knew that as long as he was there, Draco wouldn't allow himself that luxury. Batting away the urge to console the grieving man, Harry turned away.

"Learn from your mistakes, Malfoy," he said a little harshly. "In the future, try placing your children ahead of your damned pride."

He strode off to find Madame Pomfrey, leaving the stricken man to deal with his tangled emotions on his own.

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By the time that Harry found Poppy and returned to the spot where he had left Malfoy, the man was much calmed, though he seemed no less guilt-ridden. He submitted willingly to Madame Pomfrey's ministrations, letting the woman examine him and treat his illness.

Harry was not at all surprised to hear Malfoy admit that he hadn't been to see a mediwizard about his condition. He was beginning to see a pattern, and decided that the Malfoys likely equated illness with weakness and thought as little of seeking medical help as they would of seeking aid of any other type.

Slipping back into the isolation room, Harry found Adrian awake and sitting up in bed. The boy looked a little frightened.

"Adrian," Harry greeted with a smile as he moved to sit on the edge of the boy's bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right, sir," Adrian replied quietly.

Harry blinked in astonishment. He honestly hadn't been expecting a verbal response, much less a full sentence.

"You gave us all a bit of a scare. Luckily, Professor Snape knew how to counteract the poison. You'll be fine in a day or two."

"Am I going to be expelled?" Adrian asked, the fear in his innocent eyes twisting Harry's heart.

"No, Adrian," Harry replied gently. "You're not going to be expelled. You *are* going to have quite a few detentions for having such a dangerous potion on Hogwarts grounds, but.... We want to help you Adrian."

Adrian refused to meet Harry's eyes. Instead he looked down at his own hands as they picked at a loose thread near the bottom of his pyjama top. "Please don't tell my father," he whispered.

"I already know," Draco said from the doorway, causing both Harry and Adrian to jump slightly.

Adrian's face drained of all colour as he raised his eyes to meet his father's. "Are you angry with me?" Adrian asked in a tremulous whisper.

"I am *very* angry, Adrian," Draco said levelly. Harry's heart twisted again as he watched the boy sink back into the pillows as if trying to escape. "But I'm not angry with *you*," Draco continued before Harry could intercede. Draco crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed, just opposite Harry. "I'm angry with myself for not realising how much you were hurting," he said, gently brushing the boy's pale locks back from his brow. "Do you think you can forgive me?"

Adrian burst into tears and leaned forward to let himself be wrapped in his father's warm embrace. Draco cradled the child to his chest, stroking his back and kissing the top of his head, pain and fear showing plainly on his face.

Harry left the two alone. He realised he had been wrong about Malfoy; the man did love his children. Harry had never been so happy to admit that he was wrong.

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The next afternoon, after a long day spent administering exams, Harry made his way to McGonagall's office, eager to discuss Adrian's situation with the Headmistress. Minerva hardly had time to greet Harry and offer him tea before a knock at the door interrupted them. Predictably, the unexpected visitor was Draco Malfoy, who looked much improved after a night in Madame Pomfrey's care.

"Headmistress, I apologise for interrupting," Malfoy began smoothly, his eyes flickering to Harry and back again. "I wanted to discuss my children." He coughed discreetly into his handkerchief.

"Please sit down, Mister Malfoy," Minerva replied. "Professor Potter was just expressing his concern for your youngest son."

Draco turned his attention to the other man. "I wanted to thank you for looking after Adrian. You saved his life, and for that, I can never repay you. I am in your debt," Draco said humbly.

"It's my responsibility to care for each and every child that sets foot inside Hogwarts," Harry replied. "I was only doing my job. You owe me nothing."

Unsure exactly what to say, Draco merely nodded, his expression unreadable. He turned his attention back to the Headmistress.

"I'm in the process of making arrangements to transfer my children to another school. While I do not hold any of the staff here responsible for what happened - and in fact owe a great debt to Potter, Snape, and Pomfrey - I cannot in good conscience keep my son in an atmosphere that has so obviously disturbed him. I believe that the Wickam Institute would better suit our needs."

"Are you mad?" Harry snapped. Perhaps he was speaking out of turn, but someone had to look after Adrian's best interests.

Draco turned slowly to glare at Potter. "Do you have something to say, Professor?" he asked snidely.



"Yes!" Harry replied, his face flushing with anger. "Have you thought - *really thought* - about the implications of snatching your children out of school at this point? Seraphine and Damien are *happy* here. They get on well with their classmates. They enjoy their studies. Some of the older Slytherin's are talking to Damien about joining the Quidditch team next year. If you transfer them now, they'll not be happy about it. And if they know it's because of Adrian - as they invariably will - they'll resent him. How do you think that will affect his state of mind?" Harry paused to let his words sink in.

Although he was reluctant to admit it, Draco thought Harry might very well have a valid point. He leaned back in his chair, thinking, and smothered another cough.

"Perhaps you're right," Draco conceded at last. "Do you have a better suggestion?"

"The very same suggestion I gave you before," Harry replied levelly.

"Psychotherapy." Draco's tone was flat, but there was something in his eyes that made Harry believe he was a little more open to the idea now than he had been before.

"Yes."

"I suppose there is a qualified therapist on staff at Hogwarts?" Draco asked sarcastically, one eyebrow rising into a smooth, challenging arch.

Harry shook his head slightly in aggravation. "There is a licensed therapist in Hogsmeade, Malfoy. She's very good at what she does. I'm sure someone can make time to escort him there."

Draco's eyes narrowed at the slight barb. "I shall come and fetch him myself."

"Good," Harry said, rising from his chair and making for the door. "That's settled then."

Draco had the distinct impression that he had just been tricked. He decided that Harry Potter would have made a very good Slytherin.

Harry opened the door to the Headmistress' office, intending to go to the infirmary to visit with Adrian, and very nearly walked right into a glowering Professor Snape. Fixing Harry with his deadliest classroom glare, Snape brushed past the younger man and stepped into McGonagall's office, shutting the door firmly in the younger professor's face.

Noting Draco's presence, Severus paused. "Forgive me Minerva. I didn't mean to interrupt," he said smoothly, sounding not at all contrite.

"It's quite all right," McGonagall assured him. "Have you finished your inventory, Severus?"

"Everything is precisely as I left it," Snape replied coolly, his dark gaze purposefully avoiding young Master Malfoy.

"And Madame Pince?"

"The same, Headmistress."

Minerva sat back in her chair, looking deeply troubled. "Severus, if you would, please ask Professor Potter to make a few discreet inquiries."

Snape raised one eyebrow in a silent query. At some unspoken but crystal clear cue from the headmistress, Severus nodded slightly. "Very well," he said levelly before turning to sweep out of the room again.

Draco had heard every word the two had spoken, but felt as though he had missed out on the entire conversation.

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Seraphine and Damien Malfoy lazed on Sera's bed in the Slytherin dorms filling their father in on the goings on in their lives at Hogwarts. Mostly the children's chatter was aimed at one another, and Draco was able to let his mind wander freely.

It amazed him, really, how little the Slytherin dungeons had changed since his own school days. The common room looked precisely as he remembered it, and the dormitories themselves were similar enough to the way they had been twenty years before to give Draco flashbacks.

Sitting at the foot of Sera's bed with his back resting against one of the bedposts, his knees drawn up, and his arms looped around his knees, Draco felt as lost as he had when he was a teenager. Everyone had assumed he had it easy, being a Malfoy with all the wealth and power that entailed, but Draco was certain that adolescence was never easy for anyone.

"So you're glad you chose Hogwarts?" Draco asked them, knowing already what their answer would be.

Seraphine flashed him her brightest smile. "Oh yes!" she assured him, going on to gush about how wonderful her classes were and the brilliance of her professors, Damien nodding in agreement with every word she said.

"Charms is best, though," Damien added, looking a little thoughtful. "Professor Flitwick lets Adrian and I work together. I miss him sometimes," he confessed.

"Is he feeling better?" Sera asked, her pretty blue eyes full of love and concern.

Draco wondered for a moment if he should tell Sera and Damien the truth about what had happened to their brother, but quickly decided that the choice should be left to Adrian. "He's somewhat better, yes. I think perhaps Madame Pomfrey will let us take him home in a day or two."

"So we get to go home for Christmas after all?" Damien asked, his eyes lighting up.

"If you like," Draco replied nonchalantly. "However, I've already told Father Christmas to bring your gifts to Hogwarts, so you might be a bit disappointed on Christmas Day," he teased.

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After a brief meeting with Madame Pomfrey in her office, Draco headed for Adrian's room on the opposite end of the infirmary. He couldn't keep a slight smile from his face as he anticipated the boy's reaction to the news that he would be released later in the day to spend the remainder of the Christmas holiday at home with his family.

Outside the door to Adrian's room, Draco paused at the sound of Potter's voice. His jaw clenched involuntarily. By Merlin, he was tired of running into that prat all the damned time!

"That was quite a difficult potion you brewed," he heard Harry say. "Snape tells me that some of the ingredients are quite difficult to come by. Says the recipe itself is restricted such that it's a bit hard to find as well."

"You want to know where I got it, don't you?" Adrian replied, managing to sound both frightened and angry.

Potter sighed. "Adrian, I'm not trying to trick you into telling me anything you don't want to, but the Headmistress and I feel that it's important to know how you got the ingredients and the recipe. If students have access to such dangerous things, we need to know so we can protect the lot of you."

"No one else could get it, sir," Adrian said quietly. Draco knew that tone - it was the tone that said 'I've done something so terrible I know you'll be horribly disappointed in me so please give me a hug now before I confess.'

Draco heard a slight rustling noise, and then Potter spoke again, even more gently than before. "Tell me?"

"I nicked the aeger root and the boomslang venom," Adrian admitted in a hushed whisper.

"You stole them?" Harry asked. "From whom?"

"My grandfather."

Draco's blood ran cold. He clenched his hands into fists, but forced himself to stay as calm as possible.

"Did you take the recipe from him as well?" Potter asked.

"No, sir. He gave me a book. Dad had been teaching me how to brew some simple potions, and Grandfather said I deserved 'a little something' for doing my lessons so well."

"So he gave you a book of potions, and one of those potions was the Silens Mortis poison?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"Yes sir," Adrian replied.

Unable to stand still a moment longer, Draco strode into Adrian's room, face flushed and eyes flashing. "Where is the book, Adrian?" he demanded a little harshly.

"In my trunk, sir," the boy answered, cowering back against the pillows.

Harry suddenly wondered at the child's reaction. Was Draco as prone to fits of anger as he had been back at school? Had he actually raised a hand to this boy to make him shrink away from him in such a way?

Eyes narrowing in anger, Harry stepped between Draco and his son.

Ignoring Potter for the moment, Draco peered over the other man's shoulder at Adrian. "Do you have anything else belonging to your Grandfather?" he asked coldly.

Adrian nodded stiffly, never taking his eyes off his father. "It's all in a box in my trunk."

Draco shifted his gaze back to Harry. "I want his things brought down at once," he demanded.

"Then I suggest you go and inform the Headmistress, as I am neither a house elf nor an errand boy," Harry ground out between clenched teeth.

Malfoy's nostrils flared with distaste, and for one startling moment Harry was certain that the other wizard was going to strike him. Instead, Draco turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

Heart racing, Harry turned around slowly to face the wide-eyed boy in the hospital bed. Schooling his features to absolute calm, he moved to sit beside Adrian.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked gently.

"Did you see his eyes?" Adrian whispered. His own eyes were still riveted to the door.

Harry's brows drew together in a slight frown of confusion.

"I've never seen him so angry." He turned his gaze from the door to meet Harry's eyes. "I think... Please go and see that he doesn't do anything he'll regret," he pleaded.

Harry had no idea what the child was afraid Draco might attempt, but he too had the feeling that the man might do something rash in his current state of mind. Giving Adrian a quick, reassuring hug, Harry hurried after Malfoy.

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After a quick word with Headmistress McGonagall, who informed him that Snape had escorted Draco up to the Hufflepuff dormitories, Harry felt a slight bit less panicky. Snape wouldn't let Malfoy do anything too drastic, surely. Still, he traveled the hallways at a quick walk, somewhere just short of a run, as he made his way to the Hufflepuff common room.

Harry burst into the common room, startling the few Hufflepuffs who had remained at Hogwarts for the holidays. Twice in the past few minutes, teachers had invaded their territory. They looked at Harry with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity, but he was blissfully oblivious to their stares.

A brief pause to catch his breath so as not to appear winded, and then Harry was slowly climbing the stairs to Adrian's room. Long before he reached the open doorway, Harry could hear Draco's voice raised in fury.

"What the fuck was he thinking, giving these things to my son?" Malfoy shouted. "I'll kill him," he growled.

As Harry neared the door, he heard sounds of a light scuffle, and the low, silky sound of Snape's voice. He couldn't make out Snape's words, but he was certain that the man was either talking reason to Malfoy or threatening him to keep him from going off to murder Lucius Malfoy.

Pushing the door fully open, Harry leaned against the doorframe. Snape held Malfoy pinned against the wall, his beaky nose almost touching Draco's slightly upturned, aristocratic one. Snape seemed to be holding Draco in place more with his menacing gaze than with his hands.

At some slight noise, Draco jumped and turned his gaze on Harry. The anger in Malfoy's eyes had melted away to be replaced with something that Harry couldn't quite identify. Fear, perhaps?

Snape dropped his hands and took a step backward, effectively freeing the other wizard. Malfoy remained standing with his back against the wall, as if rooted to the spot. "What do you want, Potter?" he asked icily.

"Adrian sent me to make certain you didn't do anything foolish," Harry replied evenly. "You frightened him."

Draco turned away to rest his forehead against the cold windowpane, his fists clenched tightly enough to leave half moon bruises where his nails dug into the tender flesh of his palms.

Snape busied himself with packing the 'gifts' from Lucius back into their box. He would send a house elf up for Adrian's things and take the box of contraband himself, to be turned over to Draco after the man had cooled down a bit.

"I haven't time to stand around up here all day," Snape announced. "I shall leave you in Professor Potter's *capable* hands." With that, the older man slipped out the door and was gone.

Harry remained silent for some time, watching Draco stare sightlessly out the frosted window. Finally, he roused himself and moved to stand beside the other man.

"Adrian seemed very frightened of you," Harry stated evenly, trying to keep any hint of accusation from his voice.

Draco's head snapped up. "Frightened of me, Potter? Are you certain you aren't just seeing what you want to see?" he drawled.

"Believe me, I have no wish for any child to be afraid of his father."

"He isn't," Draco snapped. "He has no reason to be."

"Then why does he shy away from you when you're angry?" Harry asked, unsuccessfully trying to keep his voice calm.

Draco narrowed his eyes and frowned at the other man. "I don't have to explain myself or my son to *you*, of all people. Mind your own business."

"Adrian's well being *is* my business Malfoy."

"Spare me," Draco said, turning his attention back to the window.

"Have you ever raised a hand to your son?" Harry asked quietly.

Malfoy whirled, fire blazing in his normally cool grey eyes. "Do you honestly think I could ever strike Adrian?" he asked, his voice a mixture of incredulity and ire. "There have been times I've wanted to knock the insolence out of Damien, and even a time or two when I wanted to shake some sense into Sera, but I have *never* raised a hand against any of my children - least of all Adrian. The boy is practically a saint. I was half afraid he'd end up in Gryffindor."

Harry fought back a grin at the look of disgust on Malfoy's face. He had wanted to believe that the man would not hurt his children, and something in Draco's eyes reassured him. Taking a deep breath, he forged ahead.

"Do you think perhaps the reason that Adrian is so frightened of you when you're angry is because you remind him of Lucius? You look a great deal like him, you know, but never more so than when you've worked yourself into a rage."

Draco blanched. The last thing he wanted was to be anything like his father. He loved his parents, yes, but he disagreed with them on more issues than he cared to count.

"I don't know, Potter," he admitted quietly. "But I think perhaps I should find out."

## Chapter Four

As it turned out, Draco was unable to learn why his son had seemed so terrified of him. Any mention of Adrian's stay in the infirmary or the events leading up to it caused the boy to withdraw into himself in a way that troubled Draco immensely. Worrying that he was pressing the subject, Draco decided to refrain from any further mention of the incident.

The children enjoyed the holiday away from school - Adrian most of all. Outside of Hogwarts, there were no schedules, houses, or newfound friends to separate the siblings, and they spent every moment of the break together.

Before anyone was truly ready for the holidays to be over, it was time for the children to return to school. Adrian seemed reluctant to leave, but voiced no complaint.

Wanting to spend every possible moment with his sons and daughter, Draco decided to forgo the Hogwarts Express in favour of making the short walk from Hogsmeade to the school. The nearer they drew to the school, the more excited Seraphine and Damien became and the more Adrian withdrew.

Outside the castle, on the vast stone steps, Draco hugged his children and bid them farewell with a heavy heart. Sera and Damien bolted up the steps, eager to be reunited with friends, but Adrian held back, looking uncertain.

"Are you all right?" Draco asked his son softly.

"Yeah, Dad. I'm fine," Adrian assured him. "I'll see you in a week, right?"

Looking down into the intense expression in Adrian's innocent blue eyes, Draco smiled softly. "A week and a day, actually," he corrected.

Adrian rolled his eyes at his father, but he also flashed him a smile. "Do we have to come straight back after I see the counselor?"

Draco recognised the calculating look in his son's eyes. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, a slight smile curling one corner of his mouth.

"Well.... It's been a while since we've been to the Three Broomsticks for butterbeer."

"Weren't we just in there last week?" Draco asked teasingly, chucking Adrian under his little pointed chin.

"It was worth a try," Adrian replied with a wide grin.

"You'll have to do better than that to outwit your old man, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. Slytherin wiles and all that rubbish. I know."

On impulse, Draco crushed his boy to him and ruffled his hair.

"Dad!" Adrian cried. "Someone might see..."

"Go on then," Draco said, making a shooing gesture. "I've got to get back to Hogsmeade, but I'll see you a week from tomorrow. I'll be right here," he pointed to the stone steps beneath his feet, "waiting for you when classes let out."

"All right," Adrian said with a nod. "See you, then."

Adrian seemed a little more confident as he turned and trudged up the steps. Draco waited until the massive doors had closed behind his small son before turning away. He was in no hurry to meander across the grounds and slowly make his way back to the very empty house that awaited him.

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A week and a day later, Draco Malfoy waited impatiently on the wide stone steps of Hogwarts castle. Right on time, Adrian burst through the huge double doors, engaged in a lively conversation with his favourite professor.

Draco scowled as he saw Potter walking alongside Adrian. He wondered if the man would ever learn to mind his own business. Adrian flashed Draco a brilliant smile as he trotted down the steps and threw himself into his father's arms.

Adrian had always been the most affectionate of the three children. Despite Lucius' many warnings about coddling the boy, Draco enjoyed his son's loving hugs. Today, he held onto Adrian a bit longer than was strictly necessary.

"Ready to go?" he asked, trying to ignore Potter's presence.

The smile fading from his face, Adrian nodded slightly. He glanced nervously up at Harry.

Harry descended a couple of steps, standing on the riser just below the Adrian in order to set himself nearer to eye-level with the boy. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Adrian," Harry reassured him. "Doctor Ponsford is a very nice woman. I'm sure you'll get on just fine with her."

Adrian turned to bury his face in the front of his father's robes, inhaling deeply the rich scent of old books, new linen, and the expensive cologne Draco favoured. He felt quite certain that if he could only stay here wrapped in his father's arms he would have no need to go and talk to some stranger about his troubles.

Draco stroked his son's unruly curls with one kid-gloved hand. Resolutely, he untangled the boy's arms from around his waist and took a step backward. "Chin up," he said gently, urging Adrian's face up with a soft touch.

With a curt nod to Potter, Draco wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders and turned to leave.

"I've business in Hogsmeade today, myself," Potter announced. "I'll walk with you, if you've no objections."

Draco very much objected. He was just opening his mouth to say so when he caught the expression on his son's face. Adrian was looking at Harry with something like relief. While it hurt him that his son

so obviously needed Potter's reassurance in addition to his own, he couldn't find it in his heart to deny the child anything he desired.

"Very well," Draco said coolly.

The three of them settled into step, Draco matching his strides to the shorter ones of Harry and Adrian. They walked in uncomfortable silence as they crossed the school grounds. As they passed beyond Hogwarts' boundaries and started up the lane toward Hogsmeade, Adrian finally broke the silence.

"Professor Potter was telling me about what it was like when you were at school together," he announced cheerfully.

"Did he now?" Draco replied levelly, aiming an icy glare at Harry.

"Yeah. He said you were really good at Quidditch and were Captain and everything. Why didn't you ever tell us that?"

"Bad memories," Draco said with a small, tight smile.

"Did something really bad happen?" Adrian asked, his eyes going wide. "Did you get hurt or something?"

Draco laughed softly. "You could say that. Before I married your mother, I dated one of my fellow Quidditch players. We had a rather nasty break up - there were threats and blackmail and thrown hexes. Really quite awful."

Adrian covered his mouth with both hands to smother a laugh. "You won't talk about Quidditch because of a *girl*?" he asked mockingly.

Draco merely raised an eyebrow and smirked at his son.

The three men continued to make conversation, and soon they had arrived at their destination. Harry waited with Draco until Adrian was closeted with Dr. Ponsford.

"Well?" Draco asked, when they were alone in the counselor's waiting room. "Why are you still here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Adrian," Harry said with a slight scowl.

"Go on," Draco said, his tone slightly more civil.

"I just thought you should know that he still refuses to speak in class. In any of his classes, actually, with the exception of Charms. He's still unusually quiet at meals, as well."

"I see," was Draco's only response as he looked down at where his gloved hands lay folded primly on his lap.

Frustrated, Harry rose and headed for the door.

"Potter." Draco's tone was flat, devoid of emotion, carefully controlled.

Harry turned back to look at Malfoy who raised his eyes slowly to meet Potter's gaze.



"Thank you for telling me," Draco said.

From the expression on the other man's face, it was clear that saying 'thank you' had taken a lot of effort. Harry couldn't help but be impressed.

"You're welcome," he said quietly. And then he was gone.

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An hour later, Harry ducked back into Dr. Ponsford's office, glad to be in out of the chill wind that had sprung up. To his surprise, Draco was still sitting in the waiting room, his cloak and gloves now resting on a chair beside him.

Without a word, Harry sat down to wait. Roughly a quarter of an hour later, Adrian and Dr. Ponsford emerged from the inner office. The doctor, a middle-aged woman with graying walnut-coloured hair, smiled at Adrian.

"I'll see you next week, Adrian," she said, her voice warm and caring. "Good day, Mister Malfoy," she added politely, giving Draco a slight nod as Adrian moved to join him. "Harry, dear, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. Adrian and I let time get away from us. Do come in," she apologised, ushering Harry into the office Adrian had just vacated, leaving two confused Malfoys staring after them.

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When Harry emerged from Dr. Ponsford's office some time later, he tugged out his pocket watch and checked the time. He had just enough time for a quick drink at the Three Broomsticks before joining his old friend Remus Lupin for dinner.

Harry stepped into the dimly lit pub, blinking as his eyes adjusted from the blinding brilliance of the snow-frosted streets. Looking around for a seat that would offer a little privacy, he spotted Adrian and Draco at a table in one corner. Adrian's gaze landed on his professor almost the moment the man entered the building, and instantly he was beckoning Harry to join him and his father at their table.

Sighing inwardly, Harry crossed the room. He would speak to the boy and then make his excuses. Spending any more time in Draco Malfoy's company today was certain to incite a riot - or at least a duel.

"How did it go?" Harry asked when he reached the table.

"All right, I guess," Adrian replied, licking the butterbeer from his upper lip. "We just talked about stuff." He gave a slight shrug. "It was like you said it would be."

Harry smiled. "Occasionally, I do know what I'm talking about."

Adrian grinned. "I didn't know you...well, you know."

"That I'm one of Dr. Ponsford's patients?" Harry supplied. "Yes. I wouldn't have recommended her if I didn't know she's the best in the business."

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment, and Harry was certain that a question had formed in Adrian's mind. However, "Would you like to join us?" was all the boy asked.

Reluctantly, Harry accepted the offer and sat down beside Adrian, completely ignoring the scowl on the elder Malfoy's face. Although he longed for something a bit stronger, he ordered a butterbeer; his

tolerance for alcohol was nil and he had no desire to let one of his students -or Draco Malfoy - see him pissed out of his head.

"Dad and I were just about to go home for dinner. Would you like to come with us?"

"Adrian, don't pester the poor man," Draco said lightly. Harry understood the deeper meaning behind the words.

"I'm just being polite," Adrian said somewhat petulantly.

"I appreciate the offer," Harry said truthfully, "but I already have plans. I'm having dinner with a friend."

"Oh," Adrian replied, looking disappointed. "Well, I guess I'll see you back at school then," he added as he rose from his chair at a cue from his father.

"Perhaps another time," Harry offered. He was rewarded by the sight of Adrian's little face breaking into a wide grin.

"Yeah. Another time. Good night, Professor."

Harry watched the two Malfoys step out of the pub and into the twilight, everything else momentarily forgotten.

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After that, Harry took care to ensure that his counseling sessions did not coincide with Adrian's. As much as he cared for the boy, he didn't want to spend any more time than necessary in the elder Malfoy's company. Still, he made a point of escorting Adrian to the front steps and waiting there with him until Draco arrived.

A few weeks after Adrian's first meeting with Dr. Ponsford, Harry began to see changes in the boy's behaviour. Adrian continued to become more and more talkative when he was with Harry outside of the classroom. Once or twice, Harry even saw the boy laughing and talking with some other first year Hufflepuffs at dinner.

About that time, Adrian expressed an interest in making up the missed work from his classes. Private tutoring and testing was set up for him in both Defence Against the Dark Arts and Transfiguration. As the new Transfiguration teacher couldn't be bothered to help the boy, McGonagall herself oversaw his special sessions; she was amazed to discover that the boy, who had been failing Transfiguration class, knew the material well.

"My father taught me and Damien a lot of this stuff last year," he explained. "We wanted to learn what Sera was learning."

Minerva decided then and there to approach Draco Malfoy about taking Professor Garrett's position next term. She was determined to replace the horrible Transfiguration teacher as soon as the board would allow it.

Adrian sat his Dark Arts and Transfiguration exams in mid-February, two months after the time when he should have taken them. He received high marks on both, as Harry had known he would.

The following Monday, when Draco arrived to collect Adrian for his weekly session with the doctor in Hogsmeade, Harry once again invited himself to walk into town with them. Again he waited until he and Draco were alone before speaking.

"I'd like to talk with you about Adrian," he said, before Draco had a chance to shoot off any witty, cutting remarks. "Preferably at the Three Broomsticks over a pint of butterbeer."

With an apprehensive glance at the door through which his son had disappeared some minutes before, Draco nodded slightly. "Very well," he said.

The two men walked in silence to the pub, ordered their drinks, and tucked themselves away at a shadowy corner table.

Harry took a long swig from his warm, sweet, soothing drink before speaking. "Adrian had his Defence and Transfiguration exams this past week," he announced.

"I see," Draco said to his mug. "How did he fare?"

"He did moderately well in Defence Against the Dark Arts - his marks were high, but not any more so than the majority of my students. I'm not certain whether that's because I'm a good teacher or because I'm not making them work hard enough."

Draco snorted and took another long drink. "And Transfiguration?" he asked, sounding a bit apprehensive.

"His exam scores were off the charts. Minerva administered the exam herself, and she was completely blown away. Especially considering the incompetence of the current teacher." Harry paused a moment, watching a prideful smile curve Malfoy's lips. "Adrian said you tutored him some last year, after Sera started to school."

Draco nodded. "The boys insisted on getting their wands when I bought Sera's. Since we live in an exclusively wizarding community, we got around the strictures against underage magic. I taught them basic potions, a little Transfiguration, some simple charms...and flying, of course, though that turned out to be a bit of a disaster."

"How so?"

"Adrian can't stay on a broom for more than ten seconds at a stretch. He's almost as hopeless at flying as Longbottom was."

Harry chuckled. "Is that the real reason why you never told them about your Quidditch days?" he asked.

Draco smirked. "For the most part. Of course, what I said to Adrian is true as well - I do have some very bad memories associated with Quidditch. That's what I get for dating one of my teammates, I suppose."

Potter's brows drew together in a puzzled frown. "I don't recall their ever being any girls on the Slytherin team," he noted.

"Who said anything about a girl?" Draco asked with a slight raise of his eyebrows. He swallowed the last of his butterbeer and pushed back his chair. "Adrian will worry if I'm not there," he said.

Harry hid his shock by quickly turning up his butterbeer and draining it. Composure restored, he rose and followed Draco out the door.

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A few weeks later, Draco was sitting alone in the library of his cottage in Hogsmeade and trying to concentrate on a novel he had picked up a few days before. His reading was interrupted by the arrival of an aging snowy owl bearing a letter.

Adjusting the reading glasses that he would never publicly admit to needing, Draco broke the seal on the envelope and withdrew the bit of parchment tucked away inside.

*Malfoy*

*I'd like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss Adrian.*

*Harry*

Fearing that his son's emotional health had taken a turn for the worse, Draco checked the time and dashed off a reply:

*Potter,*

*7 p.m. this evening. Three Broomsticks.*

*DM*

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Harry strolled into the Three Broomsticks at a quarter till seven that night with a slight spring in his step. His heart was lighter than it had been in months, and for the first time ever he was truly looking forward to seeing Draco Malfoy.

Although Harry arrived early for his meeting with Malfoy, Draco was already seated at his usual corner table. Harry made his way directly to Draco's table, his eyes shining and a smile curving the corners of his lips.

Draco spotted Harry the instant the dark-haired man entered the pub. As usual, Potter was dressed in the most boring robes imaginable and his hair was in wild disarray. He looked very much the part of an overworked and underpaid schoolteacher.

But the joyous sparkle in those vivid green eyes, the unconscious smile playing at those soft, full red lips, and the confidence and vitality that enveloped him at that moment lent him a beauty that Draco would have been forced to acknowledge even if he had been blind.

Which he most certainly was not.

Forcing the unexpected and unwanted appreciation of his former nemesis to the back of his mind for later examination, Draco schooled his face into an emotionless mask.

"Potter," he greeted coolly, wondering belatedly why Potter seemed so unconcerned after sending such an urgent message. "You had something you wanted to discuss?"

Harry draped his cloak over the back of one chair and procured another for himself. Excitement shown in his eyes and in the lines of his face.

"First class of the day today was first year Hufflepuffs," Harry announced. "We're studying werewolves."

Draco made a small, derisive noise, which Harry ignored.

"I always encourage my students to ask questions or make comments - with permission of course - at any time during class. I was right in the middle of my lecture today when the most extraordinary thing happened: Adrian raised his hand for permission to speak."

"Adrian spoke in class?" Draco asked, feeling his heart begin to beat a bit faster as if Harry's enthusiasm were contagious.

Harry laughed. "I didn't think I'd ever get him to shut up," he said with a grin.

Draco leaned back in his seat, a pleasantly dazed expression settling onto his face.

"We're getting there," Harry said, leaning forward and resting his folded arms on the table. "Adrian's really making progress."

Gathering his wits, Draco sat up properly again and motioned for Madame Rosmerta. "I think this calls for a toast," he said.

Madame Rosmerta broke out her finest bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky at Draco's behest - with Draco complaining all the while that she hadn't any decent liquor - and the two men did indeed raise their glasses to Adrian's health. Then raised them again to Dr. Ponsford.

Harry giggled at some inner musing, already feeling the effects of the potent potable. Draco raised an eyebrow, and Harry leaned on the table again.

"Adrian shocked me in more ways than one today. I mean, it was a surprise to have him speak up in class, but the things he said....."

"What did he have to say?" Draco asked, swirling the whisky around in his glass and wishing he had something more pleasant-tasting to drink.

"He gave the class a half-hour lecture on the evil of the Ministry of Magic."

Draco nearly spit out the mouthful of liquor he had been in the process of swallowing, earning a snicker from Harry.

"He was on about how wrong it is of the Ministry to classify werewolves as beasts, and require their registry, and forbid them breeding.... And he was on about how terrible it is that society misunderstands werewolves, largely due to the Ministry's policies, and about how people shouldn't judge a man by something he can't control. Went on to explain all the latest news on the Wolfsbane potion, and the improvements that have been made to it over the last decade or so. Really quite fascinating," Harry explained, watching Draco's expression with a knowing look. "I wonder where he would have gotten such unpopular notions."

"No idea," Draco said vaguely, staring down into his now empty glass. The slight hint of pink in his cheeks could have been from the alcohol, but Harry knew better.

"I had no idea you felt so strongly about the issue," Harry said.

Draco lifted his head slowly and looked into Harry's eyes with a burning intensity that frightened Harry just a little. "There is a great deal you don't know about me, Potter."

Harry offered a tiny smile. "I'm beginning to understand that, I think." Looking rather mournfully at the half-full bottle of whisky, Harry sighed and pushed back his chair. "I've classes to teach in the morning. I'd best be going," he explained, standing and drawing on his cloak.

With the barest nod of acknowledgement, Draco returned his attention to the bottle before him, slowly filling his glass and lifting it to watch the way the dim light refracted through the glass and the amber liquid.

With a small sigh, Harry turned and walked away, completely unaware of Malfoy's hungry gaze following his every movement until he disappeared through the front door to be swallowed up by the still darkness.

Slumping in his chair, Draco cursed himself for his weakness and stupidity as he slowly worked his way through the remains of the firewhisky.

## Chapter Five

Harry awoke the next morning sweaty and tangled up in his sheets with his heart racing. The pleasant dreams he had been having - starring none other than Draco Malfoy - left him both aroused and shaken. Lusting after his childhood enemy just couldn't be healthy.

Lying there, alone in his massive bed, Harry contemplated his attraction to Malfoy. Even back in school he had entertained more than a few stray sexual thoughts about Draco, but the attraction was much stronger now. Something about the man's intensity and haughty demeanour sent tendrils of desire snaking through Harry's body. Draco's tall, lean frame and exquisitely sculpted facial features didn't hurt matters any, either.

In his school days, Harry had toyed briefly with the idea of seducing Draco Malfoy. At the time, he had no idea what seduction involved. Older and wiser, the thought of fumbling his way through an attempted seduction of the suave, cool, beautiful man Draco had become was enough to make Harry queasy. No, he'd be making no such stupid mistake.

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The following Monday, Harry waited with Adrian on the steps of Hogwarts castle. Malfoy arrived, was greeted enthusiastically by his son, and exchanged civilities with Harry as usual. Harry again accompanied the duo into Hogsmeade, settling immediately into a chair in Dr. Ponsford's waiting room. With a curious glance at Harry, Draco set aside his cloak and seated himself primly in a chair as far from Harry as space would allow.

Harry studied Draco surreptitiously for a few minutes before speaking. "Seraphine and Damien were as outspoken as their brother on the subject of werewolves. You appear to have three Lycanthropes' Right's activists on your hands," he said with a slight smile.

Draco looked uncomfortable at the topic of conversation. He rose from his chair and paced across the room, stopping before a Muggle painting of a moonlit ocean shore.

"Does it bother you that they're so vocal on the subject?" Harry asked.

"No, of course not," Draco replied casually.

"Why does it bother you when I mention werewolves, Malfoy?"

Draco turned and gave Harry a small, tired smile. "Remus Lupin was the first subject on which I ever openly opposed my father," he said simply. At the confused but intrigued expression on Harry's face, Draco decided to explain. "Lupin was the first decent Dark Arts teacher we had. He knew the subject. His classes were interesting and well organized. In short, he was a competent teacher. Of course, I had other competent teachers," Draco's words faded into silence as he turned his attention back to the painting, lost in his own thoughts. "Some of the teachers treated me like I was pond scum because of

who my father is. Some treated me like royalty for the same reason. Lupin was different. He treated me fairly, neither bowing and scraping nor looking down on me. Sometimes I would go to his office and talk with him about trivial things that no one else cared to hear. He always listened. When he left, I lost the only real friend I had at Hogwarts. At the time, at least." Draco turned around slowly, his eyes not really focusing on anything.

"He *is* quite a good listener, though I don't feel right asking him to listen to my fears and insecurities," Harry said, not really knowing why he was opening up to this virtual stranger.

"Are those the sorts of things you talk to her about?" Draco asked, gesturing towards Dr. Ponsford's inner sanctum.

"Sometimes," Harry admitted.

"Does it help?"

"I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Sheila."

Draco raised an eyebrow at Harry's familiarity with the doctor.

Harry grinned. "I've been a patient here for over a decade. I think I'm allowed to call her by her given name."

"That long?" Draco asked incredulously.

"That long," Harry affirmed. "She wasn't the first therapist I ever visited, but she's certainly the best. Then again, I'd have been better off telling my problems to Snape than to some of the doctors I've visited," he explained with a wry grin.

"Certainly they couldn't have been that bad," Draco chided, slipping back into his seat.

"Dumbledore sent me to my first therapist the year after the Umbridge fiasco; the stupid cow wanted to lock me away in St. Mungo's, and after a year of hearing everyone talking about how I'd gone 'round the bend, I was none too happy with her pronouncement. The second therapist told me I'd rot in the 7<sup>th</sup> level of hell for having impure thoughts about other boys. The third was certain that I was only pretending to be unstable to garner attention. Need I go on?"

"The 7<sup>th</sup> level of hell? Obviously incompetent. The 7<sup>th</sup> level of hell is reserved for the violent, not the lustful," Draco said with mock seriousness, folding his hands calmly in his lap but certain that Potter must be able to hear the sudden racing, pounding rhythm of his heartbeat. Harry's candid admissions had caught him off guard, and he wished - not for the first time - that he had paid some attention to the rumours from home while he was abroad.

Harry stared at the other man in complete disbelief, a grin slowly spreading its way across his face. Draco smirked back at him and then turned his attention back to the painting, trying to shunt away the stray thoughts conjured up by Harry's offhand confession about his sexual orientation.

"It's meant to be calming," Harry said after a moment.

Draco made a small, non-committal noise. "The shoreline looks like Ireland, but the water....the water is all wrong. The water belongs somewhere tropical. Hawaii, perhaps, or Jamaica."

Harry never spared so much as a glance at the painting. He sat still, mesmerized by the sight of Draco Malfoy with all of his defences temporarily stripped away. There was such a longing in the grey eyes



that Harry's heart did a little flip in his chest as he wished, just for an instant, that the longing gaze was fixed on him rather than some imaginary paradise.

With a sigh, Harry turned his gaze away from the beautiful man who shared the waiting room with him. One thing was certain: he would have a lot to talk to Dr. Ponsford about today.

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Draco was secretly pleased when Harry joined him and Adrian the next week for the walk into Hogsmeade, although he would rather die than admit it. Adrian greeted Draco with his customary bear hug, Harry gave him a slight nod, and then they were traveling the well-beaten path into the wizarding village.

"Tell me more about when you were at school with my dad," Adrian requested.

Harry hesitated, uncertain what exactly to tell the boy that didn't end or begin with hexes, hurled insults, fistfights, or death threats. Draco took advantage of Harry's momentary silence.

"Your professor and his friends were rather incorrigible," Draco stated with a little smirk. "They were always getting into trouble. Dueling in the hallways, sneaking out of bed at night, showing up in places that were off limits...."

Adrian's eyes went wide with surprise, and he glanced up at Harry who merely grinned at the boy.

"It's true," he confirmed. "Of course, half the time when I was breaking the rules, it was because your dad had tricked me into it. He managed to get into his fair share of mischief, too, you know."

"You did?" Adrian asked, looking up at his father with something like admiration shining in his eyes.

Draco laughed and pulled his son to his side. "Of course I did. All boys get into trouble at school. It's an unwritten rule. Don't get any ideas, though."

Adrian grinned and snuggled under his dad's cloak, glad that the weather was still mild enough for such things.

"Your professor had a bit of a mean streak," Draco continued.

"And you didn't?" Harry asked, sounding more amused than insulted.

"Quiet, Potter. I'm telling this story," Draco replied calmly. "As I was saying, Potter had a bit of a mean streak. Seems he enjoyed frightening the wits out of unsuspecting young boys."

"Only if the unsuspecting little brat deserved it," Harry replied with a grin.

Draco ignored Harry's comment and forged ahead. "During a visit to Hogsmeade, my friends and I decided to explore a little. We headed to the edge of town where there stood a ramshackle old house known as the Shrieking Shack, which was rumoured to be haunted by crazed spirits. There I was, minding my own business, when I was violently assaulted by an unseen presence. We all assumed that the spirits were angry at being disturbed."

Harry laughed aloud. "You were insulting my best friend, not minding your own business," he corrected. "And I'd hardly call being doused in a bit of mud 'violent'."

"Regardless, we were young and impressionable and had no idea where the attacks were coming from. It was more than a little unnerving. Seeing your disembodied head floating around didn't help matters any either. Crabbe and Goyle had nightmares for weeks, and I had to put up with being awakened by their groaning."

"The Shrieking Shack is gone, you know," Harry said, suddenly turning more serious. He reached out to open the door of Dr. Ponsford's office and usher his companions inside.

"I noticed that it had been replaced with a newly built house. I can't imagine who would have the nerve to tear down the Shack..."

Draco and Harry paused in their conversation to greet Sheila. Once she had shut herself up in her office with Adrian and he and Draco were seated, Harry continued.

"Remus Lupin," Harry said softly.

"What about him?" Draco asked, puzzled.

"He's the one who had the Shrieking Shack town down. It's his house that stands there now."

The profound sadness in Harry's eyes touched something in Draco. His paternal instincts, he imagined, as he suddenly wanted to sooth Harry the way he did his children.

"Why?" Draco asked gently.

"You know the rumours about the Shack, but I'm guessing you don't know the truth," Harry said, lifting his head to look into Draco's eyes.

Draco shook his head slightly, and Harry began to explain.

"There were never any spirits haunting the Shack. The noises the locals heard...." Harry paused, swallowing hard and blinking. "The Shrieking Shack was built the year Remus Lupin started to school at Hogwarts. It was built for his use, in fact. The screams and the ruckus..."

"The transformation," Draco said quietly.

Harry nodded. "My godfather, Sirius, and Remus were really good friends, you know. Sirius was an animagus, and he used to run around with Remus when the moon was full. When Sirius died," Harry paused and swallowed thickly. "When Sirius died, it was like a part of Remus died, too. He couldn't bear the sight of the Shreiking Shack any longer, so when things settled down after the war, we had the place torn down. Remus couldn't stand the sight of the empty hill where it had stood, so we built a house there. I guess it helped, some, but he's had so much taken from him..." Harry stopped, realising that his voice was shaking with emotion. He really didn't want Malfoy seeing him vulnerable. He turned his gaze towards the Muggle painting and withdrew into his own mind.

After many long moments of silence, a slight rustle of fabric drew Harry back from his thoughts to reality. Turning his attention from the painting, he saw that Draco had moved to sit beside him. The grey eyes held a hint of uncertainty.

Neither moved, either to increase or to decrease the distance between them. The silence between them was no longer uncomfortable, and each found the other's presence somehow reassuring. They remained quiet until Adrian emerged from the inner office, then said their goodbyes before going their separate ways.

Harry didn't join Adrian and Draco the following week. He parted company with the two on Hogwarts' wide front steps, explaining to Adrian that he had other matters to attend to that day. In truth, Harry simply didn't want to make a nuisance of himself.

The week after that, however, he accompanied them into Hogsmeade once again. He said goodbye before they reached Dr. Ponsford's office and headed up the lane to visit Remus.

Three-quarters of an hour later, he returned to Sheila's office, arriving just a few minutes before his own appointment was scheduled to begin. As he slipped quietly into the office, Draco Malfoy looked up, peering at Harry over the top of a pair of stylish reading glasses. With a look of minor annoyance, Draco checked the time on his pocket watch. He removed the glasses and tucked them into his pocket, let the paperback book he had been reading fall closed, and then slipped that into his pocket as well.

"Potter," he greeted civilly.

"Good afternoon," Harry replied in kind.

Before either man could strike up a conversation, or even decide whether he wanted to do such a thing, the door to the inner office opened. Adrian stepped out, casting a slightly concerned look at the doctor, who was holding one hand to her forehead.

"Mister Malfoy, I know I specifically asked you to be here today so that I could chat with you a bit about Adrian, but if it wouldn't be too much bother, I'd like to reschedule. I'm afraid I'm developing a migraine."

"I understand," Draco said, his tone respectful and more cordial than it had been when he greeted Harry. "It isn't any bother at all."

"Thank you so much, dear," Sheila replied. She turned to face Harry as Draco helped Adrian on with his cloak. "Harry, do you mind awfully if we put off your session till another day?"

"No, of course I don't mind. Is there anything I can do for you?" Harry replied immediately, concern evident on his face.

"No, no. I'll be fine. I just need to take my headache potion and have a bit of a lie-down. But thank you for asking, Harry."

Harry held the door for Draco and Adrian, and then followed them out into the slightly cool April day.

"I guess I'll see you back at school, then," Harry said to Adrian, preparing to head back to Hogwarts.

"Professor?" Adrian began, a little hesitantly. "Would you like to stay and have dinner with us?"

Looking down into those innocent, pleading eyes, Harry was uncertain how he could possibly refuse. He glanced up at Draco, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I'd love to," Harry said honestly, earning a beaming smile and a warm hug from Adrian.

Muttering some disparaging remarks about the quality of the few dining establishments in Hogsmeade, Draco turned in the direction of his own home. A short walk and a dash of childish prattle later, Harry found himself standing before an immaculate white stone house of moderate size.

The house was spotless inside as well as out, and Harry felt slightly ill at ease as he carefully hung his cloak on a peg beside Draco's. A moment later, Adrian tossed his own cloak at a peg, missed, and never looked back as he dashed into the house and bolted up the stairs to his room.

Shaking his head and grinning slightly, Draco retrieved the cloak from the floor to hang it properly. He crossed the foyer and stepped onto the plush silver-grey carpet that graced the stairs and landings.

"Adrian!" he called, sounding stern but not really cross.

An instant later, Adrian's face appeared over upstairs railing. "Yeah?"

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"I mean... Yes, sir?" Adrian corrected himself.

"Where are your manners, young man?" Draco asked rhetorically. "Don't you think you should come down and entertain our guest while I see to dinner?"

Harry's eyes widened in surprise at the mention of Draco 'seeing to dinner.' After a moment's thought, however, Harry concluded that Draco must mean 'telling the house elf what to do,' an idea which seemed much more plausible.

Adrian bounded back down the stairs. "Sorry," he said, addressing Harry more than his father. "Um..." He seemed at a loss for how to entertain his guest.

With a slight smile that wasn't quite a smirk, Draco headed for the kitchen, leaving Harry alone with the younger Malfoy.

"Want a tour of the house?" Adrian asked at last.

Harry answered with a smile, and then let Adrian drag him through the cottage.

"This is the sitting room," Adrian said as they stepped from the foyer.

The room was spacious and comfortably appointed. Two deep couches and an oversized chair with an ottoman faced a rather large television. Harry couldn't help grinning as he inspected the TV, not at all surprised to see that it had obviously been enchanted to work without electricity.

"Dad says he's gotten used to Muggle things. Truth is he *likes* Muggle things. Grandfather, of course, doesn't approve, but Grand-mere does, so it's okay."

Besides the television, Harry noted that there was also a digital disc player with an expansive and eclectic collection of movies and a stereo with an even more expansive collection of Muggle and wizard music.

Aside from the Muggle contraptions, there were shelves filled with books - fiction and non-fiction, Muggle and wizard, all perfectly organized according to some system that only Draco fully understood. On one of the shelves stood a wizard's chess set. On another shelf, there was a framed photo of Draco's children.

Various photographs of the children graced the walls, a few featuring Draco or his parents as well. The photos drew Harry's attention, and for an immeasurable amount of time, he lost himself in studying the photographs. What enchanted him most was the way that Draco kept turning to look at one child or another, never keeping his attention on the photographer.

Adrian tugged impatiently at Harry's sleeve and ushered him back the way they had come. He started up the stairs, saying, "The only other rooms down here are the kitchen and the dining room. You'll see those later."

Harry followed Adrian upstairs, letting one hand glide over the polished grey-tone wood of the banister. Upstairs, as down, the rooms lay on both sides of the stairway. Adrian led Harry down the hallway to the right.

"Dad's study," he said as they entered the first room they encountered. "He's in here a lot when he isn't in the family room with us. And we have to come in here when we're in trouble or he wants to talk to us about something important."

Harry could understand that. The room held an atmosphere of gravity and solemnity that made him a bit uncomfortable. The study, he noted, was decorated in Slytherin green and silver.

"Come on," Adrian said quietly. "I don't like it in here."

Continuing the tour, Adrian pointed out which bedroom belonged to each family member, but refrained from showing Harry most of the rooms themselves as Draco's was warded, Sera's was off-limits, and Damien's was, in Adrian's words, a dung-heap.

The door to Adrian's room, however, stood open, as Adrian had left it before his father had called him back downstairs. Adrian wandered inside, and Harry followed, stopping in the doorway to look around the boy's private lair.

The room was simply appointed with an overly large bed, a desk, an armoire, bookshelves, and something that looked like a pirate's treasure chest. The chest was open, and peeking inside to sate his curiosity, Harry saw that it was filled with games, toys, and interest trinkets which Harry assumed were memoirs of the family's travels. An oil-on-canvas portrait of the Malfoy children hung on the wall opposite the bed; Harry was surprised to find that the portrait didn't move. Adrian hopped up to sit on the edge of his bed and sat idly kicking his feet, obviously at a loss for what to do next. The boy was saved by the sound of Draco's voice, calling up to let them know that dinner was ready.

Harry hadn't been expecting dinner to be ready so soon; he assumed that the house-elves had been ordered earlier in the day to have the meal ready at a certain time. He watched in amusement as Adrian, with the enthusiasm that only the very young and the very hungry have for food, disappeared in a flash. Harry and Draco followed behind more slowly, joining the boy at the family-sized dining table.

Harry had been expecting a long table - the kind they had in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, or like he had seen in movies. He had envisioned himself at one end, and Draco at the other, unable to speak to one another without yelling.

When compared to his mental image, Harry found the seating almost intimate.

The meal, too, came as a surprise. Where Harry had expected something unpronounceable and likely unpalatable, he found a fairly plain meal of roast chicken and vegetables, which turned out to be quite delicious.

Adrian waited for some cue from his father - a slight inclination of Draco's head that could not quite be called a nod - and then dug into his meal with relish. Harry chuckled slightly, thinking that the boy was acting as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. Draco took up his knife and fork and began to work his way genteelly through his chicken and vegetables. Harry did his best to mimic Draco's fluid movements, but felt like an oaf beside the other man's grace and poise.

After a few moments of silence, Adrian halted his assault on the chicken, and licked his lips. "Kira Macmillan said her dad said that you and my Dad were the two best Quidditch players Hogwarts has ever seen," he said to Harry.

Harry almost choked on his bite of potato. Dabbing at his mouth with his napkin, he quickly regained his equanimity. "I think that's taking it a bit far, Adrian. Hogwarts has turned out many fine Quidditch players. I'm certain there were a fair few better than myself or even your dad - some of which were at school with us."

Draco smirked. "I believe it would be fair to say, however, that we were two of the most fiercely competitive players Hogwarts has seen."

"Especially when we played against one another," Harry agreed.

"Kira Macmillan also said that her dad said you two didn't get on very well," Adrian added, looking down at his plate.

"I believe that could very well be the understatement of the century," Draco replied calmly, secretly wanting to throttle Kira Macmillan and her meddling fool of a father.

"Kira's father was at school with us," Harry explained. "Ernie Macmillan," he added at Draco's blank stare.

"Oh," Draco responded at last. "*That* pompous ass."

"I'm certain Mr. Macmillan has a good many stories about both of us, although, as he was not a close friend of mine - and I'm assuming not of your father's, either - he doesn't have all the facts."

"What else has Mr. Macmillan told his daughter?" Draco asked, resuming the task of methodically dissecting his dinner.

"Um... He...uh. He said that when you were at school, there were never any girls on the Slytherin Quidditch team," Adrian stammered, leaning forward to hide his rapidly reddening face.

This time, Harry did choke on his bite of potato. Draco dropped his fork onto his plate with a clatter.

"Is that true?" Adrian asked, looking up cautiously.

"Yes, Adrian, it's true," Draco confirmed quietly.

"So, you were just joking around about dating one of your teammates?"

Draco looked away from his son's inquisitive gaze. "No, I wasn't joking, Adrian."

The boy looked a bit uncomfortable. "You dated a *boy*?"

"Yes, I did. An older boy. We began seeing one another when I was fifteen, but he broke it off when he left school at the end of that same term. His parents wanted him to marry a girl of good family, and he wanted to make his parents happy. It wasn't until my own parents pressured me into marriage that I truly understood Adrian's motivation..."

"You named me after your boyfriend?" Adrian cried. Sounding more amused than alarmed. Harry stared at Draco, looking more alarmed than amused.

Draco smiled a little sheepishly. "Not exactly, no. Your mother wanted to name you after her favourite cousin, who just happened to be my ex-boyfriend. I liked the irony, so I agreed."

Adrian buried his face in his hands. Draco, worried about how the shock of all these revelations might affect Adrian, pushed back his chair to go and see to his son. At the same moment, Harry did likewise.

Ignoring the sound of the chairs scraping against the floor, Adrian moved one hand from his face to pound it lightly against the table.

"Adrian?" Harry asked, worried.

The boy burst into undignified giggles. "I'm sorry," he gasped between bouts of laughter. "But...but..." He was overcome with another round of helpless giggles. Draco and Harry cast a worried glance at one another, certain the boy's mind had finally broken.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Adrian smiled at the two men. "I'm named after my Dad's ex-boyfriend. How weird is that?"

Relief washing over him, Draco sat down rather heavily in a chair on one side of Adrian. On the opposite side, Harry pulled his chair a little nearer to the boy.

"So," Adrian asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep from grinning. "Is it true that you... well...that you're dating Professor Potter?"

Harry looked down at his hands, a flush rising in his cheeks. He was certain that he could feel Draco's eyes on him.

"Why ever would you think that?" Draco asked smoothly.

"Kira Macmillan," Adrian replied.

Harry glanced up, confused. "Why would *she* think that?"

Adrian shrugged. "Kira said her dad saw you two in the Three Broomsticks one night. He said you're both... well, you know. And that the only reason you two could have for being there together and not hexing each other was if you were having an affair."

Draco blanched. Harry felt as if the world had suddenly turned upside down. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to quash the sickening dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him.

Fighting to regain his equilibrium, Harry straightened in his seat and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could think what to say, he heard Draco's soft drawling tones.

"Would it upset you if Harry and I *were* seeing one another?" he asked, watching his son closely to gauge his expression.

"Of course not," Adrian replied matter-of-factly. "I'd think it brilliant. It would be weird, but brilliant. So, is it true?"

Draco shook his head slightly. "No, Adrian. It's just a rumour. Harry and I were in the Three Broomsticks talking about you."

"Oh," Adrian said, looking a little downcast. "But don't you *like* Professor Potter?"

"Adrian," Harry said suddenly. "I'm not certain you should be asking that." He didn't want to have to listen to Draco go on about how Harry was not his type.

Draco ignored Harry's well-meaning interruption. "Yes, of course I like him, Adrian. Very much so," he acknowledged, looking up at Harry with an unreadable expression. Seeing the question forming on Adrian's lips, Draco cut him off. "And even if Harry likes me as well, there is more to a relationship than that Adrian. I wish I could explain, but it's one of those things you only truly understand with experience."

"And often not even then," Harry added.

"Very true," Draco agreed.

Adrian appeared to think about this for a moment, and then nodded slightly. He turned to Harry. "Is it true, then, that you... um... You know...like boys?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, I prefer men."

"Do you like my dad?"

"Adrian, honestly!" Draco cried, not entirely certain that he wanted to know the answer.

"What's not to like?" Harry answered with a grin.

Draco let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

"I can't say I understand why you'd want to date another guy. Girls are soft and pretty. Boys are just...boys."

"I don't know," Harry said, his eyes sparkling mischievously. "Your dad is rather pretty."

A spot of pink tinting each cheek, Draco ignored Harry's comment and turned to face his son. "You can't understand why I would want to date another man, and I can't understand why *anyone* would want to date a woman. I think we're on equal footing, there."

"But you married Mum," Adrian said, looking confused.

Harry leaned forward slightly in his seat. He was curious as to the story behind Draco's marriage and divorce.

Draco sighed and slumped back in his chair, a habit he did not often indulge in. "My parents, as I said before, pressured me into marriage. I married the woman they thought most suitable. I'm certain Father doesn't know of my predilection for males, else he would have disowned me long ago. I think Mother suspects, but she is the very epitome of discretion."

"You didn't stay married," Adrian continued.

"No. I intended to, of course, but... I didn't like the way Pansy treated you children. I did what I thought best for the three of you."

Adrian shrugged. "I don't really remember her. I only ever remember there being you and Sera and Damien. And there was me of course. We didn't need her, anyway."



"No," Draco replied, leaning in to hug his son. "We didn't."

## Chapter Six

Later that evening, Draco walked Harry and Adrian back to Hogwarts. They said goodbye at the front entrance, and Draco asked Harry to stay behind for a moment.

He swallowed, trying to force moisture to his suddenly dry mouth. "If there are going to be rumours spread about us, we might as well give people something to talk about. I'd like to see you again. Without Adrian, I mean."

Harry's heart stopped beating for a moment, and then it was racing helter-skelter in his chest. "When? And where?" he asked stupidly.

Draco smirked, feeling a little more confident in the face of Harry's awkwardness.

"Friday, 8 p.m. The Three Broomsticks."

Harry nodded dumbly. "I'll see you then," he said.

Still smirking, Draco turned without another word and headed for home.

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Friday evening found Harry sorting through his wardrobe, searching for something to wear to the Three Broomsticks. He had never much cared about clothing, so long as it fit fairly well rather than hanging on him the way Dudley's hand-me-downs had, but Ron's older brother Bill had once tried to teach him and Ron a little about style. Harry hadn't learned much, but he had come away from the experience with a great many clothes that he didn't really need.

Right now, he was very glad he had bought them.

At last, he decided on an outfit of Muggle clothing. Checking the time, he saw that he was running a bit behind schedule. He took the quickest shower imaginable, dried off with a charm, and tugged on the Muggle clothes. After a brief attempt to tame his wild hair, Harry threw his brush down, wrapped himself in his cloak, and headed for Hogsmeade.

A short time later, he stepped into the Three Broomsticks, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the change in lighting.

From his typical corner table, Draco Malfoy watched Harry walk into the pub. Harry's hair was windblown, his cheeks slightly pink from the chill evening wind. Wrapped up in his cloak as he was, Draco couldn't tell whether Potter had changed from his everyday teaching robes. He sipped his tea and waited for Harry to find him.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting of the pub, which seemed quite bright compared to the darkness of the falling night, Harry looked around a bit. The Three Broomsticks was mostly deserted, and Harry was glad to see that Remus had not chosen this particular night to come and have a drink with Madame Rosmerta. He started moving in the direction of the corner table he and Malfoy had shared before, knowing without looking that Draco would be there.

Harry took off his cloak as he neared Draco's table and laid it aside before taking a seat across from the other man. Draco noted that Harry had indeed chosen to wear something other than his teaching robes, and he found himself both delighted that Harry had done so and disturbed by his own reaction to the vast difference decent clothing made in Harry's appearance.

Dressed in perfectly fitted black trousers of some soft fabric that moulded itself to his muscular thighs and a green silk shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes, Harry looked so sexy it made Draco feel a bit off his game. He would have to fight to keep his cool façade in place this night.

<>

"Hello, Harry," Draco greeted warmly, causing Harry to startle slightly. Which was, of course, exactly what Draco had intended.

"Good evening, Draco," Harry replied, sounding much calmer than he looked.

Madame Rosmerta appeared out of nowhere, asking Draco if he would like his tea freshened. He accepted, and Harry ordered a butterbeer and a plate of chips.

"Sorry," Harry said in response to Draco's raised eyebrow. "I'm famished. Had a detention to supervise, and missed out on dinner," he explained. Of course, he hadn't supervised any detention that night, but it sounded better than 'I was too damned nervous to eat.'

"I just don't understand how you can eat the Three Broomsticks' horribly greasy excuse for chips," Draco said dismissively.

Harry merely shrugged.

"You didn't have any of my children in detention, did you?" Draco asked. He sounded slightly concerned.

"No, of course not. I never have any real trouble out of them - though it's been a near thing with Damien on occasion. Unfortunately, that isn't the case with Eleanor Weasley. The girl is as much a troublemaker as her father."

"One of your sidekick's brats?" Draco asked, smirking.

Harry shook his head. "Fred's oldest."

"Good God," Draco exclaimed, sounding dismayed. "The Weasley twins procreated?"

"Only one of them," Harry said sadly. "George was killed in the early days of the war."

Draco winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't know," he said, ashamed of his solecism.

"It's all right," Harry said. He smiled wryly. "I think George would have reacted to the news the same way." In response to Draco's obvious discomfiture, Harry steered the conversation toward what he hoped would be safer ground. "Adrian told me you traveled a lot before settling in Hogsmeade. I've

always thought it would be nice to go and see a bit of the world, but I've never really gotten around to it."

"You should. There is so much more than just England, Harry. There are places you couldn't even imagine."

"And you've seen them?" Harry asked.

"Oh, gods, yes. I've lived in places so beautiful it would take your breath away. We visited places where the sun never sets, places where the wind never stops blowing, places where it never rains and the ground is always bare and brown and hot."

Harry smiled at the faraway look in Draco's eyes. "Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes. What I miss most, really, is the way things were. The way the children and I were all that mattered. They're growing up so quickly," Draco said wistfully, staring down into his empty cup.

Madame Rosmerta returned with fresh tea and Harry's chips and butterbeer. Harry munched thoughtfully for a moment. "I envy you," he said at last, not quite daring to meet Draco's eyes. "Even when I was young, I always wanted a family - a real family. When I got older, and realised that I was gay, I had to accept the fact that my friends were the only family I would ever have."

"There's always adoption," Draco pointed out, sipping his tea.

Harry nodded and swallowed the bite he was chewing before responding. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for a single parent to adopt? Especially one whose 'aberrant sexual behaviour' has been splashed all over the cover of The Daily Prophet," he said bitterly.

"I keep putting my foot in my mouth, don't I?" Draco asked rhetorically. He pilfered one of Harry's greasy potatoes and settled back in his chair, nibbling at it carefully.

"You seem to have a great talent for it," Harry replied with a little smile.

"Glad to know I'm good at *something*," Draco muttered, almost too quietly for Harry to hear.

"C'mon," Harry said, downing the last of his butterbeer and pushing back his chair. "I think we need a change of scenery."

Taking up his cloak, Harry went to the bar to pay Rosmerta.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," she said to him, making him blush.

He joined Draco at the door, and the two headed out into the cool night.

They meandered through the quiet streets, talking about how much Hogsmeade had changed since they were children and peering into windows of shops that had long since closed for the night. As they left the central part of the village and headed for the outskirts, the two men made not entirely comfortable small talk that lasted until Draco realised where Harry was leading him.

"We're going to Lupin's house?" Draco asked, confused.

"Not exactly. We're not going in," Harry replied enigmatically.

They skirted the house, and Draco followed Harry into the back garden. Even in the dark night, illuminated only by faint starlight, Harry found his way with ease. He paused at last, and took off his cloak, draping it over something that Draco could not quite make out.

Harry lay down atop his cloak, his body swaying slightly, and Draco realised that the unseen object must be a hammock.

"Don't just stand there," Harry said, amusement apparent in his voice. "Climb in. It's plenty big enough."

After a moment's hesitation, Draco removed his cloak and tried to climb into the hammock beside Harry. He nearly sent them both tumbling to the ground, but Harry's reflexes were even sharper than they had been during their school Quidditch days and he managed to right them both easily. They settled into the hammock, barely touching, with Draco's cloak as a blanket, looking up at the canopy of stars.

The silence hung heavily between them, awkward, but not quite as awkward as talking might have been. Draco felt hyperaware of Harry at his side: the way the man seemed to be trying to ignore him, the way Harry would occasionally bring their bodies into closer contact with his fidgeting. He began to wonder if all those little presses and brushes were actually accidental.

Nervous but determined, Draco shifted beside Harry, setting the hammock swinging. Harry would be glad he'd hurried things along or he'd make his discomfort known; either would be an improvement over not knowing what the other man wanted. "I think we'd be more comfortable if you moved just a little," he said

"Which direction?" Harry asked.

"Here, just..." Draco slipped his arm behind Harry's head, and Harry understood - or assumed he did. He moved up a little so that Draco's arm was around his shoulders and snuggled slightly into the other man's body heat.

"That's better," Draco sighed, relieved. He unconsciously nuzzled Harry's hair. It had been such a long time since he'd held anyone this way. Harry felt indescribably good pressed against his side. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek against the top of Harry's head, his heart pounding nervously in his chest.

Neither had any idea how much time passed before they were roused by the soft pitter-patter of raindrops falling onto their upturned faces. Draco shivered in the chill, damp air, and for a moment he considered simply pulling his cloak up over his and Harry's heads.

A moment later, the rain began in earnest. The two men stumbled unsteadily out of the hammock, and Harry led the way up to the back door of the house. As Harry reached for the doorknob, Draco stilled his hand.

"I should go," he said gently. The night had been strange, almost surreal, and while he was in no hurry for it to end, he needed time alone to think about what had - and hadn't - been said or done.

Harry nodded, disappointed but understanding.

"I'll see you on Monday," Harry reminded him.

Draco gave him a quick, genuine smile. He leaned forward on impulse to press a kiss to Harry's rain-wet temple, and then turned to leave, pulling his cloak tightly around him.

Harry watched as Draco stepped out from the little shelter provided by the eaves and trod slowly over the muddy ground. Only after the blond disappeared from sight did Harry finally remember to go in out of the rain.

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"You look like hell, Potter," Draco announced as he joined Harry and Adrian on Hogwarts' steps the following Monday.

"Hello to you...." Harry replied, breaking off to sneeze repeatedly into his handkerchief. "Too," he finished weakly.

Frowning slightly, Draco reached out and touched the back of one smooth, cool hand to Harry's forehead. "Have you been to see Madame Pomfrey?"

Harry shook his head weakly. "I'm heading to the infirmary now," he assured him.

"Good," Draco replied. He resisted the urge to caress Harry's cheek. Forcing his attention back to his son, Draco wrapped his arm around Adrian's shoulder and turned to leave.

"I'll see you next Monday," Harry said quietly.

Draco glanced back over his shoulder to smile a wicked little smile at Harry. "I was hoping for Saturday night, but you've gone and spoiled my plans by catching ill," he teased.

Harry grinned. "Yes, well, I suppose that's what I get for playing in the rain." He paused a moment. "I'll owl you after I've seen Poppy," he added at last.

"See that you do," Draco replied with a little smirk. He turned away from Harry once again, and he and Adrian started across the grounds towards Hogsmeade.

"What was that all about?" Adrian asked, his grin showing that he already knew the answer to his question.

"As if it were any of your business," Draco said, ruffling his son's hair mercilessly.

"Dad!" Adrian raked his fingers through his riotous blond curls, trying to tame them back into some semblance of order. "I thought you weren't seeing Professor Potter," he continued slyly.

Draco stopped and turned his son to face him.

"We aren't exactly seeing one another, Adrian. I'm not quite sure what we're doing, actually, but whatever is going on between Harry and myself is very private. I don't mean that you don't have a right to know, it's just that I want you to keep this to yourself. Your classmates don't need to know anything about this...whatever it is."

Adrian cocked his head to one side and studied the strange expression on his father's face. "I'm not going to say anything, Dad," he assured him. "What do you mean you aren't sure what you're doing?"

Draco sighed and resumed walking. "I enjoy Harry's company, and he seems to enjoy mine, but whether we'll ever take this beyond friendship remains to be seen. There are a great many factors to consider besides whether we fancy one another."

"Like what?"

"You children, for one. I know you get on well with Harry, but would you really want him around all the time when you weren't in school?" Before Adrian could work out whether he was supposed to answer that question, Draco continued. "Father would likely disown me. Society in general would disapprove. And right now, we're still getting to know one another. We might find we don't suit at all." He thought of the way Harry had felt pressed against him in the hammock and hoped fervently that they *would* suit.

Adrian took a few minutes to digest what his father was telling him, turning the whole idea around and around in his brain. Finally, he nodded.

"You know something, Dad? I think I'd like having Harry around all the time," he said at last.

Draco responded with a wide smile and pulled his son to his side. It was nice to know that at least one person didn't disapprove of his budding relationship with Harry Potter.

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Draco received an owl from Harry midweek letting him know that Pomfrey had been successful in treating his cold and asking when and where Draco would like to meet him on Saturday. Unable to stop grinning and feeling a bit like a love-struck teenager, Draco hastily scribbled the reply he had been planning since the previous weekend.

*Harry,*

*The Hog's Head. 8 p.m. Dress robes would be appropriate.*

*D.M.*

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Harry grinned at the brevity of the letter. Laying it aside, he went to rummage through his wardrobe in search of dress robes and wonder what Draco had planned.

Saturday morning found Harry at Remus Lupin's house. He said hardly a word in greeting before dashing down the hall to 'his' room - the guest room he always stayed in during his not-uncommon extended visits. Many of his belongings were stored in the room, and he began digging frantically through them, searching for his dress robes.

"Everything all right, Harry?" Lupin asked from the doorway where he stood watching the goings on with a slight smile.

Harry turned, panic in his eyes. "I can't find my dress robes," he said, as if that were a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why he had torn his bedroom apart like a madman. "I need them. For tonight."

"Whatever for?"

"I'm...I'm going out," Harry answered vaguely.

Remus' smile widened. "I see," he said. "What time do you need to be...wherever it is that you're going?" He resisted the urge to ask more straightforward questions about Harry's outing. Harry, he knew, guarded the secrets of his love life zealously. Whatever his young friend wanted him to know, he would tell in his own time.

"I'm supposed to meet him at 8:00," Harry replied, as he surveyed the damage he had done to his room.

"I'd suggest a quick trip to Malkin's, then, and be done with it. You haven't a lot of time," Remus replied absently as he began to help Harry pick up the scattered clothing and put it away again.

"You know I'm hopeless with clothes," Harry lamented, frowning at the Weasley sweater he was folding. "You've got to help me."

"I don't think I'd be much help, Harry," Remus replied honestly. "I've never had the money or the desire to worry much about fashion."

"You can at least tell me if what I pick out makes me look like a complete idiot," Harry assured him.

"I'm certain that Madame Malkin wouldn't let you choose anything inappropriate," Remus replied, trying to find a way out of the impromptu shopping trip. He preferred the quiet solitude of home, and the bustle of Diagon Alley certainly held no appeal for him.

"Right," Harry responded a bit sourly, "because she isn't going to try to turn a larger profit by getting me to buy the most expensive and ostentatious robes imaginable."

Lupin laughed and admitted that Harry had a valid point. Feeling certain that his going along was more to buoy Harry's self-confidence than to provide any oh-so-valuable opinions on dress robes, Remus gave in at last and escorted Harry into Diagon Alley.

Some time later, Harry returned with much more than just a new set of dress robes. Remus, delighted by the knowledge that Harry had some sort of romantic rendezvous planned, had gotten rather excited about the shopping trip once they reached Diagon Alley. He had insisted that Harry buy new socks, new shoes, and silk boxer shorts. He had also bullied Harry into getting a haircut.

After a glance at the clock showed him that time was running short, Harry dashed off to shower and change into his new robes. He ran a brush through his hair, pleased to see the raven locks behaving for once, and smiled at his reflection. Not bad, he thought.

When he joined Remus in the sitting room a few minutes later, his friend smiled affectionately at him. "Whoever the bloke is, Harry, he's going to be falling at your feet," he teased, smoothing the younger man's robes in a fatherly gesture.

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said. On impulse, he hugged Lupin tightly - a rare but genuine display of affection for the man. Remus returned the embrace briefly before drawing away.

"You're going to get all mussed," he said, smoothing Harry's robes again.

"If I'm lucky," Harry replied cheekily.

Remus laughed. "Have a good night, Harry," he said earnestly.

"You know I'll tell you all about it when I get in tonight."

"As long as I don't have to hear about you having sex. As far as I'm concerned, you still aren't old enough to be doing that."

Harry laughed. "Then I guess I shouldn't tell you exactly how long I've been 'doing that'," he teased.

"Good God, no," Remus replied. "Let me keep my fantasy that you're still a good little boy."

"Don't know how anyone could think that after the Wood fiasco," Harry mumbled.

"That was just a kiss," Remus said dismissively.

"That's not exactly true," Harry added a bit mischievously.

"Harry, that is far more information than I ever needed," Remus replied. "Go on now, before I hear anything else I don't want to," he added playfully.

Still grinning, Harry stepped out into the cool night air.



## Chapter Seven

Draco stood near the bar in the Hog's Head pub, waiting impatiently for Harry to show up. Technically, Harry wasn't due to arrive for another quarter of an hour. Draco had never been known for his patience, however, and memories dredged up by the sight of some of the other patrons were putting him on edge.

When a familiar ebony-framed face appeared in the room, Draco made his way quickly across the crowded pub. Taking Harry by the elbow, he steered him out the door and into the alleyway.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, concerned by the tenseness in Draco's face and the slightly rough grip on his arm.

Draco forced himself to breathe slowly and steadily. "Remind me that I don't ever want to step foot in that establishment again, would you?" he said calmly. He relaxed his grip on Harry's arm. "Have you ever Apparated with another person guiding you?" he asked, completely changing the subject.

"Not since..." Harry closed his eyes tightly, fighting the vertigo that sometimes overtook him when thoughts of the war crowded his mind. "Let's just say it's been awhile," he said softly.

Drawing his wand, Draco slid his free hand lightly up Harry's arm to rest on his shoulder. Harry pulled out his own wand and reached up to catch hold of Draco's arm. The world shuddered around them, and in the next instant, they were standing in a quiet street that was completely unfamiliar to Harry.

Glancing around himself as he tried to regain his balance, Harry's thoughts were drawn away from painful memories of the war. He and Draco were standing on one side of a cobblestone road lined with buildings of various shapes and sizes. Wherever they were, it reminded Harry very much of Diagon Alley.

Smirking at Harry's thunderstruck expression, Draco gently extricated himself from their uncomfortable embrace. "Come along," he commanded.

Shaking himself from his ogling of the city street, Harry followed Draco across the cobblestones to a quaint, squat little building. Warm candlelight poured from the building's windows, and the air around it was filled with the soft music of a violin. Draco opened the building's simple wood door and the two stepped inside together.

Harry found himself in a dimly lit restaurant. Candlelight reflected off the highly polished wood surfaces of the tables and the walls, the violin music floated softly through the room, and immaculately dressed men and women hurried here and there, serving food and wine to other immaculately dressed men and women.

A smiling auburn-haired girl stepped up to meet them just inside the door. "Mister Malfoy, so good to see you again. Right this way," she said, and led them to a booth in one corner that would afford them a good bit of privacy.

The girl presented the men with ornate menus and disappeared back into the kitchens. Harry looked over the menu, his brows drawing together in frustration. The menu had no prices and was written in some language that he couldn't read. Harry, drawing on his limited knowledge of such things, thought perhaps it might be Italian, but he couldn't be sure.

Draco smirked slightly as Harry's discomfiture, causing the dark brows to draw even further down. Feeling decidedly stupid and uncultured, Harry lay the menu aside and sat back in his seat, fighting the urge to fidget.

The young woman returned to the table, and Draco spoke to her in a mixture of English and some foreign language which Harry assumed was the same language that was on the menu. He felt a little more certain that it was Italian, which helped his predicament not at all. The girl hurried away again, but a moment later, she was back with a bottle of red wine and two silver goblets.

"Relax, Harry," Draco said gently as the girl filled their glasses. He smiled at the redhead, who blushed and returned the smile, obviously trying not to giggle. When she was gone again, Draco turned his full attention to Harry, really taking in the other man's appearance for the first time.

Harry looked quite different, dressed as he was in simple but elegant navy blue dress robes, his normally unruly hair neatly trimmed and perfectly tamed. Draco found he actually preferred the 'just stumbled out of bed' hairstyle Harry normally favoured. His hands itched to tousle the jet locks, bringing up images Draco was forced to quell.

"You're uncomfortable, Harry. Why?" Draco asked, desperate to make conversation of any sort in an attempt to drive away the unwanted - and inappropriate - thoughts that were threatening to overtake his mind.

"This isn't exactly what I'm used to," Harry replied, waving his hand vaguely to indicate the establishment.

"I know. That's why I chose this place. Everyone needs to broaden his horizons," Draco returned smoothly.

"I can't even speak the language," Harry snapped. He felt that Draco was chiding him as if he was a naughty child, and he didn't like it at all. Truthfully, he didn't want his horizons broadened; he liked things orderly and familiar. He'd had enough of chaos and new experiences during the war.

Draco smirked at him, and Harry felt a fleeting urge to slap the smug look off the man's face. Or perhaps kiss it away. Anything to erase that damnable smirk that reminded Harry far too vividly of the boy he had hated back at school.

"Have you forgotten how to cast a simple translation charm, Potter?"

Harry flushed, feeling even more stupid than he had previously. Angry with himself for being so thick, and angry with Draco for being so mean-spirited, Harry jumped to his feet, intending to walk away, possibly to go and lock himself in his room and spend the rest of the night sulking.

A soft touch to his hand stilled him.

"I wasn't trying to be a bastard," Draco said. "It just comes naturally."

Harry took a deep breath and willed himself to be calm. He knew Draco was trying to apologise, in his own strange way. Without another word, Harry returned to his seat, refusing to meet Draco's eyes.

Across the table, Draco sighed and took a sip of his wine. "I guess this wasn't such a brilliant idea," he said softly. "I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable. I wanted to take you some place....unique. If it makes you feel any better, we're just around the corner from Diagon Alley."

Harry looked up at Draco, his brows furrowed in puzzlement.

"I only discovered this place after I moved back to England. We - the children and I - came here the night before Sera started to school. We were all rather taken with the place, and it's becoming something of a tradition to come here for special occasions," Draco explained.

For a moment, Harry sat thinking, sipping at his wine. He wondered if Draco considered this date a special occasion, or if coming to this particular restaurant had merely become habit. Not caring whether it was just wishful thinking, he decided that the former must be the case.

The wine, Harry thought as he took another sip, was quite good, being neither too dry nor too sweet. If nothing else, Draco Malfoy had exceptional taste.

A moment later, Harry tossed his menu down on top of Draco's.

"My translating charms were never very reliable," he lied. "I'll just have to trust your judgment."

Draco looked up at Harry with an unreadable expression. The two sat in uneasy silence until the young woman returned and Draco placed their orders. Harry couldn't help wondering what exactly he would be eating, but he didn't ask. Instead, he asked about the restaurant itself.

"Is this a wizarding establishment?" he asked, glancing around at the other patrons in their expensive dress robes.

"Yes, of course," Draco replied.

"The servers...they're..."

"Squibs," Draco replied. "Or those unfortunates who don't possess enough magical ability to become fully trained and licensed."

Harry nodded and took another sip of wine.

"Oh," Draco said suddenly, his face lighting up. "I talked with Doctor Ponsford on Monday. She feels that Adrian has made a great deal of progress. He's only to visit her a few times over the summer holidays, rather than every week."

"That's good," Harry replied, beaming. "I'm glad he's doing so well."

"Harry... I don't mean to pry. All right, I'm lying; I do mean to pry. Why after all this time are you still seeing her on a weekly basis?"

"That's rather personal," Harry said lightly, settling back into his seat. He enjoyed the look that crossed Draco's face as the man struggled between his curiosity and his sense of propriety. "Actually, the answer is quite simple: I *don't* see her on a weekly basis - at least not most of the time. My visits are closer together when I'm under a great deal of stress and farther apart other times. Unless something cataclysmic happens, I doubt I'll see her all summer."

Draco nodded slightly, but made no further comment. He took a sip of his wine, and considered where to take the conversation. "How did you come to be teaching at Hogwarts?" he asked at last. "The last I'd heard, you were working as an Auror."

A pained expression crossed Harry's face, and Draco knew he'd put his foot in it again. "Minerva was kind enough to offer me the Defence position. She tried to convince me that I would be doing her a favour by taking the job, but..." Sitting back, Harry sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Let's just say that I wanted a slightly less hazardous line of work."

"Dealing with teenagers on a daily basis isn't hazardous?" Draco teased.

Harry smiled wryly. "I never said that."

The two men lapsed back into silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Draco sat for a moment, sipping his wine thoughtfully.

"Quidditch," he said at last. "Quidditch is usually considered a safe topic of conversation." Draco seemed rather proud of this epiphany.

"Let's not talk about Quidditch," Harry said in a tightly-controlled tone. He took a rather large gulp of his wine, gripping his goblet hard enough to leave minute impressions in the soft silver.

"What have I done now?" Draco asked, looking weary.

"I've been grounded," Harry explained calmly. He took another drink of his wine and refused to meet Draco's eye.

"Grounded?" Draco asked indignantly and a bit too loudly, drawing unwanted attention from patrons at nearby tables. "By whom and for what reason?"

"By...everyone, I guess," Harry replied quietly, glancing around uncomfortably at the curious stares. "I've developed an unfortunate habit of falling off my broom."

Draco silently topped off his and Harry's goblets, more for something to do than because they truly needed refilling. He stared into the viscous red liquid before him for a long moment before speaking. "You were always one of the most gifted fliers I'd ever seen. I can't imagine your being confined to the ground."

Harry shrugged, scowling into his own goblet.

"Is this related to your quitting the Aurors?"

Another sizable drink from his glass, and Harry lifted his head. "It's all in my head, you see," he explained bitterly. "Not a spell. Not an injury. Just...trauma."

Draco slid his hand across to table and placed it cautiously on top of Harry's. The green eyes looking back at him seemed startled for a moment, but Harry didn't pull away. In fact, he seemed to take courage from the simple gesture and continued with his story.

"I can't fly because of vertigo. I get these incapacitating dizzy spells from time to time, and I never know when one's going to hit me. As for the Aurors, I had to quit because I...because I lost my nerve. I tend to freeze up in dangerous situations, now. Nearly got Tonks killed...that was my cue to bow out gracefully."

The two men were silent for a moment, and Draco was a little surprised to find his thumb gently stroking the back of Harry's hand. He slowly moved his hand away to wrap it around the goblet of wine in front of him.

"For what it's worth, Harry, I'm sorry."

"So am I," Harry replied quietly. Draco hardly had time to wonder what the guilt in Harry's eyes might mean before the red-haired girl returned with their meal.

The two men tucked into their dinner, grateful for a good excuse to cease talking for a bit. Harry tried not to watch the graceful way Draco spun the long strands of pasta around his fork and tucked them tidily into his mouth. He felt awkward and clumsy beside the other man's unconscious poise. And the nearly orgasmic expression on Draco's face as he savoured his meal was making Harry feel hot and uncomfortable.

Without looking up, Harry fumbled for his goblet and took a drink of his wine. The chill liquid momentarily cooled him.

Across the table, Draco carefully lay his fork down. Glancing up, Harry was surprised to see the other man looking pained and perhaps a little fearful.

"This isn't going well, is it?" Draco asked quietly.

Harry lay his own fork aside and took another sip of wine. "Actually, all things considered, I'd have to say it *is* going rather well," he answered honestly.

Draco gave a little snort of disbelief.

"No, Draco, I mean it. The wine is excellent, the food exceptional...."

"And I'm such a bloody brilliant conversationalist," Draco added bitterly.

"With all we've seen, and considering all that lies between us, we'd have to be blind and stupid to expect to be able to carry on a so-called normal conversation," Harry replied.

"Not that I would really know what constitutes a normal conversation," Draco admitted quietly. "It's been ages since I've engaged in more than just small talk with any adults other than my parents. And my parents spend most of their time criticising me, dodging my questions, or steering our conversations 'round to nice, safe topics," he added sourly. "I mean, I still don't know how Father..." Draco trailed off, watching Harry gulp more wine as his face turned pale.

"All right," Draco said levelly. "We'll leave off talking about my Father, as well."

"Sorry," Harry apologised.

"Don't be," Draco replied, taking a long draught from his goblet. "I didn't really want to talk about him anyway."

Draco lifted the wine bottle, refilled his own goblet, and then moved to refill Harry's as well. Harry shook his head.

"Any more and I'll splinch myself trying to Apparate home," he explained.

"Don't be silly," Draco responded. "You've not had that much to drink. Besides, you can always Floo home."

"Yes, I'm certain Remus would really love for me to be sick in his fireplace," Harry replied with a smirk. He lifted his now full goblet to his lips, despite his earlier protests.

Draco chuckled and turned his attention back to his meal.

Harry steered the conversation around to Draco's travels, and the other man was off and running, spinning tales for Harry of the places he had visited. For someone who had never travelled, Harry seemed to know quite a lot about some of the places Draco had gone; he admitted that he had learned most of it from Hermione's letters. Soon they were deep in discussion about the various places Draco had seen, and the places that Hermione had visited that Draco had not. So engrossed was Harry with the conversation that he hardly noticed when the red-haired girl brought a second bottle of wine, and then a third.

By the time that Draco passed the girl some coins to pay for the meal, Harry was feeling incredibly warm and light. He was also having a bit of trouble focusing properly, and he couldn't help wondering how he had managed to get into such a state. Only when Harry rose so they could leave, staggering slightly as he stood, did Draco realise how much the wine had affected the dark-haired man.

"Did Diana slip you a firewhisky when I wasn't looking, or do you really have the alcohol tolerance of a twelve-year-old girl?" Draco asked, obviously amused.

"That last bit," Harry admitted with a beatific smile.

"God help us," Draco muttered. "Can you make it to the door unaided?"

"Sure." That smile again - a smile that made Draco's insides churn and his knees threaten to buckle beneath him.

Harry proceeded to show Draco that he could - in fact - walk out under his own power. Outside, Draco took hold of Harry's arm to make certain he didn't stumble. Somehow, Harry managed not to trip over his own feet as they walked down the lane - perhaps because his attention was focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other and not at all on where he was going or what he might be walking into.

With a sigh, Draco guided him towards a weather-beaten building bearing a tattered sign proclaiming it the 'The Seven Stars Tavern'. Tugging the door open, he led Harry into a dimly lit but quite clean little pub.

Giving the old man behind the bar a slight nod, Draco pointed Harry towards the fireplace. Grabbing up a pinch of Floo powder and tossing it into the flames, Draco spoke in a clear, quiet voice. Harry didn't hear their intended destination. He had only just enough time to wonder if this were all some twisted plan for revenge concocted by Lucius Malfoy before Draco was dragging him into the Floo, crushing Harry tightly against his chest as they whirled and fell through the Network.

The two landed in Draco's fireplace, and - courtesy of Harry's intoxication and resulting lack of balance - tumbled onto the hearthrug. Draco was up in an instant, using a spell to cleanse their robes and the rug of soot. Harry remained where he was - on all fours, his head lowered, waiting for the dizziness to pass. Just as Harry began to worry that the dizzy spell had been triggered by more than just the alcohol, gentle hands were on him, helping him to his feet.

"All right, Harry?" Draco asked.

Harry responded by leaning against Draco, his head resting comfortably on Draco's shoulder. The blond tensed slightly, but then relaxed and brought his arms around the slightly smaller man. Harry slid a hand up to his face, tugged off his glasses, and shoved them into one pocket of his robes. With a little sigh, he moved closer to Draco, pressing his face into the soft, warm skin of Draco's pale throat.

Draco let his eyes fall shut. He was certain that nothing had ever felt as good as holding Harry this way. One hand drifted up to slide lazily through Harry's thick, black locks.

After a time, Harry moved slightly, his warm mouth ghosting over Draco's throat. He stretched up to nuzzle Draco's pale cheek with his own, and then his lips pressed against Draco's in a gentle but insistent kiss.

Startled, Draco pulled away. "Not like this," he said roughly. "I won't be responsible for your doing anything you'll regret. Try it again when you're sober," he added, turning away.

Harry grabbed at Draco's wrist, determined not to let the other man walk away. "Don't you think I wanted this before you went and got me drunk?" Harry snapped, vaguely realising that his words had come out wrong.

Draco's eyes narrowed in anger.

"It's not what I meant," Harry said ashamedly before Draco had a chance to retort. "I just meant...oh for fuck's sake, Malfoy! Use the sobri...sobria... oh fuck you know what I mean. That charm," he said, waving his hands uselessly.

Although he was still clearly angry, Draco also looked somewhat amused. "You want me to cast *Sobrius* on you?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically.

"Just remember - you asked for it," Draco said with an evil smirk.

Pushing Harry down onto the couch, Draco brandished his wand, casting a charm that would return Harry to some semblance of sobriety. As soon as the charm was cast, Harry doubled over, clutching his head and stomach.

"Instant hangover," Draco said smugly. "Be careful what you wish for."

Harry made a pitiful whimpering noise, and Draco felt a little ashamed of himself for enjoying the other man's suffering, even for a moment. "Accio potion," he said, and an instant later, a vial of thin blue liquid flew into his outstretched hand.

Settling onto the couch beside Harry, Draco popped the stopper out of the little vial. He held the open container in one hand and gently forced Harry's head up with the other.

"Drink it down," he said in that voice that all parents use when trying to coax medicine into their children. "It'll do away with your headache and it should help with the nausea as well," he explained.

Harry gratefully downed the potion, relieved when it began to work almost at once and the blinding pain slowly drained out of his head.

"Better?" Draco asked, gently stroking Harry's soft, inky hair.

Harry nodded slightly, colour rising in his cheeks as he looked up at Draco. "Thanks," he said quietly. "I...er...I should probably go."

"You don't have to," Draco replied, his voice soft.

"I...I should," Harry said uncertainly. He squinted a little, trying to read Draco's expression. Without his glasses on, he couldn't see far enough to discern what emotion might be flickering in the other man's eyes.

Taking hold of his legendary Gryffindor courage, Harry leaned forward, bridging the distance between Draco's lips and his own.

Draco stiffened slightly and Harry was certain he had made a grave mistake. In the next instant, however, Draco's hands were tangled in his hair, his mouth open and hot and demanding under Harry's. Harry brought his own hands up to cradle Draco's face.

Some time later, they reluctantly broke the kiss. Neither would ever remember who had actually pulled away first. For a long moment, near silence reigned, their ragged breathing and pounding hearts the only sound.

Harry was the first to speak. "Maybe I shouldn't go after all," he said with a wicked little grin.

"You should," Draco replied, a bit too quickly. He practically jumped up from his seat. "I'll walk you home," he offered, crossing his arms across his chest, and then quickly forcing them back to his sides.

Harry just stared. "Right," he said a touch coolly as he drew his glasses out of his pocket. He glanced up, blinking as his eyes adjusted, to see Draco nervously twisting his hair around his fingers.

"Draco?"

The blond stopped fidgeting for a moment and turned his attention back to Harry.

"Did I do something wrong?" Harry asked.

Draco shook his head slightly. "No, no. It's...it's been a long night, Harry. I think we both need time to think about things."

"I don't need time to think," Harry said in a near whisper as he rose to stand before Draco. "I've *been* thinking." He raised a hand to caress Draco's cheek. "I know what it is that I want," he murmured.

Swallowing convulsively, Draco took two steps backward and nearly tripped over his own feet. "Obviously, you misunderstood my meaning," Draco said harshly, his face contorting with anger. "Let me spell it out for you - I am not going to tumble into bed with you and spend the rest of my life regretting it. If you don't care enough or respect me enough to understand and accept that, then you aren't worth my time."

Harry knew that Draco was right, but hearing the words hurt. He channelled the sudden shame he felt into anger and used the anger as a shield. Afraid that anything he might say would only make matters far worse, Harry forced the most civil response he could think of: "I'll show myself out."

After Harry had gone, Draco sank down onto the couch, despairing. He knew that he had been right to refuse to give in to his baser instincts, but he wondered if being right was worthwhile if it meant losing Harry.



## Chapter Eight

Remus Lupin looked up calmly at the sound of his front door slamming. With a little sigh, he closed the book he was reading and set it aside, waiting for Harry to come and cry on his shoulder. It wouldn't be the first time, though Lupin hoped - as he always did - that this time would be the last. Harry deserved a little happiness after all he'd been through.

Harry stalked into the parlour and threw himself down onto his usual spot on the sofa. He yelped and leapt up again, furiously tossing aside the heavy tome he had accidentally sat down upon. Remus winced as the old book hit the hardwood floor and skidded.

"What happened?" Lupin asked, concern evident in his tone and in the expression on his thin face.

"I kissed him," Harry said, sounding as if kissing the man in question were the worst thing imaginably. "And then he threw me out."

Remus rubbed his temples tiredly. He had a feeling that getting the full story out of Harry would take most of the night. "He threw you out because you kissed him?" he asked.

"Yes," Harry replied automatically, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning back into the sofa cushions. "No," he added. "Maybe...."

Fighting the urge to smile, Remus moved to sit beside Harry on the sofa. He rested a comforting hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

With a good deal of backtracking, and without ever revealing the identity of the other man involved, Harry managed to tell Remus about the events of the evening. When at last he had finished his tale, Harry sighed.

"I've made a real mess of things," he said in a near whisper.

"You made a few mistakes, I'll give you that," Remus replied. "What do you think was your biggest mistake?" he asked, feeling that getting into Harry's mind would be more productive than just doling out advice.

Harry considered the question for a moment. "My biggest mistake was thinking that it would be possible to have a healthy relationship with Draco Malfoy," he mused, still lost in thought.

"Draco Malfoy?" Remus asked, certain that he had imagined that name coming from Harry's lips. After all, the two boys had hated one another back at school.

Harry glanced up, his eyes wide with alarm. Apparently, he hadn't intended to reveal Draco's identity. Remus forced what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Yes, Draco Malfoy," Harry admitted.

Remus sat quietly for a moment, thinking of the confused boy he had befriended ever so briefly during his term as Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. The private boy had been quite different from the public one, even then. Given Harry's description of the night's events, Remus felt certain that Draco had managed to grow up to be his own person, rather than a carbon copy of his father, and that thought pleased him immensely. He turned Harry's story over in his mind again.

"Harry," he said at last, "I feel as if there are some details you've left out - important details."

Harry refused to look at him but nodded slightly.

"Tell me?" Remus prompted gently.

"After....after I kissed him, I...I rather insinuated that I should like to...to spend the night with him," Harry stammered.

"And that's when he threw you out?"

"He didn't actually throw me out," Harry admitted. "He just...he just made it clear that he thought my staying the night was a bad idea," he finished weakly.

"And?"

"He said we needed time to think about things. I told him I didn't need time. I...I told him I knew what I wanted. He jerked away like I had slapped him. Told me that he had no intention of sleeping with me and that if I didn't like it I could bloody well fuck off," Harry fumed.

Remus coughed to hide a laugh. "Were those his exact words, then?" he asked.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, and sighed. "No. Something along the lines of if I didn't respect him enough to back off and give him time then I wasn't worth *his* time."

"Ah," Remus said, smiling.

"You agree with him!" Harry accused, hurt shining in his eyes.

"Calm down, Harry," Remus said levelly. "Calm down and *think*. Really think about the situation, and then you tell me which of you was in the wrong."

Harry stood and began to pace, running his hands through his too short hair. At last, he stopped his pacing and came to kneel at Remus' feet, looking up into the older man's kindly brown eyes.

"Me," Harry whispered. "I was in the wrong."

Remus answered the admission with a warm smile. "So tell him that."

"You want me to apologise to Malfoy," Harry replied flatly.

"What I want is not the issue. I'm merely telling you that if you want to work things out with Draco then you should apologise for being so insensitive. If he cares about you at all, he'll accept the apology and all will be well."

"And if he doesn't accept?"

"Then you know he's the same prat he's always been and you can go on with your life," Remus replied sagely.

Harry laughed, seemingly surprised at the sound. "I'm being an idiot, aren't I?"

"You always are where relationships are concerned."

"What do you know of my relationships?" Harry countered, twisting around to sit rather than kneel beside the sofa.

"More than you might expect," Remus answered cryptically. "More, in fact, than I ever wanted to."

"You shouldn't believe everything you read in the Daily Prophet," Harry told him with a little grin.

"You're changing the subject," Remus chided.

"Of course I am," Harry replied offhandedly.

"You should invite him to dinner," Remus remarked, changing the subject back to Draco.

"Somewhere chic and refined like the restaurant he introduced me to last night? No, thanks. I think I'll pass," Harry replied sourly.

"I meant you should invite him to dinner *here*," Remus explained patiently.

Harry considered the suggestion. "You think that having a chaperone of sorts around might help?" Harry asked.

"Actually, I simply thought it would be nice to see him again. Now that you mention it, though, Draco might well be more comfortable in a situation that doesn't involve the two of you being alone together."

"Remus...why do you think Draco reacted like that?" Harry asked, turning to look up into his friend's face again.

Remus leaned forward to meet Harry's serious gaze. "I think that you should talk to Draco about that, Harry," he said quietly. "I may have theories, but only he knows for certain why he shied away from you. Give him a little time, and he may even volunteer the reason. Be patient, Harry. You've had enough of jumping in over your head," Remus said.

Harry sighed. "I'm such a fuckup," he said.

"What is it the Muggles say? Hindsight is 20/20? You can't change the past, Harry, anymore than I can. We both of us have to live with the mistakes we've made. We're two halves of the same coin, you know. I spent my life afraid to love anyone, and you've spent yours determined to love anyone who will accept it. I'm not at all certain your way isn't the better of the two," Remus said, looking pensive.

"So we're both fuckups," Harry amended. "At least we can be miserable together."

"Can we be miserable together tomorrow?" Remus asked. "This old man needs sleep," he added, pushing himself to his feet.

With a grin, Harry bid Remus goodnight. Aware that he had made a right mess of his new dress robes, he got up off the floor, dusting debris from the soft fabric. Not altogether reassured by Lupin's 'pep talk', Harry headed for his own bed where he lay awake for some time replaying the evening's events in his mind.

Sleep did not come easily, and when at last it did come, it was neither peaceful nor refreshing.

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On Monday afternoon, Draco dutifully headed to Hogwarts to collect his son. He knew that Harry would be waiting on the front steps with Adrian, and he had no idea what to say to the man. He wasn't even entirely certain whether his anxiety was due to a desire to see Harry or a desire to avoid him.

Sure enough, there Harry stood, chatting and laughing with Adrian. Seraphine was with them, as was another girl whom Draco didn't know. Whatever he was telling the children, Harry had their undivided attention.

"I can't believe Da' was ever like that," Draco heard the unfamiliar girl say. She pushed a lock of dark brown hair out of her face and looked up at Harry adoringly.

"Well, you can't expect him to get into mischief the way he did when he was your age," Harry said. "Besides, you get into enough trouble for the both of you."

The girl giggled. "Just you wait," she said. "Da' says I'll be much more trouble in a year or two," she said wisely.

"He means you'll be more trouble when you discover you have hormones," Harry replied.

That remark sent both girls into a fit of giggles.

Smiling slightly to himself, Draco stepped up to join the little group.

"Dad!" Adrian cried, throwing himself into his father's arms as if it had been a year rather than a week since he had last seen the man.

Draco hugged his son tightly, and then accepted another exuberant hug from his daughter.

"Dad, this is my friend, Ella," Sera said, introducing the other girl.

The girl extended one slim hand to Draco. "Eleanor Weasley," she offered, smiling brightly when Draco shook her hand and introduced himself. "Yes, I know," she replied. "Uncle Ron would skin me alive for being civil to you," she said cheerily.

"Honestly, Eleanor, have you no tact?" Sera asked, turning her tiny nose in the air in a gesture that reminded Draco strongly of his mother.

"Nope, not a bit," Ella replied with a wide smile. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Malfoy," she added. Grabbing Sera's arm, she tugged the girl away from the group. Sera waved briefly to her dad before turning back to her friend as she headed towards the lake.

"Sera wants to meet Dr. Ponsford," Adrian announced. "She thinks counselling sounds...um..." he looked up at Harry for assistance.

"She thinks counselling sounds like a rewarding career," Harry explained.

Draco turned to stare at the retreating form of his daughter, and then looked back at Harry. "Did having a career ever cross your mind when you were thirteen?" he asked, looking a bit rattled.

"No, I don't think so," Harry confessed.

"The girl worries me sometimes," Draco said.

"She was trying to impress Ella," Adrian noted.

"Why would she need to work to impress that girl?" Draco asked. Seeing the dark expression that crossed Harry's face, he quickly amended the question. He honestly hadn't meant the remark the way it had come out, and the last thing he wanted was to further alienate Harry. "What I mean to say is that Eleanor seems the type to like a person based on....well, what the person is like rather than who she is or pretends to be, if that makes any sense."

"In other words, she's a bit like her Uncle Ron," Harry replied casually.

Draco rubbed his eyes and sighed. He had known the subject of Ron Weasley would come up eventually. "Yes, rather like her Uncle," Draco agreed. "Although," he added, "I do hope the girl is a bit less vindictive and a tad more even-tempered."

Sensing the tension growing between the two adults, Adrian decided to step in. "She doesn't want to make Eleanor like her," he explained. "She wants to seem more grown up because she fancies Ella's cousin."

Draco looked positively green at the mere mention of his daughter fancying anyone.

"Which cousin?" Harry asked, sounding a bit alarmed.

"The Veela one," Adrian replied impatiently. "Dad, we're going to be late!"

"Veela?" Draco asked, concerned.

"Armand's Mum was part Veela," Harry explained. "Fleur Delacour. She was one of the Triwizard champions."

"She married a Weasley?" Draco asked, sounding surprised.

"No, she f..." Harry began hotly, his voice trailing off as he became aware of Adrian's curious gaze following the flow of conversation. "That is...er...she and Bill never married."

"I see," Draco replied quietly. He, too, was now aware that his adolescent son was hanging on their every word. "We should be going," he added. His heart hammered in his chest as he waited what seemed like an eternity to learn whether Harry would accompany them into Hogsmeade.

"We can continue our conversation on the way, if you like," Harry suggested a bit nervously. Draco had a feeling that Potter was asking for permission to join them, and he quickly nodded his assent.

"Tell me more about this Armand," Draco prompted as the trio made their way across Hogwarts grounds. "Should I be concerned?"

Harry ran a hand through his dark hair, considering his words. "Armand is living proof that Weasleys should never marry Veela," he began. "Or breed with them. Both Veela and the Weasley clan have notoriously volatile tempers. You know first hand what Fred and Ron were like. Armand is worse."

"Sera is *never* going near him," Draco said firmly.

"Probably a wise decision, though I doubt she'd see it that way," Harry agreed. "For the record, Armand isn't a bad kid. He's intelligent and well-mannered and hardly ever gets into trouble at school. He's a prefect, actually, and will likely earn more than a few OWLS next month."

"He's in fifth year?" Draco asked, looking more worried by the minute.

"Er...yes."

"That settles it. If he as much as looks at Sera, I'm bringing her home," Draco swore.

"Dad!" Adrian cried.

"Don't you think that's a little extreme?" Harry asked with a smile.

"No, Potter, I don't," Draco replied curtly, although he did think it extreme and would never actually follow through with it. "I'm a bit young to be a grandparent, don't you think?"

"You're not making sense," Harry said.

Draco stopped in the middle of the lane. "When you were fifteen, did you think about anything other than sex?" he asked.

Harry gave him a strange look.

"All right. Did you think about anything other than sex and the possibility of dying a horrible death at Voldemort's hands?"

"Actually, I didn't discover sex until a bit later on," Harry replied.

Aware of Adrian watching them with wide eyes, Draco began to walk again. "Suffice it to say, Harry, that most of the boys in our year were not as sexually repressed as you obviously were. You got a late start."

"I made up for it," Harry muttered.

Draco glanced over at Harry, pondering the remark. The comment was wide open for interpretation, and he found himself wondering whether Harry was merely noting a vastly increased interest in sex or whether the man had gleaned more than his share of practical experience. The troubled expression on Harry's face could be indicative of either.

"Dad?" Adrian asked hesitantly, drawing his father's attention away from a frank perusal of Harry's face.

Draco looked down at his son with a somewhat guilty expression. "What is it, Adrian?"

"Can we talk about something else?" The boy's cheeks were bright pink and he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Yes, of course," Draco replied quickly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I just don't want to know, you know? I might be almost twelve, but I'm still too young to be scarred for life." Adrian turned to Harry. "I'm twelve next month, did you know? You'll come to my birthday dinner, won't you?" he asked.

"Adrian, honestly," Draco chided. "That is hardly the way to extend a proper invitation."

Harry grinned down at Adrian. "I promise you that if you extend me a proper invitation that I will come to your birthday dinner," he said. From the corner of his eye, he could see Draco smirking.

Adrian seemed more than satisfied with Harry's answer. "Cool," he said. "Dad always lets us have whatever we want for our birthday dinners. Well, almost. One time, me and Damien tried to convince him to let us have just sweets, but he said 'no'."

"Damien and I," Draco corrected automatically, torn between frowning and smirking when Adrian rolled his eyes. He settled for disregarding the impertinent gesture altogether.

Grinning, Harry opened the door to Dr. Ponsford's office and held it for the two Malfoys. He shrugged off Sheila's calculating glance and settled himself into a chair near Draco.

As soon as the two men were alone, Harry suffered a miserable moment of doubt. Draco seemed to be trying to ignore Harry's very existence, and Harry found himself suddenly very nervous. His agitation and anxiety managed to utterly destroy his well-rehearsed monologue.

"I know I've really bugged things up," he blurted out at last. "I never meant to imply that...that I don't care or that I don't respect you. I...Draco, I'm very sorry for pressing the issue the other night," Harry said in a rush, never looking up from where his hands lay twined in his lap.

"Apology accepted," Draco replied quietly. "I'm afraid this may take more work than either of us counted on," he apologised.

"I remember one of my Muggle teachers telling me once that nothing worth having is every easy to attain," Harry mused. "I grew up believing that."

"Yes, well, I grew up believing that if a thing was worth having then my father likely already owned it," Draco replied a little bitterly.

Harry gently took Draco's hand in his own, smiling when Draco's fingers twined with his. Draco relaxed a little, although his heart still raced in his chest. Harry wasn't going to walk away; the rest, they could work out.

"Will you have dinner with me this weekend?" Harry asked.

"You're not planning on dragging me to one of those horrid Muggle take-away places are you?"

Harry laughed. "No, though I'll have to file that idea away for future reference," he teased. "Actually, Remus suggested I invite you to join us one evening. Cooking has become one of his favourite hobbies. He's forever trying to fatten me up. He's as bad as Molly Weasley," Harry explained, shaking his head and grinning.

"In that case, I'd be delighted," Draco answered honestly. Some of his fondest memories of his childhood were of the time spent with Lupin, and he had been wondering for some time how to go about reconnecting with the man. The presence of a third party would also help prevent another disastrous scene.

"Friday evening?"

Draco assured Harry that Friday evening would be perfectly acceptable. "Around seven, if that's all right," he added. "I'll be at Mother's, and she always keeps me rather late," he explained.

Smiling, Harry leaned in and kissed Draco on the cheek.

"I had best go and tell Remus to be expecting us. I'll see you on Friday."

As the door shut behind Harry, Draco sat back in his chair, a wave of relief washing over him. Glad as he was that he and Harry weren't on the outs, it wouldn't do to seem too eager to stay in Harry's good favour. Better to play the part of the scorned lover reluctantly granting absolution for Harry's sins than to let the other man know how desperately he wanted this relationship to work.



## Chapter Nine

On Friday morning, Adrian met Damien outside of the Charms classroom, as they had done since the very first day of school. Damien's eyes were flashing with excitement in a way that Adrian hadn't seen in some time

"You'll never guess what Sera told me," Damien whispered excitedly to his twin as they took their seats.

"Then you'll have to tell me," Adrian whispered back matter-of-factly.

At the front of the class, Professor Flitwick began his lecture, oblivious to the boys' quiet conversation.

"Ella Weasley told Sera that there are thestrals at Hogwarts," Damien explained.

"What?" Adrian's whispered exclamation carried a little farther than he had intended and a few nearby students turned to stare. He blushed and turned his attention back to Flitwick's lecture.

*'Thestrals at Hogwarts,'* Damien scratched on a slip of parchment, which he showed to his twin.

*'I don't believe it,'* Adrian wrote back.

*'Ask Sera if you don't believe me,'* Damien scribbled.

Brows furrowed slightly, Adrian glanced at his brother and gave a small shrug as if to say 'So what?'

*'Don't you want to see them?'* Damien wrote.

Adrian rolled his eyes. "You can't see thestrals, stupid," he whispered.

"You can if they're babies," Damien returned with a smirk.

Adrian's eyes grew wide. Damien was right, he knew. Thestrals only became invisible after their first year; one of the books Adrian had read about them had gone into a long-winded theory as to why the infants were visible, but it had all gone far over his head.

"Well?" Damien hissed.

"When?"

"After lunch," Damien decided.

Adrian nodded. They didn't have afternoon classes on Fridays, so they'd be free to investigate then, and the storm that threatened would give them some cover from prying eyes. Their plans set, the two boys turned their attention back to Professor Flitwick's demonstration.

After lunch, the twins met outside of the Great Hall and moved casually towards the entrance hall and the front doors of the castle, trying not to attract any attention.

"They're in the forest," Damien said, keeping his voice low to avoid anyone overhearing.

"We're not supposed to go in there," Adrian reminded his brother even as they slipped outside and headed across the grounds toward the distant tree line. Worry furrowed his pale brows.

"You're not afraid, are you?" Damien asked, holding his head a little higher to show that he, at least, wasn't scared.

"Not of the forest," Adrian scoffed.

"Then what?"

"Headmistress McGonagall," Adrian replied with a slight smile. "She'll be mad if she finds out."

Damien nodded. "Then we just shan't tell her, then," he said.

The duo paused on the edge of the forest, looking around to see if anyone was paying attention. Sneaking into the Forbidden Forest in broad daylight was not the easiest thing to accomplish, even on a stormy day when most everyone was safely tucked away inside the castle.

Certain that they hadn't been followed or detected, Damien jerked his head to one side, indicating that was the direction they were to go. He headed off through the trees, Adrian following close behind.

"Do you know where you're going?" Adrian asked, sounding uncertain.

"Of course I do," Damien replied haughtily. "Weasley told me just where to find them."

"I thought you lot don't like Gryffindors."

"We don't. But Weasley's different. She should have been in Slytherin."

Adrian said nothing. He merely followed his brother through the ever-darkening gloom of the forest, hoping that thestrals were the only creatures they would happen across.

After perhaps half an hour of walking in the rain, backtracking, circling, and generally wandering around lost, the boys found the beasts. They quite literally stumbled into the creatures; Damien walked face first into a warm, invisible wall and nearly fell into the mud. Only after they spotted two thestral foals did they realise that the unyielding wall before was an adult thestral.

"Bloody hell!" Damien breathed, his eyes passing over the strange reptilian horse-like creatures.

Adrian clutched his brother's arm, his eyes wide with delight and disbelief, unable to say a single word.

Glancing at each other, the boys grinned, each knowing what the other was thinking. Together they walked cautiously towards the foals. Adrian moved a little ahead of his brother, reaching out a hand to pat the creature's leathery snout before tracing his fingers over its skin and stroking the silky mane. He was dimly aware of Damien following his movements, petting the other thestral.

Even though the foals were less than a year old, they were fairly large, larger at least than their equestrian counterparts would have been at the same age. An idea struck Damien, and it clung tenaciously to his brain as he stroked the foal's mane.

"Remember when you tried to ride that Granian?" Damien asked with a grin.

"How could I forget? I've never been so scared."

"Granians are awful fast. Bet these would be easier to ride," Damien commented, glancing at his brother out of the corner of his eye. He wondered if Adrian would take the bait. He wanted to see if riding the foals was safe before trying it himself

"Maybe," Adrian replied, obviously not very interested in the conversation.

"You'd be too scared, anyway," Damien challenged.

"I would not!" Adrian replied before he could think better of it.

"You would. You're such a baby, really. Always going to Dad for hugs and kisses when you get a bump or a scratch."

"I'm not a baby!" Adrian answered hotly. Damien had as much as called him weak, and his own doubts told him it was true. He was determined to prove that he was *not* weak. "I'm not afraid at all," he said defiantly.

"Prove it," Damien said, smirking.

Throwing caution to the wind, Adrian fisted the foal's silky mane in his hand, pushed off from a nearby stump, and awkwardly straddled the thestral's back. The foal tossed its head, but otherwise stood perfectly still.

Adrian thought for a moment, trying to recall what he'd read of thestrals. If the books were correct, all he needed to do was talk to the creature to get it to do as he wished.

"Well, all right, then. I'd just like to circle around a bit," Adrian said uncertainly.

To Adrian's delight and amazement, the foal began to trot at an easy pace. He wondered if the creature were too young to fly, but then the thestral spread its wings and lifted smoothly into the air. Adrian let out a wild whoop and clung more tightly to the foal.

Glancing down nervously through the rain, Adrian could see Damien scrambling onto his own mount. A moment later, a piercing shriek rent the air, and Adrian nearly fell off his thestral in a moment of blind panic.

"On the ground! Now!" he cried as his brother let out another scream

As the thestral touched down, Adrian brandished his wand. Leaping from the creature's back, he tucked and rolled, coming to rest at the base of a large tree. Glancing up, he was shocked at the scene before him.

An unseen assailant had plucked Damien from the foal's back and was shaking him roughly. Adrian paused for only a second before casting the only spell he could think of.

"Petrificus Totalis!" he screamed.

Instantly, the shaking stopped. Damien hung in midair, shivering and crying. Blood soaked his robes.

Adrian tugged on his brother, ripping the bloodstained robes that were still clenched tightly in the thestral's teeth and sending both boys tumbling to the forest floor. Damien cried out at the impact.

Not knowing how long his binding spell would hold, Adrian leapt up and began trying to tug Damien upright. Damien cried out again, clearly in pain, and struggled to gain his feet. Leaning heavily on his brother, Damien managed to put one foot in front of the other, walking slowly and steadily in what Adrian hoped was the direction of Hogwarts castle.

Every step that Damien took was agony. He had never known such pain in his life. The feeling of his own blood running down his arm and soaking his robes terrified him, but the thestrals terrified him even more. He kept walking.

The rain made the trek through the forest much harder than it otherwise would have been. Damien kept slipping in the slick mud, and crying out in pain when Adrian jerked him to keep him from falling down. The light was fading quickly, and Adrian felt certain that they were lost.

"Can't," Damien panted after a time. "Please....stop."

"We have to get you back to Hogwarts," Adrian said, trying to keep the panic from his voice. "We need to get you to Madame Pomfrey."

Damien leaned more heavily on his brother, his head lolling forward in exhaustion.

"Can't," he whimpered.

A moment later, Damien proved that he honestly could not go on when he fainted and fell into the mud, bringing his brother toppling down on top of him. Frightened and frustrated, Adrian began to cry. His tears mixed with the rain on his cheeks, and he wiped both away angrily.

Steeling his resolve, Adrian tried to lift his brother to carry him back to Hogwarts. He succeeded only in tumbling once again into the mud. Sobbing, he forced himself upright again.

Desperate, he cast a lightening charm on Damien, not knowing for certain whether the spell would even work properly on a live being. Pocketing his wand, he tried again to lift his brother, and let out a small cry of relief when he was able to lift his brother's now much lighter body.

Inching his way along to avoid stumbling in the mud, Adrian turned again in the direction that led towards Hogwarts. At least he hoped it led towards Hogwarts. If not, he was certain his brother would bleed to death long before help could be found.

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As Harry stepped from Hagrid's hut, heading back to the castle after having tea with his old friend, he spotted movement on the edge of the forest. He squinted his eyes at the indistinct shape for a moment, and then, certain that what he was seeing was a student, began to run toward it.

"Adrian!" he cried, as he drew near enough to recognise the two boys. "What happened?"

"Damien's hurt real bad," Adrian sobbed. "Please...you've got to hurry."

Harry took the injured boy from his brother's arms, alarmed by the amount of blood that coated his torn robes. Cradling Damien carefully so as not to harm him any farther, Harry turned and hurried toward the castle, knowing that Hagrid would see that Adrian returned safely.

Damien's condition alarmed Madame Pomfrey. She set to work quickly, ushering Harry from the room as she began to cast spells.

Harry headed for the entrance hall, wanting to see Adrian the instant he arrived at the castle. He hoped that perhaps an explanation of Damien's injuries would help in his treatment. Adrian, he knew, was the only person who could give such an explanation.

Just as Harry stepped into the entryway, Hagrid and Adrian burst through the oak front doors. Adrian fell to the floor, gasping for breath, and Harry moved to kneel beside the winded boy.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

Adrian nodded his head slowly, still struggling to breathe normally.

"Damien?" the boy gasped.

"Madame Pomfrey's with him. What happened?"

Tears gushed from Adrian's eyes. "Thestrals," he panted.

"Thestrals?" Harry repeated, confused. He looked up at Hagrid. "Why would a thestral attack a child?"

"Protectin' their young, I'd wager," Hagrid said in his thick accent. "Can't think o' nothin' else that'd make 'em act that way. They keeps to themselves, mostly."

Headmistress McGonagall rounded the corner, drawn by the sound of the wide double doors slamming open.

"What in Merlin's name?" she exclaimed at the sight of the mud and blood covered child half-sitting, half-lying on the floor.

"Damien Malfoy's been seriously injured," Harry explained brusquely. "I need to contact his father."

Harry gently hugged the shaking boy, then stood and turned to leave. "He's going to be all right, Adrian," he said reassuringly. He only hoped he wasn't lying to the boy.

Wanting to have as much information as possible when he contacted Draco, Harry headed down to the infirmary to ask after Damien and to tell Poppy how the boy's injuries had been sustained.

"The child's lost a lot of blood," Pomfrey told him, "and he was in shock when you brought him here. I've done all I can. The rest is up to him."

Feeling not at all reassured, Harry turned and fled in the direction of his office, intent on placing an emergency fire call. As he reached for the Floo powder, Harry checked the time on the clock above the mantle. Draco had said he would be at his parents' house until rather late, visiting with his mother, and Harry was certain that's where he would be now. Swallowing a knot of pure dread, Harry tossed the powder into the fireplace, connecting his office with Malfoy Manor.

Lucius Malfoy turned at the sudden hiss of flames in his cold fireplace. He recoiled at the sight of Harry Potter's head in his hearth.

"What do you want, Potter?" he hissed, his face contorting in a grimace of disgust.

"I need to speak to Draco. And I need to speak to him *now*," Harry snapped.

Lucius opened his mouth, perhaps to protest, and Harry spoke again.

"I haven't time for your bullshit, Malfoy. I need to speak to Draco. Go and get him or I swear you won't live to regret it," he said coldly.

Sneering with contempt, Lucius marched out of the study. A moment later, he reappeared with his son in tow.

"Harry," Draco said, surprised. With his attention focused on the face in the fire, Draco didn't see his father startle at his son's familiarity with the other man.

"Damien's been hurt. I think you should come to the school at once," Harry said without preamble.

Draco's pale face turned deathly white. "What happened?"

"I'm not entirely certain. All I could get out of Adrian was 'thestrals'."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Draco assured him.

Harry disappeared, and the fire blinked out.

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Turning from the fireplace, Draco addressed his father. "Tell Mother where I've gone," he said, fighting down a wave of panic.

"I'm coming with you," Lucius snapped.

Draco started to protest, but realised it would be utterly pointless. He dashed through the house and into the sitting room where he had left his mother some minutes before. After the briefest explanation possible, he kissed Narcissa on the cheek and Apparated to Hogsmeade.

Draco was already striding down the path towards Hogwarts when he heard the pop that signalled his father's arrival. He ignored the other man, ignored the rain that soaked his expensive robes, ignored the wind that whipped his hair into his eyes, moving as fast as the slick ground would allow. Within minutes he was bounding up Hogwarts front steps and throwing open the oak double doors. Lucius was less than two steps behind him.

Disregarding the strange looks they received from students and staff alike, the two Malfoys strode through the hallways of Hogwarts toward the infirmary.

Harry was waiting for Draco when he arrived at the hospital wing. He was, in fact, sitting beside Damien's bed with Adrian curled in a shaking ball on his lap.

Draco rushed to Damien's side, his eyes moving instinctively to check for the rise and fall of the boy's chest that would indicate that he was alive. He choked back a sob of relief as he watched Damien breathing. Taking his son's hand in his, he sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

Focused intently on the child lying in the hospital bed, Draco never saw Adrian recoil at the sight of Lucius. Harry, however, felt it, and felt the increased shivering of the boy in his arms.

"How is he?" Draco asked as Madame Pomfrey moved to check on Damien.

The mediwitch cast a few spells and then nodded her head. "He's improving. He isn't out of the woods yet, but his vital signs are stabilising. That's a good sign," she assured him.

Draco leaned down to kiss Damien's forehead and then turned to his other son. "What happened?" he asked once again.

"You should go out into the foyer to talk," Madame Pomfrey suggested. "Damien doesn't need to be disturbed."

Long experience with Madame Pomfrey had taught both Harry and Draco not to argue with the woman. As Draco rose from Damien's bed, Harry gently pushed Adrian off his lap. The three of them made their way to the foyer, and Lucius followed.

Once outside, Draco turned Adrian to face him, tilting the boy's face up so he could look down into his son's eyes. "Tell me what happened," he said calmly.

"Damien wanted to see the thestrals," he said.

"He shouldn't be able to see thestrals," the senior Malfoy said, fixing the boy with a hard stare.

"We could see the baby ones," Adrian replied, his voice hardly above a whisper.

"What happened, Adrian?" Draco prompted, trying not to let his exasperation show.

"We were just petting them. At first. Damien...erm...we thought it would be neat to ride them," Adrian said, not wanting to lay blame on his brother who might very well be dying.

"You rode baby thestrals," Draco said, scrubbing his face with his hands.

"I did. But Damien....a grownup thestral grabbed him. In its mouth. And shook him." The tears were flooding Adrian's cheeks again. Harry resisted the urge to gather the child in his arms, but just barely.

"Riding thestrals," Lucius interrupted, his tone one of contempt. "You've always been one for reckless, brainless stunts. And now you've gone and dragged your brother into it. If anything happens to him, it will be on your head."

"Father, please," Draco snapped.

Fire flashed in Harry's eyes. His hands itched to wrap around his wand and lay out Lucius Malfoy with some particularly nasty hex.

"I'm so sorry!" Adrian wailed.

"Sorry won't be of much use if Damien dies," Lucius replied coldly.

Adrian turned and fled, running blindly down the hallway. Harry and Draco both turned toward the older man.

"You're one to talk!" Draco snarled. "You, who gave my eleven year old the means to attempt suicide."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lucius replied in a bored voice that said he knew exactly what Draco was talking about but didn't care.

Harry caught Draco's wrist as the blond reached for his wand. "You've worn out your welcome, Lucius. I think you should leave," he said in a cool, level voice.

"I've every right to be here," Lucius insisted. "That's my grandson in there," he added, gesturing towards the infirmary.

"You've no rights, Lucius. None at all," Harry said threateningly.

Draco stood transfixed, watching the verbal volley and wondering just what in the hell was going on.

"Strong words," Lucius commented. "I hope you realise that enforcing them might very well cost you your...friend," he added, looking pointedly at Draco.

Harry's hand left Draco's wrist, his wand sliding from his sleeve as he raised his arm. In the split second since Lucius had spoken, Harry had brandished his wand and pointed it directly between the senior Malfoy's eyes.

"Give me a reason," Harry said, his voice hard as stone. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Pleased with the look of horror on his son's face, Lucius took a step backward and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. Slowly and deliberately, he turned and walked away.

Harry stood with his wand raised until long after Lucius disappeared around the corner.

"Do you mind explaining to me what just happened?" Draco snapped.

"Not now, Draco. I've got to find Adrian," Harry said, dismissing the other man's concerns completely.

Draco grabbed his arm. Harry turned to look him in the eye. "Find Adrian. But you *will* tell me what is going on between you and my father."

"I will," Harry promised quietly. He reached up and gently caressed Draco's cheek, a look of profound sadness in his eyes, and then he was gone, hurrying down the corridor in search of Adrian.



## Chapter Ten

"Seems I spend all my time tracking you down," Harry commented as he moved to sit beside Adrian. After over an hour of searching, he had found the boy sitting at Damien's desk in the Charms classroom.

"You shouldn't have bothered," Adrian replied. His eyes were dry now, but a bleak hopelessness had settled on him that Harry found much more worrisome than healthy tears.

Harry carefully settled his arm around the boy's thin shoulders. "I wanted to make certain that you were all right."

"Damien's the one you should be worried about," Adrian countered.

"I am worried about your brother, but there isn't anything I can do to help *him*." He didn't say that he hoped he could help Adrian, but he knew the child understood his meaning.

"I didn't mean for him to get hurt," Adrian whispered, tears filling his bright eyes once again.

"I know," Harry murmured, drawing Adrian closer. "It isn't your fault, Adrian."

"It is!" Adrian snapped, pulling away. "It *is* my fault!" He dashed away tears with the back of his hand.

"Adrian, listen to me," Harry said in a calming voice. He took Adrian's face in his hands, forcing the boy to meet his gaze. "It isn't your fault. You didn't make him go with you. You didn't force him to try to ride that thestral..."

"So now it's Damien's fault?" Adrian shouted, jerking his chin out of Harry's hands.

"No!" Harry answered firmly. "It isn't anyone's fault, Adrian. It was an *accident*."

"We weren't supposed to be there," Adrian whimpered.

"No, you weren't. The rules are meant to keep you safe. You've both been dealt a hard lesson in minding those rules."

"I won't ever misbehave again," Adrian swore.

Harry smiled softly and hugged the boy tightly to his side. "I know you'll do your best," he said softly. Fishing in his pocket, Harry managed to procure a handkerchief. He gently wiped away Adrian's tears. "Why don't we go find your dad and check in on Damien?" he suggested.

Adrian's brow furrowed slightly. "Is Grandfather still with them?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. As far as I know, he's gone home." Harry tilted Adrian's head up to catch his eye again. "Adrian, what your grandfather said...he was wrong. He was wrong to even think such things, much less say them to you."

The child shrugged, trying his best not to meet Harry's gaze. "I'm used to it," he replied.

Harry clenched his jaw, fighting to keep from telling Adrian exactly what he thought of the boy's grandfather. The implication that Lucius Malfoy was in the habit of subjecting the child to such abusive treatment made his blood boil with rage. Seething, Harry led Adrian back to the infirmary.

Draco sat in the chair beside Damien's bed, watching his son sleep. At the sound of footsteps, he turned to look up at Harry and Adrian. He spared one brief wary glance at Harry before opening his arms wide in welcome for his son.

Adrian flung himself into his father's arms, grateful that the man still loved him. He buried his face in Draco's robes, trying to hide in the darkness and familiarity there. Draco gently stroked his son's tangled hair.

"Has there been any change?" Harry asked quietly.

"Madame Pomfrey says he'll be fine in a few days," Draco replied in a hushed tone, relief evident in his voice.

Adrian hugged his father all the harder.

"Good," was all Harry could think to say.

"Snape and Professor Sprout are in with McGonagall, now, deciding what to do about the boys," Draco said.

Adrian looked up. "What do you mean?" he whispered fearfully.

"They're deciding whether to allow you to stay at Hogwarts. Going into the forest and messing about with dangerous magical creatures...those are serious infractions."

Manfully fighting back another wave of tears, Adrian moved back to stand straight and tall before his father. "You have to tell them it wasn't Damien's fault," he said. "I...I teased him, Father. I...I told him he was too scared to ride one. I called him a baby," he added, looking Draco straight in the eye. "It's not his fault. He shouldn't be expelled."

Draco nodded, carefully hiding his true thoughts. "Yes," he replied at length, "I believe I should go and fill them in on the details. You stay here and watch over Damien for me."

As Draco stood and moved toward the door, Adrian took his father's seat in the chair, turning his attention to his brother. Draco paused, looking back, and smiled sadly at the little tableau. After a moment, he turned to go, gesturing for Harry to follow.

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Draco said not a word as he and Harry made their way to the Headmistress' office. Harry, following his cue, kept his silence as well, speaking only to give McGonagall's password to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the office.

Harry waited as Draco rapped on the door and they were granted admittance.

"Mister Malfoy," McGonagall greeted. "Harry."

"Headmistress, if I may," Draco began. "Professor Potter here just returned to the infirmary with Adrian, who had the most interesting story to tell me about what happened in the forest."

Minerva gestured to an empty chair near Professor Snape and Draco gracefully folded himself into it. Harry remained standing near the door, apart from the meeting.

"Adrian, upon hearing that his and Damien's fates were being decided, offered more information on their outing this afternoon. He told me that none of what happened was Damien's fault, and that he, Adrian, had goaded his brother into interacting with the thestrals. He said that he called Damien a baby and accused him of cowardice."

"I see," said the Headmistress, straightening her glasses.

"That doesn't sound at all like Adrian," Professor Sprout, Adrian's Head of House, commented.

Draco smiled wryly. "No, it doesn't. In fact, it sounds a good bit like Damien. You see, Damien has a horrid habit of challenging his brother in just those ways that Adrian mentioned."

"Adrian was trying to cover for Damien," Harry said from his spot by the door.

"Yes," Draco confirmed. "The boy really is a terrible liar, which I suppose I should be glad of."

"I don't see what difference any of this makes," Snape said.

"I don't expect it will make any difference in the outcome of this meeting," Draco said, giving Snape a look that said he very much expected it to make a difference.

Snape scowled, but said nothing.

"Adrian was willing not only to take all the blame for something where he and Damien were both at fault, but he was willing to risk the disapproval of his family and the staff here. I think that counts for something," Harry said quietly.

Professor Sprout beamed. "The Sorting Hat was right to place him in Hufflepuff. That kind of loyalty is certainly something to be proud of."

"As is his courage," Harry added, giving Draco a little smirk that, despite everything, the blond couldn't help answering with a smirk of his own.

"Mister Malfoy," McGonagall said, calling everyone's attention back to the matter at hand. "Before you arrived, we had already agreed that the boys would not be expelled. They have both suffered enough that I believe it will be some time before they try any more foolish stunts. They both will be receiving fair and fitting punishment."

Draco looked relieved.

"Essentially," Sprout added, "we'll be keeping the boys confined to the castle, except during Herbology and flying lessons. They'll also be serving quite a few detentions."

Draco nodded, and then stood to leave. "Thank you," he said, addressing Minerva. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to see to my children."

"Certainly, Mister Malfoy," McGonagall replied.

Draco brushed by Harry on his way out the door, but said nothing more. Harry followed, uncertain whether Draco would allow his presence.

"Draco?" he called softly after the other man.

Draco stopped, but didn't turn around. He resumed walking once Harry had caught up to him. "I don't think I can bear to hear it tonight," he said quietly. Harry didn't have to ask what he was talking about.

"Tomorrow, then," Harry promised.

When they entered the infirmary, Harry was surprised to find Remus sitting in a chair he had pulled up alongside the one Adrian occupied.

"Remus?" Harry queried softly.

Lupin looked up and smiled. "I was worried when you didn't show up," he explained.

"I completely forgot," Harry remarked.

"My apologies," Draco added.

"It's quite all right. Poppy explained the situation," Remus replied with a smile. He rose from his chair and extended his hand to Draco in greeting. "It's good to see you again," he said.

"And you," Draco replied, shaking Remus' hand. "You're looking good...Er...well. You're looking well," he stammered, flushing slightly at his Freudian slip.

Harry covered a smile with his hand, and gave Remus a thumbs-up behind Draco's back. Remus tried unsuccessfully to smother a laugh.

"Harry, haven't you anything better to do?" Lupin asked.

"Of course not."

Draco squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head slightly. Leave it to Harry to act like a mischievous teenager, especially in such serious circumstances

Remus clapped Draco on the shoulder. "We'll leave you alone with your boys," he said gently.

"I wish you'd stay," Draco said, opening his eyes again. "We never did settle our dispute," he added.

Remus' eyes twinkled. "I imagined you'd forgotten all about that."

"Never," Draco replied with a smile.

"Very well, then," Remus replied, settling back into his chair. "I only hope your arguments are of a less...shall we say *tangible* nature?" he added, the laughter in his eyes contradicting his serious tone.

Draco flushed again, and turned his gaze on his youngest son. Adrian was rubbing at his eyes tiredly. He leaned his dirty cheek on one hand, but his elbow promptly slipped off the arm of the chair, jolting him awake again.

Draco stroked the boy's matted hair. "I should get him cleaned up and into bed," he noted.

"Cleaning charms will get the worst of it," Remus said. "I'd leave the rest till morning."

Nodding, Draco pulled out his wand and set to work tidying up his dozing child. After some minutes of work, he sighed and put the wand away. "Best I can do," he said, as he crouched down beside Adrian's chair. "Adrian, love, you need to wake up," he said, gently touching his son's face.

Harry laid a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Let him sleep," he said. "Poppy won't mind if we tuck him into one of the other beds."

Draco nodded, even as he moved to gather Adrian in his arms. The boy fidgeted a little, but never woke as his father carried him to the nearest bed. Harry turned back the covers, and then tucked them around the sleeping boy.

Remus watched the scene with a knowing smile. He had a feeling Harry had found the family he had always wanted.

Muttering something about having essays to grade, Harry bid Remus and Draco goodnight, leaving the two men to become reacquainted. He could hear them talking quietly as he slipped out of the infirmary.

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The next morning, Harry found Remus and Draco just as he left them: still in the infirmary, still engaged in conversation, chatting like old friends over their morning coffee and tea.

"That doesn't make any sense," Draco was saying, his brows furrowing together. "You're just trying to confuse me into agreeing with you."

Remus laughed quietly. "I'm doing no such thing. My arguments make perfect sense, Draco, only you're too exhausted to keep up."

Smiling, Draco sipped his coffee. "Perhaps you're right," he conceded. "But my feelings on the subject haven't changed any in the last twenty years, Remus."

"Not at all?" Remus replied, his bemused grin growing wider as Draco tried to hide his suddenly flushed face behind his hair. Perhaps it wasn't nice to make him blush so in front of Harry, especially when the blond wasn't aware the other man was watching him. "Good morning, Harry," he called, drawing Draco's attention to the young professor's presence.

"Good morning," Harry returned, wondering what exactly the two had been talking about that had caused Draco to turn such a peculiar shade of red. "How's Damien?"

"Much improved," Draco replied, trying to regain his composure. "He woke for a bit, but Madame Pomfrey insisted that he sleep."

"I'm glad he's doing better," Harry said. "Where's Adrian?"

"Serving detention with Hagrid," Remus answered. "Professor Sprout thought it would do him good to learn a bit more about the thestrals, and about the dangers of the forest."

"As if Hagrid has any idea of what constitutes 'dangerous'," Draco grumbled.

"Almost anything can be dangerous in the wrong hands, Draco," Remus said. "A hippogriff, for example."

Draco had the good grace to look rather shame-faced. He had spent quite some time the previous night debating with Remus about the advisability of having dangerous creatures at Hogwarts, whether in a classroom setting or in off-limit areas of the school. Draco, lobbying against having such beasts at Hogwarts, had used the example of his own run-in with a hippogriff some twenty years before. Remus' answering argument had pointed out that if Draco had been paying attention and following directions, the creature would never have been any danger to him.

Harry couldn't help grinning. He hated to break up what was clearly a pleasant reunion between the two men, but he knew he had to talk to Draco before his courage failed him. With nervous tremors in his stomach, he reached out to rest a hand on Draco's shoulder.

"Have you slept at all?" he asked, looking for an excuse to delay the inevitable.

"No, not really," Draco confessed. Seeing the anxious look in Harry's eyes, he sighed. "It doesn't matter if I haven't slept. Let's get this over with," he said.

As the two stepped out in the corridor to talk, Remus watched them go, puzzled. Judging by the tense expressions on both of the younger men's faces, he had a feeling that whatever they were about wasn't good.

Out in the hallway, Harry pressed one hand to his stomach, trying to calm the frenzied butterflies that had taken up residence there. "If it's all right, I'd like to talk somewhere a little more private," he said.

"Of course," Draco replied.

Harry led Draco down the busy hallway and around to an empty classroom, shutting and locking the door behind them. He cast a few spells to dissuade any would-be eavesdroppers before making his way to the front of the classroom. Gesturing for Draco to take a seat, Harry hopped up to sit on the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom. Draco slid smoothly into one of the student desks and looked up at Harry expectantly.

"You wanted to know what's going on between myself and Lucius," Harry said.

"Yes."

"Let me ask you this: have you never wondered how it is that your father has managed to evade both the Ministry and the Order for all these years?"

Draco frowned. "No, not really. The Fidelius Charm...part of my marriage contract...that is, part of the agreement between Father and Frank Parkinson, was that Frank would act as Father's Secret-Keeper."

"Draco," Harry replied gently, "you know as well as I that Frank Parkinson has been dead for a number of years now."

The blond looked away, down at the desk. He began tracing the wood-grain with his fingertips. "So he found someone else," he said casually. "One of his other friends..."

"All of Lucius' friends are dead or in prison."

"I thought for a time that he had perhaps tricked someone into it, but I know that isn't the case," Draco said, still concentrating on the patterns on the desktop. "Still, I know that it's the Fidelius Charm keeping him safe. Imagine having to be told the location of the house you grew up in."

"No, he didn't trick anyone into it," Harry affirmed. He paused a moment, trying to find the right words. There were no right words, but he forged ahead, regardless. "You're right about the Fidelius Charm, Draco. As long as Lucius is at the Manor, he's perfectly safe. I was quite surprised to see him with you here at Hogwarts. I suppose he thought he'd be safe enough, as long as I was around to protect him."

"Why would you protect him? You hate him."

Harry took a deep breath before answering. "Because I said I would ensure his safety. I'm your father's Secret-Keeper, Draco," he said quietly.

"What?" Draco cried, jerking his head up to look at Harry. The grave expression in Harry's eyes assured Draco that the other man was deadly serious. "Why?" he asked more calmly, despite the feeling of dread welling up in his chest.

"The Order, and the Ministry, wanted your father, dead or alive. Everyone kept an eye out for him. Everyone wanted to be the one to bring him in. I was the one who found him."

"We had suspected that Parkinson was Lucius' Secret-Keeper, so when he died, I went looking for Lucius. I found him at Malfoy Manor. He didn't even know Parkinson was dead." Harry slid off the desk and began to pace, Draco following his every move with his eyes.

"I could have killed him. I could have turned him over to the Aurors. But I didn't. Lucius had information I wanted, so I made a deal with him. In exchange for the information I needed, I would act as his Secret-Keeper, protecting him from my own allies. He would be more or less confined to Malfoy Manor, and he would not take any part in the war; those were the terms he agreed to. Occasionally, he feels the need to test the boundaries of our agreement, and I have to remind him that I hold his fate, his very life, in my hands."

"Extortion," Draco said, sounding stunned.

"More or less," Harry agreed. "Only I try not to abuse the power I have over him. I let him live in peace, unless he disturbs mine. I know it doesn't make it right..."

Draco let out a strangled, mirthless laugh. He leaned forward to rest his head in his hands, his hair falling in a sheet to hide his face.

"Draco," Harry said softly, moving to crouch beside the other man. "I never meant to hurt you. I intended to tell you about this, but I didn't know how. I'm so very sorry," he trailed off into a hoarse whisper, his voice tight with anguish.

He had been worrying about retaining the good favour of a man who was blackmailing his father. Draco felt like a fool. But he also felt he could understand Harry's motivation. He couldn't honestly

blame Harry for using any means at his disposal to triumph over Lord Voldemort, and despite the reasons for Harry's actions, they had kept Lucius alive and well.

"I...I think I need time to think about this," Draco said after a moment.

Draco heard Harry's footsteps as the other man walked away. Glancing up, he saw Harry staring out the window at the grey day beyond.

"You haven't heard the worst of it," Harry said quietly.

"I don't think I want to know," Draco replied. And he didn't. Not really. He *liked* Harry, enjoyed his company. If extortion had been the big issue, he could have gotten past that. He could even forgive Harry for not being forthcoming with that information; after all, it wasn't as if admitting something of that nature was the easiest thing for a man to do. But if there was something worse....

"What I'm about to tell you, no one knows, other than me. Your father likely suspects, but I've told no one - until now." Harry turned, leaning against the window ledge, and stared, unseeing, at the far wall of the room. "The information that Lucius gave me had nothing to do with defeating Voldemort," he admitted.

Draco flinched, even now, at hearing the Dark Lord's name. Even his father had avoided using it.

"Lucius supplied me with the whereabouts of Peter Pettigrew and Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry continued. "Pettigrew, as I'm sure you know, was the one who betrayed my parents to Voldemort. In doing so, he also landed my godfather in Azkaban. Lestrange killed Sirius. I watched him die."

Draco said nothing. He had unconsciously clutched the edges of the desk in his hands, as if holding on to it for support. Draco feared he knew where Harry's story might be leading.

A silent tear slipped down Harry's cheek. "I killed them," he admitted in a choked voice. "I hunted them down, and I killed them."

"Oh, God," Draco gasped, his fears confirmed. He had known others who had killed, his father among them, but he would never have expected it from Harry. He sat stunned, as Harry continued his story.

"I found Bellatrix first. Catching her alone proved to be rather tricky, but eventually the time came when I could face her without interference. We duelled; I won. I expected to feel triumphant, avenging Sirius, but I could barely muster grim satisfaction. That should have warned me that I was going about things the wrong way." Harry wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. His voice shook with anguish, but he seemed as oblivious to that as to the tears coursing down his face.

"Pettigrew...Pettigrew was different. He begged me to turn him over to the Aurors, but I wouldn't listen. I...I executed him. He was completely defenceless..." Harry's voice broke and he slid to the ground to sit with his knees drawn up.

Draco was torn between the desire to comfort Harry and the need to run. He sat for what felt like hours but was in reality perhaps only fifteen minutes, clutching the table and watching his would-be lover crying and shaking, as he turned the information over in his mind.

What would he, Draco, have done in Harry's place? What would he do now if someone as much as threatened his children? No, he didn't think he could blame Harry for the things he'd done. It had been a time of war, a time when even the most unthinkable of acts were condoned.

As Draco rose from the desk, he was still uncertain as to which direction his feet would carry him. He glanced at the door, and then back at Harry. Slowly, cautiously, he crossed the room to tower over



the shaking man. He eased himself to the floor beside Harry and very carefully pulled the other man into his arms.

Harry looked up, shock evident on his face, as Draco embraced him. He jerked his glasses off and sent them skidding across the stone floor as he pressed his fever-hot face into the side of Draco's neck. He could scarcely believe that Draco hadn't walked away, but he took advantage of the comfort the blond offered him, clinging to him as he let himself think thoughts he'd kept tightly contained for several years.

Eventually, Harry calmed. He pulled just far enough out of Draco's embrace to wipe at his tears with the back of one hand. Draco awkwardly rummaged in one pocket and fished out his handkerchief, which he pressed into Harry's hand.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled as he wiped his face.

"You said you haven't told anyone," Draco said uncertainly.

Harry nodded, avoiding Draco's eyes.

"Maybe you should talk to Dr. Ponsford, Harry. This can't be good for you."

"I don't want to go to Azkaban," Harry whispered.

"You won't. No one would dare send Harry Potter to Azkaban...not for that."

"That would be even worse," Harry replied, looking up at Draco with a look of deep sadness. "I'm afraid...afraid everyone will act like I've done something heroic instead of something horrible, just because they've some idea that I'm the bloody messiah. I couldn't bear that. I'd rather Azkaban than that." Harry leaned forward and rested his head on Draco's shoulder, feeling like a lost little boy. "They want me to be so damned *perfect*," he whispered. "But I'm not."

"Of course you're not," Draco crooned as he stroked Harry's hair and rubbed comforting circles on his back. "I don't think I'd like you much if you were," he added, softly kissing Harry's temple.

"I've got to get back," Draco said after a while. "I want to be with Damien when he wakes."

Nodding, Harry leaned back, extricating himself from Draco's embrace. Draco clambered to his feet, rubbing at his backside, which had gone a bit numb from sitting so long on the hard floor. He picked up Harry's glasses before giving the other man a hand up.

"Thanks," Harry said, as he took his glasses and slipped them on. He still refused to meet Draco's gaze.

Draco gently cupped Harry's face in his hand, tilting it up so that Harry was forced to look him in the eye. He tried to think of something to say, but words failed him. Instead, he leaned down and kissed Harry very softly on the lips. Harry swallowed hard and clutched at Draco's arms, still stunned that the other man seemed so willing to forgive his trespasses. Draco dropped his hands from Harry's face to give Harry's hands a gentle squeeze before turning to go.

Harry slid into the desk Draco had occupied as the blond cancelled the spells Harry had cast on the door and slipped out into the hallway. His emotions were a tangled, confusing mixture of grief, guilt, and hope. Once again, he forced the memories of the atrocities he had committed out of his mind, fighting to regain his equanimity. He sat in the deserted classroom for a long time before he felt ready to face the outside world again.

## Chapter Eleven

Draco took his time walking back to the infirmary, playing and replaying Harry's confession in his head. To say that he was shocked would be a vast understatement. In fact, he felt uncertain as to whether he would ever really be able to wrap his mind around the idea of Harry as a murderer. He wasn't even sure, under the circumstances, that the term 'murderer' should apply to the man. After all, it had been a time of war, and soldiers generally were not condemned for the lives they took in battle - at least not in the judicial sense. Draco wondered vaguely if Harry had actually used the Killing Curse and whether, under the circumstances, it actually would be considered 'unforgivable' if he had.

Wrapped in his thoughts, Draco made his way through the halls of Hogwarts, his steps slower and less certain than usual. Headmistress McGonagall met him outside of the infirmary.

"I was wondering if I might have a private word with you, Mr. Malfoy," she said.

"Of course," Draco replied, though he really wanted nothing more than to look in on his son.

The headmistress led him up to her office, offered him tea, and bade him have a seat. Draco dropped wearily into a chair, gratefully accepting a ginger biscuit and a cup of soothing tea.

"Have you given my offer any more thought?" McGonagall asked, peering at him over the edge of her own teacup.

When the Headmistress had first offered him the Transfigurations position after learning that he had tutored his children - and done a fine job of it - Draco had given her the most noncommittal response he could muster. Since then, he had considered the offer from all possible angles, but so far had reached no definite decision.

"I have considered your offer," Draco replied, "but to be honest, I can't seem to decide whether I should take you up on it. I have to think of what's best for my children."

"Of course you do," Minerva replied, sounding as if he were daft for pointing out the obvious. "Recent events have made me wonder if your presence might not be a calming influence on the boys, and perhaps provide a bit of a safety net for Adrian."

Draco sat for a moment, staring down into his tea in quiet contemplation. "Perhaps you're right," he said at last. "However, I have a few projects in the works that require my complete attention for the next several weeks. I don't know that I would have enough time to devote to developing the curricula."

"There are guidelines in place now that didn't exist when you were a student. In fact those guidelines are in place partly due to the ineptitude of several of the teachers you studied under. The late Headmaster saw to the development of a loose set of rules governing what information should be taught at what level."

"If I may, Headmistress...if there are such strictures in place, how is it that the current Transfiguration teacher is problematic?"

"Simply put, she doesn't know how to teach. She has no patience for the students and a decided lack of expository skills," McGonagall replied, sounding quite agitated.

"I see. So I would have basic parameters set, then," Draco mused. "Still, I haven't any experience. I'm not certain I'm up to the challenge."

"You were an excellent student of Transfiguration, Mr. Malfoy, and you're a natural leader. I'm certain you'll have no trouble adapting your public speaking skills to the classroom setting. Furthermore, I'm certain that I could answer any questions you might have along the way. I do know a little about the subject of Transfiguration, after all," she replied with a small, tight smile.

"If you're certain..." Draco said, letting his voice trail off.

"I am," Minerva replied adamantly.

Draco smiled, rose, and extended his hand. "Then I would be honoured to join the Hogwarts staff next term."

Standing, Minerva took the offered hand and gave it a business-like shake. "I shall look forward to working with you, Draco," she said.

"And I, you," he replied. "If it's all right, I'd prefer to discuss the details another time. I'd like to look in on Damien, now."

"Of course," Minerva replied, moving to open the door for Draco. "I hope he's feeling better soon. He's such a dear child, for all he's so much like his father was at that age," she added.

Draco chuckled as he stepped out of the office. His step was a little lighter, now, as he headed back to the infirmary. It had helped to distance himself from the scene with Harry.

Silently, Draco pushed open the door to the infirmary and stepped inside, noticing at once that the curtains had been drawn around Damien's bed. His heart jumped in alarm, but calmed again when he realised that Damien's voice, along with Adrian's, was drifting quietly from behind the curtain.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Adrian said to his brother. "I was really worried."

There was a pause, and Draco moved a little farther into the room. He stopped when Adrian spoke again.

"Hagrid said he doesn't know why the thestrals did that to you," he said apologetically. "They don't ever hurt people."

"They did this time," Damien replied bitterly.

"Yeah, I know. But we can't figure out why. I mean, they didn't hurt me, and I was riding one, too," Adrian said.

"How did you get it to fly, anyway?" Damien said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I just told it what I wanted it to do," Adrian replied.

"And it did what you told it?" Damien asked, sounding surprised. No response came from Adrian, but Draco assumed the boy must have nodded an affirmative, because Damien snorted. "It's just a dumb animal, Adrian, it doesn't understand English."

"That's not true!" Adrian cried. "Thestrals aren't dumb, and they do understand when you talk to them. All the books I've read said that's how you can get them to take you wherever you want to go. And they never get lost, either."

"You really did just talk to it?" Damien asked, almost too quietly for Draco to hear.

"Of course I did." There was another pause. "Why? What did you do, Damien?" Adrian asked worriedly.

"Nothing," Damien replied, a little too quickly. "I didn't do anything. I never had the chance."

"Bullshit," Adrian replied. Draco made a mental note to speak to the boy about his rough slang. "I covered for you, Damien. Tell me what you did," he demanded harshly.

Damien whispered something Draco couldn't hear.

"What?" Adrian shouted. From the corner of his eye, Draco saw the door to Poppy's office open, and he gestured for her to keep quiet. "Damien, how could you?" Adrian asked, his voice laced with anguish. "How would you like it if someone kicked you in the ribs to try to make you walk? How could you be so stupid?"

Draco crossed the remaining distance between himself and his boys in a few long strides and jerked the curtain aside. Two guilty faces looked up at him in alarm.

"Adrian, that's enough," Draco said in a quiet, calm voice. Adrian looked down at his hands and said nothing. Draco sighed and sat down on the edge of Damien's bed. "What am I going to do with you two?" he asked with an exasperated sigh.

Damien sank back into the pillows he lay propped up against, looking troubled, and Adrian pulled his feet up in his chair so he could hide his face against his knees. They so hated for their father to be disappointed in them.

"Keep them and love them, I would imagine," Poppy said wisely, interrupting the uneasy silence, as she moved to take Damien's thin wrist in her hand. Satisfied with his pulse rate, she cast a few spells to check other vital signs and then gave a little nod. "You'll be right as rain in time for classes on Monday," she told the boy. "Rest today, and tomorrow you can catch up your revising."

The mediwitch headed back to her office, mumbling to herself about how she would never finish her potion inventory at the rate she was going. The door to her office closed with a quiet click, leaving the three Malfoys alone.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Adrian whispered after a few more minutes had passed.

"It isn't me you should be apologising to," Draco reminded him gently.

Adrian lifted his head and looked at his brother. "I'm sorry I yelled at you," he said.

Damien looked down, shame-faced. "I deserved it," he whispered. He sat quietly for a minute, and then looked up at his father. "Adrian lied to you, Dad. It wasn't his fault. It was mine."

"Damien!" Adrian hissed.

"I know," Draco replied. Both boys turned to stare at him. How was it that Father always *knew* things? "You know I don't approve of you lying, especially to me. I didn't say anything because you were trying to protect your brother."

"I'm sorry I lied," Adrian said. He fidgeted, and Draco knew he wanted to be hugged and forgiven.

"I'm not really sorry that you did," Draco replied. "It's good to know that you two are looking out for one another. Just don't make a habit of telling tales, all right?" He smiled at his youngest son and held out one arm in invitation. Adrian practically jumped out of his chair and threw himself into his father's embrace.

Damien watched the two for a moment. "Grandfather says that hugging all the time is undignified."

Adrian pressed closer to his father, and Draco tightened his arm around his son, taking a deep breath before allowing himself to respond. "Your grandfather and I have very different views on a good many things, Damien. He has never cared for physical displays of affection, but I don't think they're undignified at all. I rather like hugs, and I intend to get as many as I can before you lot are too old for such things," he said, giving Adrian a little squeeze. "As you get older, you're going to have to start deciding things for yourself, Damien, rather than just listening to what I or your Grandfather have to say. It's perfectly all right to ask for our opinions, but only you can know what works best for you."

Damien chewed his lip thoughtfully. He looked at his brother, snuggled contentedly against their father's side. It had been a long time since he'd hugged Dad, and even longer since he'd snuggled up to him like that. Grandfather had told him years ago that Dad was going to ruin Adrian by coddling him too much, but maybe he had been wrong. It was something to think about.

As Damien lay back considering his father's words, the door to the infirmary opened again. Draco looked up to see a familiar-looking dark-haired girl peek in, followed almost immediately by his own daughter.

"You're awake," Sera said to her brother, smiling. "When we looked in earlier, you were still asleep," she explained, squeezing by Draco and Adrian to give Damien a kiss on the forehead. "Everyone's been worried about you."

Damien smiled weakly. "Sorry," he said. Sera gave him a sympathetic smile and sat primly in the chair Adrian had vacated earlier.

The other girl, who Draco finally recognised as Eleanor Weasley, paused uncertainly at the foot of Damien's bed before moving around to the side opposite the family. "You are an utter fool, Damien Malfoy," she chided him teasingly. "Don't bother trying to bribe me for information ever again, because you won't get it, not if this is the result."

Damien flushed slightly and cast a surreptitious glance at his dad, hoping he hadn't heard Ella's remark. Unfortunately, he had.

"Bribery, Damien?" Draco asked, raising one eyebrow. He wondered if the boy had learned that from his grandfather, as well.

"Bribery," Ella affirmed with a brisk nod. "And don't think you're squirming out of your end of the bargain just because you landed yourself in hot water."

"I'm a Malfoy," Damien replied, lifting his chin proudly. "We don't *weasel* our way out of commitments."

Ella's dark eyes flashed dangerously at the word 'weasel', and Draco had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. The scene reminded him a little of his school days, when he used to bait Ella's uncle Ron with that same derogatory play on the family name. "I should hope not," Ella replied coolly. "I've an essay to write," she announced. "Sera, I shall see you in the library."

With one last menacing glare at Damien, the Weasley girl turned on her heel and strode from the infirmary with a swirl of robes that reminded Draco strongly of Snape. The girl was so very un-Weasley that Draco had a difficult time believing she could possibly be related to the red-haired git that he had so often fought with back at school.

"What exactly did you promise her, anyway?" Sera asked, intrigued.

Damien flushed again. "Nothing, really," he said. "I'm very tired." He leaned back against his pillows and closed his eyes.

At a word from their father, Adrian and Sera said a quiet goodbye. With promises to return later, they headed off to study. Draco brushed Damien's fringe back from his face. "Is it all right if I stay here while you sleep?" he asked.

"I'm not really that tired," Damien admitted. "I just didn't want Sera asking stupid questions. She's always poking her nose into my business."

Draco smirked and shook his head slightly. At times, Damien was a little too much like he had been as a child, a little too Slytherin.

"Dad?" Damien asked, drawing Draco out of his reverie. "You know how when we were little, and we had nightmares, you'd hold us till we fell asleep?" He refused to meet his father's eyes.

Draco smiled and brushed his fingers through Damien's hair again. "I don't think we should be moving you," he said gently.

"Madame Pomfrey said I could get up a little, if I felt able."

"Come on, then," Draco replied. He helped Damien to stand, rather shakily, and take the few steps from the bed to the chair. Settling himself for a long stay, Draco sank into the chair and pulled Damien ever so carefully onto his lap. Soon, his children would all be too big for such things. Draco was surprised at the sharp pang of loss he felt at the realisation. He had always loved cuddling his children, but he had never thought how he would miss it. Burying his face in Damien's soft blond hair, Draco sighed. He just wasn't ready for his children to grow into young adults. Besides, between this whatever it was with Harry, the feud with his father, his work, and the normal trials of raising a family, he had as much as he could handle without having to worry about hormones and puberty.

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Harry spent the majority of the day shut up in his office brooding and trying to correct essays. He skipped dinner, deciding that he could slip down to the kitchens later, when he wouldn't risk running into anyone who might guess that something was amiss. He stared at his students' work until his eyes burned and the words danced on the page, but concentrating on the familiar material and the comfortable routine helped calm him.

A knock on the office door drew Harry out of his work-frenzy with a start. His mind had been a million miles away. So much for constant vigilance.

"Come in," he called wearily, never looking up from the essay he was marking.

"Harry," Draco greeted, his voice gentle and warm.

Harry laid his quill aside carefully before forcing himself to look up into Draco's face. He remained silent, not trusting his voice.

"I just came to say 'good night'. Damien's asleep. Pomfrey is releasing him in the morning, so she's sent me home to rest," Draco explained with a small, uncertain smile.

"I'm glad he's doing so well," Harry replied. The words sounded foreign, as if they had passed his lips without ever going through his brain. "I'll see you on Monday?" he asked, nervously rifling through a stack of essays.

"Actually, I was hoping you could do something for me," Draco replied cautiously.

Harry looked up, surprised. "What's that?" he asked.

"Could you bring Adrian into Hogsmeade on Monday? I got a bit behind on my work, coming up here, and I've some things I desperately need to finish up. I'm not certain I'll be done in time for Adrian's appointment."

"Of course," Harry replied, trying not to sound disappointed. He stared down at the essays in his hands, wondering again if he had been wrong to tell Draco everything. He feared that perhaps this favour was merely Draco's way of avoiding him.

The rustle of fabric and a slight displacement of air drew Harry from his thoughts, and he looked up to see that Draco had moved to stand beside his chair. He shook his head slightly to clear it. His inability to concentrate on the here-and-now was exactly what had nearly cost Tonks her life. Somehow, he had to learn to keep his mind from wandering.

"Harry?" Draco said softly.

Harry cursed under his breath. His mind had wandered off into the topic of not letting his mind wander. He forced himself to look up into Draco's eyes.

"Are you going to be all right?" the blond asked.

"I... It's been a long day," Harry said. He knew he hadn't exactly answered Draco's question, but it was the only thing he knew to say.

To Harry's surprise, Draco reached out one elegant hand and caressed his cheek. He leaned forward, scowling when his hair fell into his face. Brushing the blond locks back over his shoulder, he pressed his lips against Harry's.

"I'll see you soon," Draco promised. A moment later, he was gone.

For quite some time, Harry simply sat there, savouring the memory of that chaste, gentle kiss. The kiss was all the proof he needed that Draco wasn't trying to avoid him and that somehow things would be all right. He let it buoy his spirits enough to propel him to his rooms, where, after downing a Sleeping Draught, he managed to fall into a fitful sleep.

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On Monday afternoon, Harry dutifully collected Adrian and headed into Hogsmeade. The boy chatted away merrily about the day's classes, and Harry tried his best to listen attentively and comment accordingly. He was in a slightly better frame of mind than he had been on Saturday evening, and his concentration had improved, but the constant whirl of thoughts and emotions still made him poor company.

Handing Adrian over to Doctor Ponsford, Harry collapsed into a chair, relieved to be alone with his thoughts. When the door to the street opened a short time later, Harry scowled at the interruption and glanced up. Draco was standing just inside the door, as composed and immaculately groomed as usual. There were slight shadows under his eyes, and Harry wondered if the man had gone without sleep to catch up on whatever it was he had been working on.

"You look like hell," Draco said by way of greeting as he took the seat next to Harry's. "You haven't been sleeping well, have you?"

"I'm fine," Harry said dismissively.

Draco frowned slightly, obviously not believing Harry. He didn't contradict him, however. Instead, he sat collecting his thoughts for a moment.

"Harry, I've been thinking about what you told me," he said calmly. He could see Harry's hands tighten on the arms of his chair. Cautiously, he laid his own hand on Harry's arm in a gesture of comfort. "I wanted to ask you a question about what happened."

Harry licked his lips nervously. "Go on," he replied, surprised when his words came out as a whisper.

Forcing himself not to look away from the pain in Harry's eyes, Draco took a deep breath. "Did you use the Killing Curse, Harry?"

Harry's eyes widened slightly in surprise. He shook his head in a quick, jerky motion. "No. No, I never...I couldn't...my parents," he stammered.

Draco moved his hand from Harry's arm to the back of Harry's neck. "Calm down," he murmured. "Harry, you're a wreck. You need to talk to her about what happened. About what you did," he added, gesturing toward the door to Sheila's inner office. He pressed the fingers of his free hands to Harry's lip when the dark-haired man opened his mouth to protest.

"No one is going to send you to Azkaban, Harry. Firstly, Dr. Ponsford isn't going to tell anyone. What goes on behind that door stays behind that door; that's what she told me the first time she and I discussed Adrian. Secondly, you were an Auror and Lestrangle was wanted dead or alive, so there was no crime committed. Lastly, no one could charge you, much less convict you, in conjunction with the death of Peter Pettigrew. Your godfather already served the sentence for that. Besides, the Ministry never admitted that he was still alive. They would have a hard time sending you to Azkaban for killing someone who supposedly died when you were an infant."

Harry swallowed thickly and fought back tears that he refused to let fall. He thought about what Draco was saying. It all made perfect sense. He continued to sit quietly, letting Draco's words sink in as he studied the man's face. Draco looked so very tired. Harry was certain he hadn't slept in days.

"This...this is the important work you needed to get finished?" Harry asked as the pieces all fell into place in his mind.

Draco just smiled and stroked Harry's cheek. "I wanted to be certain I was right about a few things," he replied. The research had helped him organise his own thoughts on the subject as well as aid Harry, but he kept that bit of information to himself. "Will you tell her now?" he asked.



"I...I'll try. It isn't that easy," Harry said, biting at his lip. "I'll talk to her before I leave and set up an appointment," he added.

"I took the liberty of setting that up for you," Draco admitted, turning his gaze to the painting on the far wall. "You're to see her as soon as she's done talking with Adrian."

Harry had a moment of blind panic as he realised that Draco intended for him to spill his darkest secrets here, today, in just a few more minutes. He knew that Draco had his best interests at heart, and he really couldn't fault him for trying to help. Under normal circumstances, he would have been appalled at anyone setting up an appointment of any type without his knowledge or consent, but these were not normal circumstances, and he could only feel a strange mixture of anxiety and relief.

"Thank you," he whispered, drawing Draco's attention back from the painting.

Smiling, Draco leaned forward to give Harry another sweet, soft kiss as he had on Saturday. Harry found himself returning Draco's smile in spite of his worry and fear. Settling back into his chair, Draco took Harry's hand in his and twined their fingers together, giving Harry both strength and comfort.

At last, Adrian emerged from Sheila's office, immediately throwing himself at his dad. Draco hugged the boy in a one-armed embrace, reluctant to let go of Harry's hand. Only when the doctor beckoned Harry into her office did Draco release him, pressing a soft kiss to the back of Harry's hand.

"Do you want me to wait for you?" Draco asked as Harry rose to join Dr. Ponsford.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know how long I'll be, and you should sleep," he replied.

Draco nodded and gave Harry one last reassuring smile before Sheila ushered Harry into her office. As he and Adrian headed toward Hogwarts, Draco's mind kept turning back toward Harry. The next hour or so would be difficult for Harry. He wished there was something more that he could do for the man, but knew that this hurdle was one Harry had to face on his own.

## Chapter Twelve

To Harry's relief, Draco had been right: Sheila wouldn't say a word to anyone without Harry's consent. Talking to Sheila about his darkest secrets felt *right* somehow. Just being able to discuss the events with the counsellor made Harry feel as if a weight had been lifted from his heart, but the doctor had a few ideas that she thought would help him truly come to terms with his past. His sleep that night was a little less troubled than usual.

As soon as he finished up with classes the next day, Harry began the first task Sheila had set for him: confession. She believed that Harry needed to tell his story to the very people he least wanted to admit his sins to. To this end, he headed into Hogsmeade to confront Remus, hoping desperately that the man could find it in his heart to forgive him. Of all the people he intended to confess to, he cared most what Remus thought.

During the walk to the village, Harry considered what to say to the man. There seemed no easy way to broach the subject, no polite terms to make the story less horrific. All too soon, Harry found himself outside of Lupin's house.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped inside. "Remus?" he called.

"In here," Lupin's warm voice called from the sitting room.

Harry followed the sound and found Remus with his nose in a massive tome of some sort. "Did I come at a bad time?" he asked nervously.

"Of course not," Remus replied, setting the book aside. "You know you're always welcome here, Harry."

Turning away to hide the emotion he knew showed plainly on his face, Harry swallowed hard and blinked rapidly, trying to remain calm. He doubted that Remus would welcome him here after he knew the truth, so the well-meant words stung.

"I'm actually here as part of my therapy," Harry said at last, forcing himself to turn and give Remus a small smile. He sat in the chair beside Lupin's and tried not to fidget, while Remus held himself still and waited for Harry to continue. At last, Harry found a tiny bit of courage lurking somewhere inside and forced himself to speak. "I want you to understand that I'm not asking for forgiveness," he said.

"Forgiveness for what, Harry?" Remus asked gently.

"I...I've done something....something so horrible... I was afraid to tell you," Harry began, staring down at his hands. "I'm still afraid," he added quietly. He had never felt less like a bold Gryffindor in his life.

Remus laid his hand on Harry's arms, frowning when the younger man startled at his touch. Concerned, he pulled his chair closer, so that he faced Harry. "It's all right, Harry. Take your time," he said soothingly as he took one of his young friend's hands in his own.

Harry's hand clenched convulsively around Remus'. "I killed Peter," he confessed in a harsh whisper, his head bowed.

"Oh, God," Remus breathed.

The entire story, from the blackmailing of Lucius Malfoy, through the duel with Bellatrix, to the execution of Peter Pettigrew, fell from Harry's lips like water from a downspout. He had no control whatever over the words; rather, they controlled him. Only when the story was complete did he even pause for air, his breaths too shallow and too rapid.

In the silence that followed his confession, Harry found that Remus hadn't let go of his hand. Seizing onto a small bit of hope, he forced himself to look up into his friend's face. Tears streamed silently down Remus' cheeks.

Never in all the years that Harry had known the kind-hearted older man had he ever seen Remus Lupin cry, not even when Sirius died. To know that he was the cause of the pain in those gentle eyes would forever be a source of torment to Harry's soul.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Remus whispered, breaking the stillness.

"Sorry?" Harry repeated, not understanding.

"I'm sorry you had to go through this. Sorry I didn't deal with it myself. I should have...but I ....." He broke off, his voice shaking. "If I had taken care of matters myself, you wouldn't have... Harry, you should never have felt the need to take that responsibility on along with everything else that was forced on you. I couldn't bring myself to face it...but I should have. Harry, I'm so very sorry. Please forgive me," Remus added, his voice wrought with emotion.

Harry brushed the tears from Lupin's cheek with his free hand. "I'm glad it was me and not you, Remus," he said softly. "Peter was your friend once; I only knew him as a traitorous rat. It's better this way."

Remus opened his mouth to protest, but Harry cut him off. "What's done is done, Remus. We can't change it now." He paused for a moment and looked back down at his and Remus' joined hands. "I was afraid you would hate me," he confessed.

Remus squeezed Harry's hand slightly. "I regret that you felt you needed to do something that has so obviously hurt you," he said, measuring his words, "but I don't hate you. You're my dearest friend, and the closest thing to a son I shall ever have. I could never hate you."

Harry held on to Remus' hand for a moment longer before releasing it and settling back into his chair. He watched silently as Remus produced a handkerchief from somewhere to dry his eyes and leaned back to sit more comfortably in his own chair.

"You said that you told Draco all of this," Remus said cautiously. "How did he handle the news about his father?"

"Honestly, I think he's still digesting the information. He's been really supportive, though. It's kind of scary, really. I expected him to run away, but he's still here."

Remus smiled. "You make it sound like that's a bad thing," he said.

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just not what I would have expected from anyone, much less the self-righteous daddy's boy I knew at school," he replied with a wry smile. His expression turned more serious. "I keep expecting him to come to his senses and tell me he doesn't want anything more to do with me. Instead, he's rather doing the opposite, going out of his way to help me."

"I've always done my very best to keep my nose out of your personal business, especially when it comes to affairs of the heart, but I'm going to give you my opinion, regardless of whether you want it," Remus said lightly. "Draco Malfoy is no more like the child you knew than you are like the child you were, Harry. He's grown into a remarkable young man. My advice is this-- don't confuse what you think he should be thinking and feeling with what he actually is thinking and feeling. Never assume you know what's going on in his mind. He's a very complex person, Harry. If you have doubts or questions, you should talk to him."

Harry thought about Lupin's words for a bit. He had found out long ago that he could learn a lot by simply listening to the man. After a time, he nodded. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

Remus patted the younger man's arm and then skilfully changed the subject. They talked of mostly inconsequential things while preparing and eating a light meal, and then Harry bade Remus goodnight and headed back to Hogwarts.

As he walked, Harry went over the list of names in his head. There were only a few other people whom he felt the need to confess to, but he wanted to complete the task as soon as possible. Of those remaining, Molly and Arthur Weasley would be the hardest to face. He planned to see them on Saturday, and he hoped he would have the time and strength to talk to Tonks on Sunday afternoon. There would still be time for him to talk to Minerva tonight; originally, he had planned to wait until another day, but his visit with Remus had given him strength and buoyed his spirits. The sooner he got through this trial, the better.

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Harry awoke with a start, his heart pounding as confused images from his dreams rolled through his head before fading away. The strange nightmare had somehow evolved from being sacked by Minerva to Draco turning him over to dementors. Everything in between was rather fuzzy, but the basic idea still stood out clearly: everyone he knew had turned their back on him because he had killed Lestrangle and Pettigrew.

Untangling himself from his sheets, Harry brushed the tattered remnants of the dream from his mind. Minerva had been visibly shaken by Harry's confession the night before, but she hadn't sent Harry away or even voiced any disapproval. Whatever her thoughts on the subject might be, McGonagall kept them to herself.

Shoving his fear aside, Harry began to get ready for the long day of classes that lay ahead of him.

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The week passed by in the usual blur of classes, staff meetings, and long nights of grading essays. On Thursday, Remus owed to check on Harry, but no word at all came from Draco. Confused, hurt, and disappointed, Harry tried to rationalise Draco's behaviour or ignore it by turns. By the time Saturday afternoon finally arrived, Harry was bone tired from anxiety over both Draco's sudden disappearance and the eminent confrontations with the Weasleys and Tonks.

Pushing aside his worries, Harry travelled the well-worn path toward Hogsmeade, Disapparating when he had gone far enough to be outside of Hogwarts wards. He arrived instantaneously outside the door of the Weasley house and raised his fist to knock before his courage could fail him.

Three-quarters of an hour later, he stumbled back through the door, chest tight with pain and unshed tears. Molly Weasley had thrown him out of her house.

For a moment, Harry thought longingly of Draco. He knew the blond was probably at his home in Hogsmeade. It would be easy enough to go to the cottage and pour his troubles out to Draco.

No. He still had some tattered remnants of his pride, and he would keep them intact. Squaring his shoulders, Harry wrapped his hand around his wand, took a deep breath, and Apparated to Hogsmeade.

Madame Rosmerta and her few customers looked up, slightly startled, as Harry Potter appeared in their midst.

"Bollocks," Harry cursed emphatically. In his distressed state, he had missed his mark and Apparated some distance from his intended destination. Scowling, Harry strode out of the Three Broomsticks and into the sunny streets of Hogsmeade.

For a moment, he considered turning left and going down to Draco's house. Shaking his head to clear his mind, he turned right instead, heading for the comfort and security of one of the few places he knew he would be welcome.

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"And what of human error, Draco?" Remus Lupin asked, leaning forward slightly in his seat.

Across from him, Draco frowned down into his tea. "There are ways to minimize the chances of something going wrong," he began. The sound of the front door opening caused him to pause, and he turned his eyes toward the door to the foyer.

Harry stalked into the sitting room ready to throw himself at Remus' feet to be soothed and comforted. The short walk from the Three Broomsticks had given him enough time to mentally replay the entire confrontation with the Weasleys and he had worked himself into an angry, hurt, guilty wreck. He hadn't been expecting to find Draco sitting calmly in Harry's favourite spot on the sofa and drinking tea, however, and he paused on the threshold, unsure how to proceed.

There was no mistaking the despair in Harry's eyes, or the uncertainty. "Should I go?" Draco asked, looking up into tear-bright jade eyes.

Shaking his head slightly, Harry moved from the doorway into the sitting room. He wanted nothing more than to throw himself into Draco's arms, but he forced himself to remain calm and move past the blond.

"Harry, what is it?" Remus asked gently. "What's wrong?"

Tossing his glasses aside, Harry sank down on the sofa, square in the middle, turning so that his back was to Draco and he could lay his head on the sofa's back. His heart hurt, and his mind ached. The woman who had been the closest thing to a mother than Harry had ever known was ashamed of him and didn't want to know him anymore. Right now, what he needed was the closeness of someone who accepted him and loved him. He just wasn't quite sure how to ask that of Draco, or how to solicit that kind of comfort from Remus while Draco was present.

Remus had seen Harry in a vast array of depressed states over the years. He knew from experience that Harry needed to talk about what was troubling him, though he would have to be forced or coaxed to speak, and that he craved physical contact as reassurance. He moved to sit in the little space left on the sofa and gently stroked Harry's soft inky hair. "Harry?" he asked again, his voice full of concern.

"Molly hates me," Harry whispered, his voice completely devoid of emotion. His eyes, however, showed the depth of his pain quite clearly.

"Oh, Harry," Remus said. He didn't know what else to say. He didn't challenge the statement, mostly because he knew Harry wouldn't listen, but also because he had no way of knowing exactly what Molly's thoughts and feelings might be. Sighing, he continued to stroke Harry's hair and resolved to talk to Molly Weasley - and soon.

"Who is 'Molly'?" Draco asked cautiously, setting aside his teacup.

"Molly Weasley," Remus explained. "She's been almost like a Mum to Harry."

Fire flashed in Draco's eyes. "Obviously not, if she's upset him this badly," he snapped, bouncing up from his seat and drawing his wand.

"Draco, what do you think you're doing?" Remus asked, sounding so very like a disapproving parent that Harry had to turn and see what Draco was up to.

"I'm going to go and tell that Weasley cow exactly what I think of her," Draco snarled, his nostrils flaring and his eyes flashing.

Remus had his wand out in a split-second, and with a quiet, calm "*Expelliarmus*" Draco's wand was sailing through the air to land neatly in Remus' outstretched hand. "You may take your anger out on the walls, if you like, or the furniture, or even on me, but you will remain in this house until your temper cools," he said levelly.

Draco stood for a moment, chest heaving and fists clenched, before turning and putting one of those perfectly manicured, alabaster fists through the wallboard. "Fuck!" he exclaimed, cradling his hand to his chest.

"Honestly," Harry said, jumping up and shoving his glasses on. "Could you be just a little more idiotic?" He carefully took Draco's hand in his, surveying the damage. "Lucky you didn't break it," he said after a moment. "Come with me."

Harry dragged Draco down the hallway to the bath where he carefully cleaned the scratches on Draco's hand and applied Quick-Heal salve to the bruises and abrasions. "Best I can do," he muttered apologetically as he wrapped the injured hand in a thin layer of cotton gauze.

"Better than I deserve," Draco replied. "You're right, that was an incredibly stupid thing for me to do. Especially since that's my wand hand." He brought his other hand up to caress Harry's cheek.

Without stopping to think, Harry turned his face into Draco's touch, letting his lips brush against Draco's palm. Draco slipped his injured hand free and slid it around to Harry's back, pulling the smaller man close. The hand on Harry's face turned it up, and Draco pressed his lips firmly against Harry's forehead, his temple, his cheek, and finally his lips. Harry's hands tangled in Draco's hair, urging him to deepen the kiss.

With a muffled groan, Draco let his tongue slide between Harry's lips, tasting, teasing. Harry sucked gently on Draco's tongue, and the blond whimpered, pulling Harry more firmly against him. Some time

later, a quiet chuckle drew both men's attention away from the kiss and back to reality. They glanced up to see Remus smiling fondly at them.

"I came to check on you. I should have known you were quite all right," Remus said with a mischievous smile.

Draco flushed faintly, but Harry merely offered up a cheeky grin. "Would have been a damn sight better than all right if you hadn't interrupted," he teased. "Interfering old bastard."

"I am not old," Remus replied, feigning indignation.

"My mistake," Harry said civilly. "Interfering *middle-aged* bastard."

"Much better," Remus said with a smile. "Would you two care to join me in the parlour, or should I leave you to your snogging?" he teased.

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Harry shifted on the sofa, snuggling closer to Draco's side and settling his head more comfortably on the other's shoulder. Although Harry had been inclined to resume their kissing, Draco had insisted on being polite and returning to his unfinished conversation with Remus. Harry didn't really mind, though he wasn't much in the mood for conversation. Draco's arm felt good wrapped around him and the other men's voices were soothing. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift, not really paying attention to whatever it was his friends were debating.

"Harry, do talk some sense into him," Draco said, drawing Harry's attention.

Reluctantly, Harry forced his eyes to open and focus on Draco's face. "I'm sorry, what?" he asked.

"I don't believe he's heard a word we've said," Remus commented.

"I didn't know I was supposed to be listening," Harry said.

"Of course you were," Draco replied. "How else are you going to help me convince Remus that he's wrong?"

Harry looked up at Draco and grinned. "You mean I'm not supposed to just nod and agree with everything you say?"

Draco's nose wrinkled in disgust. "I rather like that you've the ability to think on your own, actually."

"All right, then. If I'm to voice an opinion, I guess you should tell me what you two are arguing about," Harry replied.

Remus chuckled. "The same thing we've been debating since I taught at Hogwarts," he supplied. "Much like Hermione, Draco worked out early on what my monthly 'illness' meant. Rather than simply confront me with his suspicions, Draco chose a more Slytherin route. During one of our afternoon chats, he decided to explain to me his views on Lycanthropes' Rights."

"Remus, of course, explained patiently how my thoughts on the subject were ill-considered. At first, I thought perhaps I was wrong about his being a werewolf. I mean, one would assume that a lycanthrope would support lycanthrope's rights, after all," Draco replied a bit angrily.

"As long as there are those who are incapable of making wise decisions, it is better not to give us too many freedoms, Draco. I've told you this before," Remus said.

"Wait," Harry said, sitting up. "I'm a bit confused. Surely you don't approve of all the anti-werewolf legislation?"

"No, Harry, not all of it," Remus replied. "There are certain strictures, however, that I very much agree with."

"For example?" Harry prompted.

"The prohibition on procreation," Draco spat.

Remus sighed and refrained from rolling his eyes. "That has been the major point over which Draco and I have disagreed all these years," he explained to Harry.

"It's ridiculous!" Draco exclaimed. "If the Ministry wants to go around telling people they can't have children, they should start with abusive bitches like my ex-wife. No one tried to tell her that she couldn't be a parent. In fact, her father and mine as much as said she had to."

Harry stroked the back of Draco's neck in a calming gesture. "You're saying it should be all or nothing, then," he said. "Either the Ministry should monitor everyone or no one rather than just the relative few who are affected by lycanthropy."

"No. I'm saying the Ministry should mind it's own bloody business," Draco replied. His tone was more matter-of-fact now, no longer tinged with anger. Harry's hand on his neck was rather distracting. He sighed. "When Remus and I first began debating the issue, I was still very much under my father's influence. I had been taught that a large enough sum of money would ensure that the Ministry would see things the way you wanted them to. I was also a teenager who was going through a rebellious phase, and I didn't have a real outlet for that rebelliousness because I knew that defying my father would get me into more trouble than I could ever possibly deal with. I found myself defending a lot of things simply because I knew Father would disapprove of my doing so. Of course, I was careful to make certain he never found out about any of it," he explained. "The more Remus and I debated the issue, the more I truly believed in my own arguments. More importantly, I found myself questioning why someone as gentle and compassionate as Remus was denied the chance at fatherhood while others who were cold and sometimes cruel were not."

"Your father, you mean," Harry guessed.

"Actually, no. It wasn't until much later that I began to see my father in that light. Some of my friends' parents were horrid, though, and I could never quite help thinking that Remus would be much better at raising children than any of them."

Remus looked thoughtful and a little sad. "Even if they repealed the laws, Draco, it wouldn't change the way that society views lycanthropy. Even if I were allowed by law to marry and have children, it would still be damned difficult to find anyone willing to overlook or deal with my disease. How many women do you know that knowingly and willingly marry a werewolf, much less have his children?"

"I must confess that the only females I really know now are my mother and my daughter. I tend to avoid women when possible," Draco replied.

"I know plenty of women who'd be willing, if they decided that the werewolf in question was the man they loved," Harry added.

"Really?" Remus asked, sitting back in his chair and looking unconvinced.



"Hermione. Ginny. Luna," Harry began.

"They are open-minded ladies, I will agree," Remus said, cutting him off. "But do you know for certain that they are *that* open-minded?"

"No, I suppose not. We've never talked about it," Harry admitted.

"So you can not actually name one woman whom you know without a doubt would knowingly and willingly involve herself with a werewolf," Remus said with a small smile.

"Yes, I can," Harry declared. "Tonks."

Remus chuckled. "The girl is just mad enough to do such a thing, but what makes you so certain, Harry?"

Harry swallowed and looked down at his hands. "Because she loves you," he said.

"I see," Remus replied quietly. "How long have you known?"

"Since the night...since the night of the accident," Harry answered, stumbling over the words. "When she...when Tonks thought she wasn't going to make it, she asked me to tell you. I thought surely she would say something to you." His words trailed off into thoughtful silence.

"Was I wrong to tell you, Remus?" Harry asked gently.

"No, Harry, of course not," Remus replied, his voice weak.

"Should I have told you sooner?"

An uncomfortable silence settled upon the room. Remus seemed deep in thought, and Harry didn't want to disturb him. After several minutes, Draco took it upon himself to break the silence.

"You've mentioned this Tonks person before," Draco said. "When you were first telling me about your....er..."

"Mentally instability," Harry supplied helpfully.

Draco frowned. "You shouldn't use such terms, Harry. They're so degrading. Anyway, you said something about 'Tonks' that night. Who is she?"

"Tonks is an Auror and a very close friend. We worked together a lot when I was still employed by the Ministry. A year ago Christmas, I nearly got her killed," Harry explained.

"That wasn't your fault, Harry," Remus argued.

"Yes, it was," Harry insisted. "After....after what happened with Peter, I lost my ability to concentrate. I didn't realise we'd walked right into a trap, and I never saw Nott until it was too late. And then I...I panicked. I just stood there like I'd turned to stone."

"It's over and done with, Harry. Let it go," Remus advised.

"Maybe I'll be able to, once I've talked to Tonks," Harry said. "After today, though, I'm not feeling too confident about facing her."

"What happened, exactly?" Draco asked as he began rubbing reassuring circles on Harry's back.

Harry took a deep breath. He had been hoping that neither Draco nor Remus would ask that particular question, but deep down he had known it was inevitable. "Molly said that no matter what they had done, Peter was still someone's son, and Lestrange was still someone's daughter. That, no matter what they had done, someone somewhere was hurt by their deaths. That I had no right to pass judgement on either of them, and that I should have turned them over for trial."

"She's not entirely wrong, Harry," Draco said, still running his hands over Harry's back. "There were people who mourned Bellatrix Lestrange, for certain. She was my mother's sister, you know." Draco could feel Harry tense beside him. "Mother mourned, but she also knew that Bella's death was inevitable. She cursed the Dark Lord for letting himself be beaten. She cursed Bellatrix for being stupid enough to fight on the losing side of the war. Mother is a very pragmatic woman, Harry. She wouldn't blame you for what you did. She would be more likely to berate you for feeling guilty about it."

"I've caused your family no end of trouble," Harry said, scrubbing his face with his hands. "How can you stand to be near me?"

Draco turned Harry's face so that he could look the other man in the eye. "I never even really knew my aunt, Harry. Only the sorrow her death has caused you and my Mum affects me at all. As for the situation with my father..." Draco broke off with a sigh. "I've thought about that quite a bit, actually. I know that he isn't a good man, Harry, but he is my father. I love him, despite the fact that I could cheerfully strangle him for what he said to Adrian that night at Hogwarts. As...unscrupulous as this arrangement you have with my father might be, I realise that it is likely the only reason he's still alive. I'm grateful for that. It's difficult to be cross with someone and grateful to them at the same time."

Harry continued to look pensive. "I don't think that night was the first time your father has spoken to Adrian that way," he said, looking down at his hands again.

"What would make you think that?" Draco asked.

"Something that Adrian said when I found him made me think that it might be fairly common for Lucius to dress Adrian down like that."

"What did he say?" Draco asked, his voice tight.

"I told him that what Lucius had said was wrong, and Adrian said 'I'm used to it' and shrugged it off," Harry answered.

"What did Lucius say to him?" Remus asked, confused and concerned.

Harry explained briefly. Draco looked imploringly at Remus, silently asking him what to do about this horrible situation.

"Talk to Adrian, Draco. Encourage him to tell you about his relationship with your father without assigning blame," Remus advised.

"You should speak with Sheila as well. She may at least be able to confirm my suspicions," Harry added.

"Of course," Draco replied distractedly.

"It's getting rather late," Remus said, changing the subject. "I'd best see to dinner. You'll stay and eat with us, won't you, Draco?"

Draco forced his mind away from brooding over his son and gave Remus a weak smile. "Only if you'll let me help you in the kitchen," he answered.

Remus grinned and offered Draco his hand, only to realise his error and quickly offer his opposite hand so that Draco could pull himself up with his uninjured one. For a moment, Remus was certain that Harry was going to pout - actually pout! - about having his boyfriend taken away. Either he was mistaken or the younger man restrained himself, though, for he didn't sulk at all but merely stretched out on the sofa and closed his eyes. Remus took a moment to draw the curtains, and turned back to find Draco draping a lightweight quilt over Harry. Draco kissed Harry on the forehead before turning away and following Remus from the room.

## Chapter Thirteen

After dinner, Draco made his excuses and headed for home. As soon as he was gone, Harry retired to his room and Remus put in a fire call to Nymphadora Tonks, asking her to dinner the next day. Tonks accepted cheerfully; if the unexpected offer surprised her at all, she didn't show it.

Tonks arrived only slightly behind schedule the next afternoon. She was dressed in Muggle jeans and a close-fitting t-shirt, which Harry was certain she had worn for effect. Her hair was gathered back into twin pale pink plaits which lay flat along either side of her neck.

Somehow, miraculously, she managed to get through the meal with only one minor accident.

As soon as the tea things were cleared away, Harry turned serious. "I'd like to talk to you, if you have time," he said.

Tonks let Harry lead her into the parlour and sank down onto the sofa with one leg curled beneath her. "You look too serious, Harry, even for you," she noted.

"Yes, well," Harry stammered. "It's a serious matter I wanted to discuss with you." After a couple of false starts, Harry managed to tell his story to Tonks, emphasising the bit where he had put her life in danger.

When Harry was done with the retelling, the room fell silent as Tonks let his words sink in.

"So you're the one who tracked down Lestrage," she said at last. "I was rather disappointed at the time to learn someone had beaten me to her. I was looking forward with dealing with her myself. As for the rest, don't go feeling bad about what happened with me. I don't hold you responsible, and you shouldn't either. I can see why you're troubled about the other, but honestly, Harry, it would be so much worse if they'd been alive and free. And Harry...thank you. If things hadn't happened as they did, Remus would have ended up going after Pettigrew himself. Thank you for sparing him that much."

Harry, dumbfounded, simply stared at Tonks for a moment. Slowly, a tired but relieved smile spread across his face. Tonks smiled brightly back at him and sprang up from her seat to straddle his lap and wrap him in a fond embrace.

"I've missed you, Harry," she told him. "The thing you should be apologising for is letting all of this keep you away for so long."

Harry looked slightly shamefaced. "I *am* sorry about that," he assured her. "I just..."

Tonks poked him hard in the ribs to shut him up. "You don't have to explain," she said.

"Good," Harry replied. "I'm not certain I could explain if I wanted to."

"You still haven't apologised," Tonks reminded him.

Harry smirked, knowing that Tonks was trying to lure him into an ages old game they had often played in his Auror days. It had been a wonderful way to relieve stress then, and he was certain it would be the same now. He took the bait, and let himself be lured in.

"What if I don't apologise?" he asked with a smirk.

"Then I shall be forced to do something drastic," she replied.

Crossing his arms across his chest, Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a defiant glare. "I should like to see you try," he challenged.

Tonks stared at him thoughtfully for a moment before moving as if to tickle his ribs. Harry dodged her fingers easily, but Tonks ducked her head to lick the bridge of his nose. Making a noise of disgust, Harry tossed Tonks onto the sofa, flat of her back, and began to tickle her mercilessly. Her shrieks of protest and their combined raucous laughter brought the other occupants of the house to investigate.

"Should I be jealous?" Draco drawled, lounging in the doorway.

Harry looked up in surprise at the unexpected sound of Draco's voice, wondering absently when he had arrived. The sharp, silly retort he had at the ready died on his lips at the hint of jealous anger flitting across Draco's face.

"Your latest conquest?" Tonks asked, shoving Harry off of her and struggling to regain her composure.

Draco raised an eyebrow, and Harry flushed.

"Not exactly," Harry mumbled, chagrined.

"Sorry, Harry. It was meant to be a joke. I forgot who I was talking to," Tonks apologised clumsily.

Remus chuckled. "You've such a talent for putting your foot in it," he said.

"Yes, well, one must be good at something, right?" Tonks replied cheekily.

"Erm...this is Tonks," Harry said, thinking that a brief introduction might be a good way to draw the conversation to less embarrassing topics. "Tonks and I used to work together. She's one of my closest friends. Tonks, this is..."

"My cousin," Tonks interjected, sounding perplexed.

Draco stared at the pink-haired woman in confusion.

"You *are* Narcissa's boy aren't you?" she asked, looking at him critically. "You must be. You look just like...."

Harry clapped his hand over Tonks' mouth to keep her from pointing out how much Draco looked like his father. He really didn't want her putting her foot in it again where Draco was concerned.

Draco smirked. "Andromeda's whelp," he said. "Obviously, not all of the bad things I've heard about you are true," he added, extending his hand for her to shake.

After a brief hesitation, Tonks shook Draco's hand.

"My name's Draco, by the way," he added. Turning to Harry he asked, "Aren't you going to say hello?"

Harry stepped forward, intending to hug Draco and kiss his cheek. Draco tangled his fingers in Harry's hair and covered his mouth with his own, kissing him long, hard, and possessively.

Tonks and Remus grinned at one another, approving, and stepped into the kitchen to give the lovers a bit of privacy.

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Once Remus and Tonks were safely out of the room, Harry pulled a little away from Draco and looked up into his eyes.

"You really were jealous, weren't you?" Harry asked, bemused.

"Not in the way you mean," Draco admitted quietly. He pulled Harry's head to his shoulder, nuzzling his hair. "The two of you were just so...comfortable together."

"I should be comfortable around Tonks. I've known her half my life. More than, actually," Harry replied.

"I've never had that with anyone, except my children," Draco said quietly.

Harry responded automatically to the sadness in Draco's voice, tightening his arms around the other's waist and pressing closer to him. The movement managed to knock his glasses askew, and he huffed in annoyance as he backed away again to straighten them.

Trying to distance himself from the unexpected longing swelling in his chest, Draco drew away from Harry. He arranged himself on the sofa and gestured for Harry to join him. Once Harry was snuggled against his side, Draco pointedly turned the conversation in a new direction.

"What was that about 'conquests'?" he asked. He could feel Harry tense, but his curiosity demanded satiation. "Whatever my cousin meant by that comment, it seemed to get under your skin."

"She meant it as a joke," Harry explained. "The kind of thing she'd say to any of her friends. Only she forgot that I...well, I have a bit of a reputation." He hid his face against Draco's shoulder, sure that the other man could feel the heat of his blush, even through his tailored robes.

Draco felt a strange chill run through his body and settle in the pit of his stomach. Harry's statement was doing nothing to calm his doubts. The last thing he wanted was to be another notch in anyone's bedpost. "I see," was all he said.

"I don't think that you do," Harry replied quietly. He sat up then and looked Draco in the eye.

"Then make me understand," Draco said. He didn't want to hear the details of Harry's past lovers, but he knew that he needed to hear what Harry had to say. Some part of him hoped desperately that Harry's words would somehow set his mind at ease.

Harry looked away almost shyly. "Back at school, I never understood why all the other boys raved about snogging. I kissed a few girls, but I never thought much of it. My last year at Hogwarts, I finally realised that it was the blokes who were catching my eye. I talked to my therapist about it, and - like I told you before - the stupid cow told me that what I was feeling was immoral and that I would burn in hell. I told her that I had grown up in hell and didn't fancy going back. After that, I wasn't really sure who I could discuss this discovery with."

Draco chuckled. He took Harry's hand in his. "It's not exactly the kind of thing you want to talk to your head of house about, is it?" he asked rhetorically.

The thought of discussing his sexual preferences with Professor McGonagall, even now, made Harry feel slightly ill. "No, not at all," he agreed. "I ended up talking to the one person I thought might be able to analyze the situation objectively."

"Miss Know-It-All?" Draco asked with a gentle smile.

Harry grinned. "Right in one. I went to Hermione, and she wanted me to read about a million books on homosexuality and 'coming out of the closet' and such-like. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself with those sorts of books, but she managed to talk me into reading one with a non-descript cover and a vague title."

"And it helped?"

"Not a bit," Harry said, laughing. "The book was utter rubbish. However, as I was sitting on my bed one evening glancing through it one last time to be sure I hadn't missed anything that might prove useful, Ron came in. He asked me why I was reading that particular book, and when I glanced up, he looked gobsmacked. Turns out he had seen that book before and knew exactly what it was about, vague title or not."

"That must have been a real kick in the arse, having him find out that way. How did he take it? Tell me he wasn't a complete prat about it."

"Actually, he was surprisingly calm about the whole thing. Of course, he was also not so surprisingly indiscreet while discussing it with Hermione, and the information spread to a few of the other Gryffindors. One of those Gryffindors gambled on what he had overheard and kissed me. Neville. My first boyfriend."

"Oh god," Draco whispered. Although he hadn't been particularly fond of Longbottom back at school, Neville had proved himself in his last moments, facing death bravely. Draco knew what had happened to Longbottom in the war because he had heard the man responsible for Neville's death bragging about the murder to his father not long before he and the children fled the country. "You were still together when...when he was killed, weren't you?"

Harry nodded solemnly. "It was really difficult to get close to anyone after that, knowing that either of us could be killed at any moment. It didn't help that I never knew who I could trust and that I had to hide important parts of my life. Of course, anytime I found someone I could trust and care about, they walked away," he said bitterly.

"Sometimes you're surprised to find that you never really knew a person at all," Draco mused. He was thinking of his former lover, Adrian. The man hadn't been at all what Draco had thought him to be. He could understand perfectly how Harry must have felt, being tossed aside by someone he trusted.

Harry didn't respond. After a moment, Draco took Harry's chin in his hand and turned his face so that their eyes met. Harry looked as if he was holding back tears, but he also looked incredibly angry.

"Tell me about it," Draco prompted gently.

"A friend of mine invited me to one of his Quidditch games - he played for Puddlemere at the time. Even though things seemed relatively peaceful to the public, the Order still had its hands full dealing with Voldemort. I ended up missing the game, but I made it to the celebration afterward. Puddlemere had won the game, and were in good shape to take the championship. This was shortly after I had found LeStrange, and I...I was stupid. I drank entirely too much in an attempt to drown my guilt, and

I got a bit friendly with my friend Oliver. I don't really remember much, but apparently someone got pictures of us kissing. I do remember his suggesting that we 'take it somewhere more private' and doing unspeakable thing to one another...."

"Spare me the details," Draco requested.

Harry blushed slightly. "Sorry. Anyway, when the story and the pictures hit the Prophet, Oliver denied that anything had happened between us. He issued a statement that my advances had been unprovoked and unwanted. He issued that statement just a few hours after leaving my bed."

"And you thought you could trust him. You thought he was your friend," Draco murmured, moving to wrap an arm protectively around the smaller man.

"I was incredibly naïve and vulnerable. I felt that I had to do something to protect myself, and the way I saw it, I had two choices: I could stop risking my heart and be alone, or I could stop caring and enjoy myself. I believed I was two steps from my grave and decided that I should live my life as fully as possible. For some reason, that translated to giving myself to anyone who would have me." Harry paused and looked up at Draco uncertainly. "I'm not proud of it. I'd take it all back if I could. There are so many things I'd do differently, given the chance," he confessed.

"I wouldn't," Draco said after a moment of contemplation. "I used to think that if I could go back, I wouldn't marry Pansy. But if I hadn't married Pansy, I wouldn't have my children."

"I think I see what you're saying. Still..."

"Harry," Draco interrupted. "Let it go. That's all in the past....isn't it?" He hoped he didn't sound as uncertain as he felt.

"I want to think so," Harry replied quietly.

Draco took Harry's face in his hand again. "Whatever happens, or doesn't happen, between the two of us, I want you to promise me you'll never go back to that. It's self-destructive, and it will bring you nothing but hurt in the long run."

"I can't imagine that celibacy would be any better. Seclusion is hurtful as well," Harry replied defensively.

"Are you being deliberately obtuse? There are a lot of options that fall between 'celibacy' and...what was it? 'giving yourself to anyone who would have you'? Sex can't be that important. I've managed to live without it for...god, since the children were small."

Harry's eyes went wide. "You've not been involved with anyone since your children were small," he repeated, unbelieving.

Draco shrugged. "I had a brief affair with Pucey right after I left Pansy," he said. "She had appointed him as her go-between in dealing with me, which suited me just fine. We had a tailor-made excuse for spending a lot of time alone together. Pucey, of course, was married, and I knew the situation wouldn't last. What I didn't know was how much of a pompous bore Pucey had become. **Maybe 'become, and'** I had conveniently forgotten how selfish and demanding he was in bed. I was glad to be rid of him, and I haven't had time for anyone since. Raising three children on your own doesn't leave much room in your schedule for dalliances," he explained, smirking slightly.

Harry stared at Draco in shock for a moment and then began to laugh. "And to think I was worried that I wasn't worldly and experienced enough to satisfy you sexually," Harry managed to gasp out. "What a pair we make," he added. "The whore and the virgin. Good Merlin, who would believe it?"



"You shouldn't say things like that," Draco admonished, trying and failing to repress a smile. "Besides being degrading, it isn't even true. I'm not..."

"Oh, do stop preaching at me," Harry cut him off teasingly. Just to be certain that Draco did indeed stop, he covered Draco's mouth with his own. A moment later, Harry pulled away.

"That's why you practically threw me out of your house that night," Harry said.

Draco, whose brain refused to switch easily from snogging to conversation, simply stared.

"The night when I first kissed you - you acted like...I don't know what. You...panicked when I suggested staying the night with you. That's because it's been...because you've been celibate for so long. Isn't it?"

One corner of Draco's lip twitched up in a self-deprecating half-smile. "I wasn't sure I could even remember what sex was, much less how to go about it. But, no, that wasn't it. Not exactly."

"Then what was it?" Harry wanted to know.

"Partly, I was afraid that sex was all that you wanted, and that you'd disappear once you had gotten it. Mostly, though, I was terrified by the thought of waking up next to you," Draco admitted.

"The first I can understand, especially since I've been through it a few times, but why be afraid of waking up next to me?"

"Since I turned nine, the only people I've ever woken up next to are my children. I wouldn't have known what to say to you, or how to act, or what to feel...."

Harry curled up against Draco's side again. "I think I understand." He thought for a moment. "Do you still feel that way?"

"Maybe a little," Draco replied, pulling Harry closer to him.

"When you're comfortable with it, I'd like to find out what it's like to wake up next to you."

"I could accompany you back to Hogwarts," Draco replied. He still wasn't entirely sure he'd know what to say to Harry after waking beside him, but he found that he very much wanted to know what it was like to fall asleep in another man's arms.

Harry looked up at Draco, certain that he was joking, but Draco was completely serious. "Do you think that's wise?" he asked cautiously.

"I believe that we both understand discretion, Harry, and if anyone is curious as to why I am at Hogwarts, I do have an airtight alibi," Draco replied, smirking.

"The children," Harry said.

"Not only the children," Draco explained. "I will be working rather closely with the headmistress for the next little while, preparing to teach classes next term."

A smile spread across Harry's face. "Transfiguration?" he asked. At Draco's nod, his smile broadened. "Congratulations," he said, beaming. "Well, I guess that's settled then. If we're going, we should tell Remus goodbye," he added.

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On the threshold of the kitchen, Harry paused and gestured for Draco to stay still and quiet behind him. Tonks was wiping tears from her eyes, and Harry didn't want to intrude on what obviously was an emotional moment.

"I wouldn't marry you, even if I could," Tonks said defiantly as she turned to face Remus. "I simply refuse to have the general public calling me 'Nymphadora,' and having two 'Lupins' about would be far too confusing. So if not being able to marry is the only downside, then there isn't really a downside at all, is there?"

Remus laughed softly and pulled her into his arms. "So we're going to see where this leads, then?" he asked. He looked apprehensive, as if he expected her to say 'no' in spite of her earlier words.

Tonks gave Remus a watery smile. She answered his question by pressing her lips to his.

Harry felt a soft, cool hand cover his eyes. He made an involuntary sound of protest as he pried Draco's fingers away from his face. At the unexpected noise, Remus looked up from kissing Tonks.

"We were coming to say goodbye," Harry explained. "We didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not going already, are you?" Tonks asked, looking disappointed.

"I need to get back to the school. I've some things to catch up on before bed," Harry replied, not untruthfully.

Remus smiled knowingly. "Will you be back on the weekend, Harry?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. I've that bloody staff meeting and about a million essays to grade."

The older man nodded, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"Oh god, I ballsed up my schedule again, didn't I? Remus, I'm so sorry..."

"Don't apologise, Harry. It isn't your job to look after me," Remus said. "I've managed most of my life without you here to play nursemaid. I'll be fine," he insisted.

"Full moon this weekend?" Draco asked.

Harry nodded. "Remus always feels a bit off-colour afterward, and I usually try to make certain I can be with him...."

"I'll look after him," Tonks volunteered. Remus looked as if he was about to protest, but her next words stopped him. "If this is ever going to work between us, you're going to have to get used to it," she said, settling the matter.

Harry beamed at the two of them. "Thanks, Tonks," he said. "We should really be going." He hugged Remus and then embraced Tonks and kissed her on the mouth in the way that very small children kiss their parents. "I'll see you soon," he promised.

Draco watched the proceedings impassively. He briefly pressed Remus' hand, warmed by the older man's smile and the gentle pressure applied to his own hand. He then moved to engage Tonks in a handshake, but, to his surprise, she hugged him instead. She took advantage of the nearness to whisper in his ear: "If you hurt him, I will hex you to hell and back."

Straightening, Draco looked Tonks in the eye. "Same goes, cousin," he said smoothly.

And then he was gone, ducking out the door in a swirl of robes, with a slightly bewildered Harry following behind.

## Chapter Fourteen

On the walk back to Hogwarts, Harry and Draco talked of Quidditch and other inconsequential matters, chatting more easily than in the past. When they reached the castle, Harry bypassed the main doors, leading Draco into the castle through a smaller, well-hidden entrance farther along the front of the building. By entering the castle there the two men were able to avoid the students who were gathered in the Great Hall for the evening meal.

Following Harry down deserted hallways and dusty back passages reminded Draco of his school days. Of course, in their student days, Draco had followed unnoticed and with the goal of getting Harry into trouble. He grinned to himself and thought that getting Harry into a different kind of 'trouble' might be even more fun.

At last they stopped in the middle of a hallway. Harry stepped nearer the wall, pressing one hand to the smooth stones. "*Amiculus*," he said, and a section of the wall slid aside, forming a doorway. Leading the way inside, Harry lit a lamp and then turned to smile at Draco.

"It isn't much, but it's....well it isn't really home, either," he finished lamely.

Draco chuckled as he surveyed the room. Harry's quarters consisted of only a combined sitting room and bedroom, but the room was spacious and there was a private bath visible through a partially open door on the opposite wall. A few photographs of Harry's friends and family personalised the space.

"I've managed with much worse," Draco said. "This is rather nice, actually."

"It's all I need," Harry acknowledged, eyeing the room critically. "I can't imagine you living in any place that could be described as worse than this, though."

"Have you ever spent the night in an American Muggle hotel room? Or shared one with three small children? Believe me, Harry, this would have seemed like Nirvana at that point in time," Draco replied as he took a seat in one of Harry's battered armchairs. The fond smile playing at the corners of his lips told Harry plainly that not all the memories connected with that Muggle hotel room were bad ones.

Wishing that his quarters contained a sofa, Harry sighed softly and made to move past Draco to take the other chair. As he passed the other man, however, Draco caught his hand and gently pulled him closer until Harry had a choice between crawling into Draco's lap and falling over. He chose the former, pausing a moment to toe off his shoes before settling in the chair, facing Draco.

"Thank god for Muggle clothes," Harry said, grinning. "I don't think I could manage this in robes."

"Of course you could," Draco replied. "You might have to pull them up a bit first, though."

"In which case I'd be better off to just discard them altogether," Harry countered.

"That doesn't sound too horrible."

Harry smirked. "If you want me naked, just say so," he said. The strange expression that flitted across Draco's face made him wonder if he'd put his foot in it again.

"Harry," Draco began uncertainly. "I don't know what it might have sounded like I meant when I said I could accompany you back here..."

"What it sounded like," Harry said, cutting him off, "is that you wanted to sleep next to me in my not-entirely-comfortable bed so that we could find out if we've anything to say to one another when we wake in the morning. I know you're not ready for more than that, and to be honest...." Harry paused, considering. "Well, to be honest, I'd love to stay awake the entire night learning what makes you moan, but I realise that rushing into that sort of relationship isn't what either of us needs. I'm willing...no. I'd really like to take things slowly with you."

Draco raised his hand to cup Harry's cheek as he searched the man's eyes, trying to discern the thoughts going on behind them. He knew Harry meant what he had said. Satisfied, he nodded. "I'd like that as well," he said softly, slipping his hand up to drift lazily through Harry's hair before coming to rest on the back of his neck. He pulled Harry down for a kiss.

The kiss began as a mere press of lips on lips, but in less than a heartbeat, Draco deepened it, lapping at Harry's lips before thrusting his tongue inside to slide wetly against Harry's. Harry's hands gripped his lover's shoulders tightly as he lost himself in the feel of Draco's tongue tangled with his own. They had kissed, but this...this was more intimate, more passionate than anything that had passed before.

All too aware of the effect Draco was having on him, Harry broke off the kiss and clamoured awkwardly to his feet. To his surprise, Draco stood as well, forced to stand incredibly close to him due to the lack of space between man and chair. There was hardly a breath between the two of them, and the nearness made Harry giddy.

"There is a difference between 'slow' and 'dead stop,' Harry," Draco said in a near whisper. "I'm not going to panic again; you don't have to worry so much, though I appreciate that you do."

"I feel like I'm walking a tightrope," Harry admitted.

"Well, you shouldn't," Draco huffed, dramatically throwing himself backward into the armchair. "Do you need a rulebook?" he asked acidly.

Swallowing his hurt, Harry simply turned and walked away. Willing himself to remain calm, he stripped to his boxers, folded his glasses and laid them and his wand within easy reach, and crawled into bed to burrow beneath the quilts. He heard a quiet '*nox*' as Draco dimmed the lights, followed a moment later by a good bit of rustling fabric. His heart beat a little faster when he felt the mattress dip and knew that Draco was crawling into the bed beside him.

"Forgive me," Draco whispered in Harry's ear as he curled around the smaller man.

With the intoxicating feeling of Draco's skin against his own, how could Harry not forgive the other man anything at all? He turned to face Draco, twining his legs with Draco's longer ones and wrapping his arm around his lover's waist.

"Forgiven," Harry said, his lips brushing Draco's collarbone as he spoke.

Draco tightened his arms around Harry, tucking the dark head more firmly beneath his chin. "This is never going to work," he said levelly.

For a moment Harry's heart stopped as he heard his worst fears voiced in such a matter-of-fact tone. Then Draco shifted beside him, and he realised that Draco hadn't been referring to their relationship at all. His heart still hammering wildly, Harry curled against Draco as the other man arranged them in a more comfortable position.

"Will this work?" Harry asked softly.

"You know," Draco replied after a moment, "I think it might."

This time, Harry knew, Draco was talking about their relationship. With a relieved sigh, he closed his eyes, content and totally at peace for the first time in longer than he cared to remember.

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Harry awoke next morning to the incessant bleating of his alarm clock. He turned over and buried his head beneath his pillow, unwilling to wake enough to turn the thing off. After a few minutes, the mattress dipped as Draco shifted beside him, swearing incoherently. There was a loud crash, and then blessed silence.

Wide awake now, Harry emerged from beneath the pillow and fumbled around for his glasses. Blinking owlishly behind the lenses, he stared across the bed to the spot where the alarm clock was supposed to be. Frowning slightly, he leaned across the pile of bedding that concealed the man lying next to him and peered over the edge of the bed.

"You're crushing me," Draco complained breathlessly, his voice muffled by the layers of bedding.

Harry considered for a moment, and then began to burrow under the quilts in search of his lover, finally giving up in impatience and tugging all of the blankets aside. Draco swore again as he fought to untangle himself from the sheets. Harry managed to extricate a single blanket. Tossing his glasses aside, he spread the blanket over the two of them and snuggled up against Draco's back, wrapping his arm around the other man.

"How long before you have to be in class?" Draco asked, draping his arm over Harry's.

"I'm supposed to put in an appearance in the Great Hall in an hour. My first class is a half hour after that."

"Mmmm. Plenty of time then," Draco murmured as he turned to face Harry, propping up on one elbow and looking down at the other man with a sleepy smile playing across his lips.

"Plenty of time for what, exactly?" Harry wanted to know.

"For this," Draco whispered, leaning down to brush his lips across Harry's forehead. "And this." His lips grazed Harry's cheek. "This," he breathed. Cupping Harry's face in his hands, he pressed a kiss to each of Harry's closed eyelids and then at last let his mouth claim Harry's slightly parted lips.

Harry responded eagerly, curling one hand into Draco's sweat-tangled hair and tugging at his hips with the other. Draco gave in to the silent demand and lay down atop Harry, holding some of his weight off the smaller man. With a slight sound which was more than a whimper but not quite a moan, Harry shifted beneath Draco, pressing their bodies more firmly together. Draco gasped and let his eyes fall closed.

The shrill tone of the alarm clock sounded from the floor beside the bed, causing both men to jump.

"I thought I'd done away with that damned thing," Draco grumbled as he rolled off of Harry and reached for the offending object.

Harry scrambled for his wand and waved it in the direction of the alarm clock, shutting off the noise just as Draco reached for the clock. Draco paused a moment, then picked up the clock and shoved it into a drawer in the bedside table.

"I shut it off properly this time," Harry said.

"Better safe than sorry," Draco insisted, flopping over onto his back on the bed.

Grinning, Harry straddled Draco's hips. Ignoring for the moment the feel of Draco's body beneath his, he retrieved the clock from the drawer and set it back in its place on the table. In the periphery of his vision, he saw Draco roll his eyes.

"It isn't broken, it's back in its rightful place, and you've still got time before your first class," Draco pointed out helpfully, managing to keep most of the irritation from his voice. "Can we go back to not having sex now?"

Harry stared at Draco for a long moment and then began laughing helplessly.

Draco frowned. "I don't think that's what I was trying to say."

Harry leaned down and pressed his lips briefly to Draco's. "Whatever you were trying to say, the answer is 'no.' I have to get out of bed now," he said as he moved to slip away.

A strong arm wrapped around Harry's waist to hold him still. With his other hand, Draco tugged on Harry's arm, causing him to lose his balance and fall forward against Draco's chest.

"Not going anywhere," Draco murmured against Harry's ear.

Harry shivered. He wanted nothing more than to stay in bed with Draco, but he had responsibilities. And he didn't fancy trying to explain to Minerva McGonagall why he hadn't shown up to teach classes.

"I really honestly have to get up now," Harry said regretfully. This time when he pulled away, Draco let him go with a small sigh. "You could join me in the shower if you'd like," Harry offered with a mischievous grin.

"Not if you intend to get to your classes on time," Draco replied.

Still grinning, Harry kissed Draco lightly and headed for the shower. When he emerged some time later, Draco was sleeping soundly. He scribbled a brief note telling Draco to make himself at home, and then he hurried down to the Great Hall, where he had just time enough to grab some toast and coffee before rushing to his first class.

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Done with classes for the day, Severus Snape stalked across Hogwarts' grounds, headed to the greenhouses in search of potions ingredients for a personal research project. His stride was a bit slower than in the past; he had insisted on returning to work with the Order sooner than the healers at St. Mungo's would have liked, forever forfeiting his health in the process.

It has been ten years now since the Dark Lord had discovered Snape's treachery and turned him over to his more loyal followers for a bit of sport. His mind had thankfully chosen to blank out most of the torture he'd undergone that night. Mostly he only remembered resigning himself to the certainty of death as darkness closed in on him and then waking in St. Mungo's.

Albus had gotten a whisper of information somewhere, and, fearing for Snape's life, launched another in a long line of desperate rescue missions; those engaged in said missions had always had the same orders: go in, locate and grab whoever was in danger, and portkey out; take no chances, and save yourself first. Snape had been involved in a few such efforts himself, once he'd recovered enough.

After what seemed like an eternity of lying idle in the ward at St. Mungo's, Snape had had enough. All outward signs of his ordeal had long since healed, and he felt he could dose himself with potions as well as the Healers could. While the Healers might not be willing to admit defeat, Severus felt they had done as much as they could, and the rest was up to him and time to heal. Time was one commodity which Snape simply did not have. There was a war raging all around him, and despite losing his status as a spy in the Dark Lord's camp, he could still play a valuable role. Taking advantage of a rare moment of solitude, he had risen shakily and dressed, and gripping his wand firmly, he had walked out the front doors of St. Mungo's, daring anyone to try to stop him.

Snape's arrival at Grimmauld Place had heralded many admonitions as half the present members of the order kicked up a fuss about him being out of bed - and out of hospital - against orders. Lupin had understood, however; he had seen Black slowly going mad from being idle while others risked everything in the fight against Voldemort, and he took Snape's side, arguing long and loudly in support of Severus' right to choose his own path. The damnable Potter brat had taken Lupin's point quickly enough and settled the matter by telling everyone to 'shut the fuck up about it, already' and calling in Dumbledore to back up him and Lupin. The old man had been worried about Snape's health, but he had been on Severus' side; with a caution to keep a low profile and to not take on more than he could handle, Albus had welcomed Snape back into the fold with open arms. Literally. The old fool had hugged him right there in front of everyone. He had hated Albus for that at the time, but he'd give anything to have the manipulative old bastard back at Hogwarts, alive and well.

Snape's step might have slowed a little in the last ten years, but the trademark scowl had diminished not at all. The man still inspired fear in his students, though he had become somewhat less biased, softening ever so slightly toward the Gryffindors and becoming infinitesimally harder on his own house. The terror-inducing scowl was fixed firmly in place now, hiding the myriad emotions that constantly danced inside of him.

As Severus passed by a stand of honeysuckle, inhaling deeply of the sweet fragrance but never slowing his step, a slight movement just beyond the bushes caught his attention. Pausing, he turned in the direction of the movement. There, half-hidden by the shrubs were two students.

The two of them, a dark-haired girl and a flaxen-haired boy, were so caught up in exploring one another's mouths that they never heard Snape coming.

"Mister Malfoy," Snape said, his silky voice dripping venom. "Miss Weasley. What an unpleasant surprise. Ten points from Slytherin...." he began.

"Ten points?" Damien cried indignantly. "Ten points for snogging? What are you, queer or just a eunuch?" he demanded hotly.

"Damien, shut up," Eleanor Weasley hissed beside him. The sheer fury in Snape's eyes frightened her more than anything had in all her thirteen years.

"That will be another twenty points, Mister Malfoy. And a week's detention," Snape responded coldly. "You will return to the castle immediately, and if you are wise, you will stay well out of my sight."

Glowering, Damien turned on his heel and marched defiantly toward the castle, leaving Ella alone with Snape. She trembled, but stood quietly, waiting for him to dole out her punishment. If he had taken thirty points from his own house, she was truly frightened of what he might do to Gryffindor.

Snape watched Damien stalk off, reminded unpleasantly of Malfoys past. The brat's words unsettled him, and he couldn't help wondering if they'd simply been a product of his quick temper or if he'd picked up on some of his grandfather's prejudices. Shaking himself mentally, Severus pushed his anger away, knowing it would only make him weak and sick; since the war, he'd had to give up his favourite vice of stewing in his own venomous fury and had long since learned to push even the hottest of his anger aside quickly. He turned to continue his journey to the greenhouses and was startled to find the Weasley girl still standing there.

"Why are you still here?" he snapped.

"I was waiting for you to take house points, sir," she said. Her voice was quiet, but she held her head high.

Snape sighed. "Very well," he said. "Five points from Gryffindor for having execrable taste in men. You've broken no rules, Miss Weasley. You are free to return to whatever it is that you children do."

"With all due respect, sir," Ella said, "if I wasn't breaking rules, and Damien wasn't doing anything different from what I was doing, why did you take points from him, sir?" She felt incredibly stupid the moment the words left her mouth, certain Snape would say something scathing and take more points from Gryffindor. To her surprise, he merely sighed and answered.

"Mister Malfoy has been confined to the castle and was therefore out of bounds. Had he better control over his emotions, you both would have known that some minutes ago. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He turned once again towards the greenhouses.

Ella watched Snape move up the path, wondering what the man wasn't saying. Shrugging, she headed back to the Gryffindor common room. She smiled smugly to herself, glad that she had made Damien promise to pay for her information services with a kiss. Kissing Damien had been an interesting experience, and she now had something to brag about to the other Gryffindor girls.

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Returning to his office after his last class of the day, Harry was a bit startled to find Adrian Malfoy waiting for him. Since Draco was already at Hogwarts, he hadn't expected to see Adrian this afternoon. He hid his confusion and greeted the boy with his customary smile and hug.

"I have something for you," Adrian announced, withdrawing an envelope from his pocket. "You said if I asked properly that you'd come to my birthday dinner. This is your invitation."

Beaming at the boy, Harry tucked the envelope into his own pocket. "Thank you, Adrian. I'm looking forward to it."

Seeing no sign of Draco, Harry started off in the direction of the entrance hall with Adrian by his side, as he had before each of Adrian's previous therapy appointments. Adrian was chattering on about the day's Charms lesson, and Harry did his best to listen attentively even as he searched the corridors for the boy's father. When they reached the entrance hall with no sign of the elder Malfoy, Harry began to worry. He felt an incredible wave of relief a moment later when he found Draco sitting on the front steps talking to Sera and Eleanor Weasley.

"Detention?" Draco asked. "What did he do now?"

"He called Professor Snape a...well, I don't know what he called him. It must have been something awful, though. He's in detention for a whole week," Ella supplied helpfully. She honestly didn't know what a 'you-nick' was, and she certainly wasn't going to repeat the part about being 'queer.' The fact that Damien had uttered that word in such an insulting way made her think less of him; her parents



had raised her to not have such prejudices, and she couldn't bear the thought of even speaking the slanderous word aloud.

Draco looked perplexed. "I can't imagine what he could have said to get Snape that riled."

"I think it was more his attitude. I mean, even if he'd been complimenting Professor Snape in that tone of voice, he'd have gotten into trouble," Ella reasoned, not entirely certain she believed the logic she was spouting. "I've never heard him sound so full of himself."

"He was showing off," Seraphine pointed out.

"I'm not impressed," Eleanor replied haughtily.

"What am I missing here?" Draco asked. He felt as if the girls were engaged in an entirely separate conversation.

Sera smirked, causing a look of sheer terror to cross the Weasley girl's face. "Snape caught Damien and Ella kissing," she said. "Damien fancies her, and I think he was showing off, trying to prove what a big, impressive man he is." She shook her head slightly.

"Proving what a big, stupid git he is, more like," Adrian added as he joined the others on the steps. He manoeuvred himself in between his dad and Ella, allowing the girl to hide her red face behind him.

Adrian's gesture was lost on neither Draco nor Harry, and they shared a grin as Harry gave Draco a hand up.

"Ready to go?" Draco asked, very deliberately tousling his son's curls.

"Sure," Adrian replied calmly, trying to mash his wild hair down again.

Seraphine pushed Adrian's hands aside and gently tamed the curls. She gave him a warm smile and a motherly hug. "The wind will muss it again, but at least you're all right for now," she told him.

Adrian said his goodbyes and set off with Draco for Hogsmeade.

"I asked Professor Potter properly, like you said," Adrian said, apropos of nothing, as they made their way across the grounds.

"Asked him what, exactly, Adrian?"

"To come to my birthday party," Adrian replied. "You said I should ask him properly, remember?"

"Ah, yes. I do seem to recall that, now that you mention it," Draco replied teasingly. "Did he respond?"

"Yeah. He wants to come. It is okay, isn't it?"

Draco stopped and turned around to face his son, who'd stopped walking. Adrian wore a look of longing and just a hint of fear that made Draco's heart flip-flop in his chest.

"Its fine, Adrian," he assured the boy. "Why wouldn't it be?" he asked cautiously.

"I don't know," Adrian replied with a slight shrug, looking at the ground instead of up at his father.

With a tired sigh, Draco enveloped his son in a loving hug. "I think you and I need to talk, man-to-man," he said, taking care to keep his tone light. "I'll Floo Dr. Ponsford from the house and let her know there's been a change of plans, all right?"

Adrian nodded slightly, and Draco pulled the boy tightly to his side as they resumed their walk into Hogsmeade. All during the walk, Adrian remained eerily quiet. He said not a word until after they had arrived home and Draco had contacted Dr. Ponsford.

"Am I in trouble?" Adrian asked at last, breaking the silence and startling his father.

Draco abandoned the seat he had just taken across from Adrian to sit beside the boy on the sofa. With the gentlest of touches, he raised his son's face so he could look him in the eye. "You're not in any trouble, Adrian," he said softly. "Is there any reason you should be?"

"No, sir. I don't think so. I've been trying to stay out of trouble," Adrian replied honestly.

"I thought so," Draco replied with a smile. "You've always tried so hard to be good."

"I like it when you're pleased with me," Adrian replied in a near whisper, snuggling into his dad's arms.

Draco just held his son for a long moment before he spoke again. "Adrian, I need to ask you a question, and I need you to be completely honest with me. Can you do that?" he asked, looking into Adrian's eyes.

"Yes, sir," Adrian answered meekly.

"Adrian...are you afraid of me?"

The curly head bent so that Adrian was staring at the floor once more. "Sometimes," he whispered.

Draco swallowed thickly around the lump that had formed in his throat. "What did I do to make you afraid?"

The pain in his father's voice twisted Adrian's heart. "Nothing!" he cried, throwing his arms around Draco's neck. "I take it back. I didn't mean it," he said as tears spilled down his cheeks.

Draco pulled his son onto his lap, rubbing his back and stroking his hair as he murmured comforting words. When Adrian calmed, he leaned back, settling the boy more comfortably in his lap. "You did mean it," he said gently, still rubbing Adrian's back reassuringly. "I need to know what's wrong, Adrian, so I can fix it."

Adrian sat quietly, contemplating. "Do kids always grow up to be like their Mum and Dad?" he asked.

The question caught Draco by surprise. He had wondered the same thing once, a very long time ago, though, so at least he had an answer.

"No, Adrian, they don't. Not always. Usually a person has certain of their parents' characteristics - I, for example, have Father's quick temper and Mum's ability to adapt. Even those things aren't exactly the same, though. I've learned to control my anger much better than Father ever did," he explained.

"So you won't ever be just like Grandfather?" Adrian asked, his voice so low that Draco barely caught his words.

"No, Adrian," he replied quietly. "I promise you that I will never be like your Grandfather."

Adrian burst into tears, clinging desperately to his father. "He...he says I'm not wo-worthy of the name 'Malfoy,'" he sobbed. "He says I'll never a-amount to a-anything if I don't get my he-he-head out of the clouds and gr-grow up. He says it's a g-good thing Damien's the fir-fir-first born, 'cause I'm not...I'm not good enough to b-be his heir. He...he says I'm weak."

"Shush, Adrian," Draco said soothingly, cradling the child against his chest. "Hush, now. It's all right. Everything's going to be all right, love. Your Grandfather is wrong. You're a good boy, Adrian. You're smart, and talented, and you're certainly not weak. You're a very brave boy. You were brave to try to carry this all alone, and even more brave to tell me. I'm very proud of you, Adrian," he said.

When at last Adrian's sobs had turned to hiccoughs, Draco shifted the boy to the sofa. He disappeared into the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with a bottle of golden liquid and two glasses. Popping the cork on the bottle, he poured out into the two glasses, and, settling the bottle aside, handed one of the glasses to Adrian.

Adrian's eyes went wide as he took the goblet from his father's hand. He stared at the yellow liquid in awe, afraid to actually drink it.

As he settled into the chair nearest Adrian's end of the sofa, Draco chuckled at the expression on his son's face. "It's only wine, Adrian, and not very strong, at that. It can't hurt you, and it might help," he explained, sipping from his own glass. "I don't want you to think I'm encouraging you to turn to alcohol as a way of solving your problems, or any such rubbish, but under the circumstances, I felt it appropriate."

In truth, this particular bottle of mead they were sharing contained just a little more alcohol than butterbeer, which might intoxicate a house elf, but had never in history given a human so much as a mild buzz. Browsing in Diagon Alley one day, he had come across the practically non-alcoholic wine side-by-side with a variety of similar products; he had purchased the mead with Harry in mind, both to tease him with and to enjoy with him on some future night together. He made a mental note to replace it for the children's use, as well as for Harry's.

Cautiously, Adrian sipped at the wine. He'd tasted wine once before, the previous summer, when Grandmere had let him have a sip from her glass. It had been bitter; this was different. "It tastes like honey," he noted, taking another sip.

"In essence, it is," Draco replied. Despite the low alcohol content of the mead, he rather instinctively chose to treat it like the real thing and begin his son's education in social drinking. "Drink it slowly, or you'll be sick. Remember moderation, and know your limits," he instructed, smiling fondly at the memory of what exactly had happened the last time Harry had forgotten *his* limits.

Brushing the thought aside rather reluctantly, he focused on watching his son. Now that Adrian was preoccupied with savouring his treat, Draco could resume their conversation without worrying overmuch about sending the child into another fit of hysterics. "Has your Grandfather ever hurt you, Adrian?" he asked, fighting to keep his emotions from both his voice and his face.

"No, sir," Adrian answered. "But he gets really angry sometimes, and I thought he was going to hit me once, but he kicked a house elf instead. He's really mean to them."

Sitting his goblet down, Draco leaned forward to look his son in the eye. "You don't ever have to see him again if you don't want to, Adrian. We aren't going to spend time at the Manor like we did last summer, and he isn't allowed in our house any longer."

Adrian's hand trembled, and he nearly lost his grip on the goblet. He took a large drink of the mead before responding. "Damien will be angry with me. He likes spending time with Grandfather. And Sera will want to see Grandmere," he said.

"Your Grandmother can come here if she wants to see us, and I'm certain that she will. If Damien is angry, he'll be angry with me. I believe that your Grandfather is a negative influence on the lot of you, and what you've told me only confirms that. Damien doesn't have to know you told me anything, Adrian. I can keep this to myself," he assured him.

"Like Dr. Ponsford does?" Adrian asked.

"Exactly like that," Draco replied with a reassuring smile.

"Please do," Adrian said into his goblet as he finished off his wine.

"You have my word on it," Draco promised.

"Thanks, Dad," Adrian replied with a smile. "And, Dad...thanks...for treating me kind of like a grown-up, instead of a little kid," he added, his eyes straying to the bottle of wine and then back to his dad.

Draco smiled fondly at his son and reached out to smooth his tumbled curls. He was determined not to point out to the child that the wine was non-alcoholic. "You almost are all grown-up," he said a bit wistfully "You'll be twelve in a couple of weeks. Next thing I know, you'll be a man instead of a boy."

"It's okay, Dad," Adrian assured him, moving from the sofa to cuddle in his father's lap again. "Even when I'm all grown up, I'll still be your little boy."

## Chapter Fifteen

Much later, after a great deal more cuddling and a bite to eat, Draco and Adrian made the journey back to Hogwarts. Adrian was stumbling, half-asleep on his feet, by the time they reached the castle, and Draco had to fight the urge to carry his son to his room and tuck him into bed. Instead, they said goodnight in the Entrance Hall, as was their custom. After Adrian disappeared around the corner, rubbing his eyes sleepily, Draco headed off in the opposite direction. He hadn't gotten to say a proper goodbye to Harry earlier, and he felt compelled to seek the other man out now in order to do so.

As it was not yet curfew, there were still a few students roaming the hallways. Draco ignored them as he quickly made his way to Harry's office, and for the most part they seemed to disregard his presence there. Luckily, he didn't cross paths with either his own children or Ella Weasley; he honestly didn't want to have to come up with an excuse for his presence.

The door to the office was closed and warded. No light peeked from beneath the door, and no one answered when Draco knocked. Frowning slightly, Draco turned and swept down the hall in the direction of Harry's private rooms.

Pausing to be sure no students were about to overhear him, Draco pressed his hand to a certain section of wall and repeated Harry's password. A doorway formed, and Draco stepped into the dimly lit room. There was no sign of Harry anywhere.

With a tired sigh, Draco leaned back against the door. He knew that Harry could be anywhere in the castle, on the grounds, or in the world at large. He didn't want to spend the rest of the night trying to track him down. Best just to admit defeat and trek back to Hogsmeade.

Disappointed, Draco stepped back into the hallway. As he slowly walked through the quiet, familiar pathways, he mentally argued with himself. In the end, logic lost out to impulse, and Draco turned toward the staffroom. Just a quick look, and if Harry wasn't there, then he would give up and go home.

For once, giving in to impulse paid off. Draco found Harry in the staffroom, curled up on a somewhat battered sofa, his nose buried in a massive text. At the sound of the door opening, Harry looked up. In the next instant, the book was cast aside and Harry was standing before Draco, smiling.

"If you're looking for Minerva, she's retired for the evening," Harry said, moving to wrap himself in Draco's arms.

"I was looking for you actually. I had wanted to talk to you before I left earlier, but I never had the chance," Draco explained.

Harry looked pleased. "You came looking for me?"

Draco chuckled. "Yes, well, don't let it go to your head," he teased.

"Did you talk to Sheila like we discussed?" Harry asked, turning suddenly serious. He felt Draco's body tense and wondered if he had been wrong to ask.

"Actually, Adrian and I skived off on his session," Draco replied, forcing his voice to remain calm. "We had a little chat about my father, and if I hadn't had to first console Adrian and then see him safely back to Hogwarts, I fear I might have landed myself in Azkaban tonight."

Harry moved one hand to the back of Draco's neck, slipping it under his hair to gently massage the tense muscles there in a gesture of reassurance. "I take it I was right," he said softly.

"The sorry bastard's been poisoning Adrian's mind for god knows how long," Draco spat. "And I was too fucking blind to see it."

"Don't you dare blame yourself for this," Harry snapped in a low, threatening tone. "The fault lies with Lucius, not with you."

Draco's reaction wasn't quite what Harry expected. Rather than flying into a rage or spouting off acid remarks, he buried his face in Harry's hair, clinging tightly to him. At a loss, Harry merely stroked Draco's back soothingly.

After a time, Draco gathered himself together. He straightened and gave Harry a tight little smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Harry replied automatically as he pushed Draco's hair back from his face.

"I didn't come to talk about my father," Draco said. "I actually came to apologise in advance. I'm going to be rather busy until the end of term. I want to get caught up on my projects before the children come home for the summer."

"Exams are next week," Harry replied, nodding in understanding. "With preparing for them, administering them, and then grading them, I'm going to be rather busy myself."

"Adrian says you've accepted his invitation to his and Damien's birthday celebration. That's the Monday after the end of term. Three weeks from today."

"Counting the days?" Harry asked with a grin.

"No, of course not. Merely counting the weeks," Draco replied playfully. "I *will* be looking forward to seeing you again," he added more seriously.

Harry just smiled and leaned in to claim Draco's mouth. The blond returned the kiss eagerly, sliding his tongue deftly between Harry's lips. With a stifled moan, Harry tangled his hands in the pale silk of Draco's hair and gave himself over to the exquisite feelings that Draco excited in him.

Draco shoved aside his inhibitions, overwhelmed by the need for comfort, the need to connect on some deep, primal, instinctual level with the extraordinary man wrapped in his arms. With no forethought, he lifted Harry easily and sat him on the staffroom table. For his part, Harry adapted quickly, tugging his robes up so that he could wrap his legs around Draco's hips and wriggle against him in a most delightful manner.

The two lost themselves in their lovemaking, their hands and mouths roving ceaselessly as they sought to memorise every nuance of one another's bodies. Draco fumbled with the fastenings on Harry's robes as he kissed him, frantic to taste more of his skin. As Draco finished unfastening the robes, Harry lay back on the table, letting his hands fall to either side of his head in a gesture of submission that had the added effect of causing his robes to fall open alluringly.

At the sight of Harry nearly naked and spread out on the table like a feast, Draco's breath caught in his throat. His last fleeting thought before his brain ceased functioning was that he was glad that

Harry had for once forgone wearing Muggle clothes beneath his robes. With a desperate, feral sound, he leaned forward and licked Harry's nipple with the flat of his tongue. From the way that Harry's hips jerked and his animalistic moan, he liked it very much indeed.

With a mischievous smile, Draco lowered his head to resume his exploration of Harry's chest, this time employing his teeth in a way that Harry greatly appreciated. Harry did not, however, appreciate being bitten when the sound of the staffroom door snapping shut startled Draco; he yelped in pain, but otherwise remained absolutely motionless, staring at the door in horror.

Draco slowly lifted his head to look at Harry's face. The expression he saw there worried him. "Tell me it's not McGonagall," he whispered fearfully.

"I assure you that I am not the Headmistress," Snape's low voice informed him from the vicinity of the doorway.

Draco visibly relaxed as he turned to face the Potions Master. "Thank god for that," he said, both noticeably shaken and clearly relieved.

"I don't think that Minerva would condone such a public display," Snape said. He gave Harry a meaningful glare, satisfied when the younger professor flushed and quickly turned his attention to fastening his robes.

"I don't think she would, either," Draco agreed. "But surely you don't mind it, Severus," he added. His tone was light and teasing, and he was smiling rather coyly at the older man.

Harry's head snapped up, his eyes narrowed. If he didn't know better, he would swear that Draco was flirting. With Snape. Harry glared possessively as he slid from the table to stand between Snape and Draco.

Severus gave a little snort as he retrieved a book from a small table at one end of the sofa. "If I were you, I'd restrict such activities to more private locations. It would be a shame to be officially reprimanded before you even teach your first class." He paused, watching the two young men.

Draco had the smaller man wrapped protectively in his arms. Currently, he was nuzzling Harry's neck in a way that caused his green eyes to fall shut.

"I had no idea that the two of you were on such...intimate...terms," Snape stated with feigned indifference.

"Neither of us felt the need to have our relationship on the front page of the Daily Prophet," Draco explained, his lips brushing against Harry's ear.

Harry whimpered softly at the contact, and he immediately looked mortified, his cheeks pinkening once again.

Snape smirked slightly at Harry's discomfiture. He had heard tales of Potter's escapades, and from Draco's comment, he had heard the tales as well. At least Draco had some idea what he was getting himself into. "Perhaps you have the right idea," he replied at last. "There are still those who would be less than understanding about a relationship such as yours."

"And they can go straight to Hell," Draco countered, tightening his arms around Harry. "Who I choose to care for is no one's business but mine."

"Agreed," Harry said, giving Draco's arm a little squeeze.

Severus couldn't help but think about his earlier encounter with Damien Malfoy. For Draco's sake, he hoped Damien's inappropriate remark had merely been the first thing to pop into the boy's head rather than some deeper homophobic reaction. Somehow, he felt that the child had been taught one of the more petty and annoying of his grandfather's prejudices. He made a mental note to keep an eye on the child. He made his excuses and retired to his rooms, leaving the two men alone.

"What was that all about?" Harry demanded.

"What was what all about?" Draco asked, honestly confused.

"Were you flirting with him?" The moment the question was out of his mouth, Harry wanted to take it back. It sounded silly. He looked away from Draco's eyes.

Draco laughed. "More or less. It's a long story, really."

Perplexed, Harry glanced up at Draco. "Tell me?"

"Erm. Well. I'm part of the reason that Severus tried to get Remus sacked," Draco began.

Harry slid his hand under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose as he sank down onto the sofa. "Go on," he said.

"Remus and I were friends - you know that much. I...well, I rather fancied him. We were arguing about that restriction on lycanthrope procreation one night and I...I told him that he could win the argument by making it a moot point," Draco explained, the colour rising in his cheeks. "I threw myself at him."

Harry stared, the beginnings of amusement showing at the corners of his mouth and eyes.

"Severus chose that moment to bring Remus his Wolfsbane potion. He stalks in and there I am, straddling Remus' lap with my lips pressed to his.... God, he has the softest lips..." Draco's words trailed into silence as he let his mind drift back to that one unforgettable kiss.

Harry looked away from the small smile creasing the corners of Draco's mouth, not wanting Draco to see the jealousy he felt must surely show on his face. He wasn't particularly bothered that Draco seemed to remember that one long-ago kiss so fondly; more, he was envious that he had never engendered such a response in anyone - ever. After a moment, Draco's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Anyway," Draco continued, "Severus was convinced that Remus was to blame - never mind that the poor man was horrified. He decided that Remus was a paedophile and set out to have him thrown out of Hogwarts. He wouldn't believe Remus' protests, or mine, but he couldn't very well go to the Headmaster without proof. So he decided to attack through Remus' lycanthropy. I hated him for that." Draco stood for a moment, his mind obviously far away.

"I don't understand what that has to do with you flirting with Snape," Harry said, calling him back.

"Oh, that," Draco said, smiling slightly. "I wish the idea had occurred to me sooner, but it was only after Remus left the school that I really got angry enough to do what I did. The night that Remus left, I was furious. I went to Snape's office, raving and trying again to explain that he had the wrong idea. I think by that time that he knew he was wrong, but refused to admit it. Anyway, finally I decided that I would just have to prove my point - so I pounced on him."

"If you tell me he liked it, I'm going to Obliviate the both of us," Harry said, scrunching up his face in disgust.



"I think he would rather have been chopped up and boiled in one of his potions," Draco replied, leaning back against the table. "He was...I don't think there are words for what he was. He panicked and flung me away hard enough I cracked my head on the floor. After Madame Pomfrey patched me up, he apologised profusely. I didn't understand his reaction until years later."

Harry waited for a moment. When Draco didn't speak, he rolled his eyes in annoyance. "So, are you going to tell me?"

"I was trying to decide if that was relevant to the story. It isn't something Severus really wants bandied about, I'm sure," Draco explained. He moved to sit beside Harry on the sofa. "Promise me you'll never speak a word about this."

"I promise," Harry said sincerely.

"When Severus was much younger, younger than we are now, he...well, he rather fancied my father," Draco supplied, looking down at his hands. "Father, being the unmitigated prick that he is, was disgusted to learn of Severus' feelings. I don't know the full details, but he said and did some hurtful things to Severus. He says now that he was too young to realise what he was feeling, that he was just in awe of Father's power and influence and overwhelmed by his attention, but I don't know that it's true. And before you ask, no he doesn't play for our team. Father was an exception, not the rule."

Harry nodded solemnly. "It's easy to fall prey to someone who shows you any bit of attention or affection when it's something you aren't used to," he said quietly. "It amazes me sometimes how much Snape and I are alike. It frightens me, at times."

"Why does it frighten you? A person could do much worse than to be like Severus," Draco replied, a hint of angry disapproval in his voice.

"For...I don't know how long, years maybe, I've been afraid I would end up bitter and angry and alone, shying away from society, hiding here at Hogwarts...."

"Hush, now," Draco said softly, pulling Harry into his arms, alarmed by the anguish in the other man's voice.

To Draco's surprise, Harry chuckled softly. "There are times, Draco, when I swear you think I'm one of your children."

Draco laughed softly. "I've had thirteen years of being a father and a few months of being your...whatever I am. The paternal instincts are a bit stronger, I'm afraid."

"Everything," Harry whispered, burrowing farther into Draco's arms.

"Everything?" Draco asked, confused by the seeming non-sequitur.

"My everything," Harry clarified. "That's what you are."

Draco stroked Harry's hair. "That's a lot to live up to," he mused. He could feel Harry shake his head slightly.

"It isn't something to live up to, Draco. It's the end result of being who you are," Harry explained.

Draco remained silent, shifting a little so that Harry was lying with his head in his lap. They stayed like that for a long while before finally reluctantly going their separate ways.

All during the walk home, Draco turned Harry's words over in his mind. How had things come so far so fast? He wondered if he and Harry were getting in over their heads. As he climbed into bed, wishing that Harry were there in his arms, he realised that even if they were in over their heads, he didn't mind a bit.

\*

Despite the fact that Draco buried himself in his work, the time until the end of term seemed to drag by. He missed his and Harry's conversations as well as the kisses and caresses. They owed, of course, but it simply wasn't the same.

For Harry, the weeks whizzed by in a flurry of classes and exams, punctuated with overtaxed students begging for extra help. He made time to contact Remus on the Floo to make certain he was all right after the full moon, and he and Draco sent one another a few sporadic notes filled with an odd mixture of remembrances, suggestiveness, and chat about Draco's children. His days were busy, but the nights were misery. Having had Draco in his bed, he found it difficult to sleep alone.

Shortly before the end of term, Harry received an unusual and unexpected message just as he was dismissing his last class of the afternoon: he had a visitor and should come directly to the staffroom. Harry's heart began to race even as he told himself that the visitor in question couldn't possibly be Draco. He immediately rose and headed for the staffroom, forcing himself not to race down the corridors and stairs.

When Harry nervously entered the staffroom, he found the last person he would have expected.

"Ron!" he exclaimed, surprised by the sight of his old friend. They owed each other fairly regularly, but he hadn't seen the other man since the Christmas holidays. Between his work at the Ministry and his housefull of children, Ron was always rather busy, but Harry knew it was his own preoccupation with Draco and his children that had kept he and his friend apart the past few months.

"Hullo, Harry," Ron greeted cheerfully, greeting Harry with an enthusiastic hug.

"I wasn't expecting you," Harry admitted. "I was going to owl you later on and make plans to come and see you and Hannah."

"The kids will drive you half mad," Ron said, grinning broadly. It was no secret that Ron Weasley was crazy about his rambunctious children. "Rebecca has learned the fine art of the temper tantrum, Daniel's turning out to be as much of a prankster as the twins ever were, and Lauren talks about nothing except Quidditch, boys, and going off to school next year."

Harry's eyes widened slightly. He hadn't realised that Lauren was old enough to be starting at Hogwarts, and the information was a bit of a shock to his system. "*When did we get old?*" he thought to himself. He forced his attention back to Ron when he realised the other man had continued to speak.

"Harry," Ron said, looking rather serious. "Mum and Dad said you came to see them just recently."

"Yes," Harry managed to say. So Ron knew his dirty little secret. Still, he hadn't acted any differently - had he?

"Dad told me everything you told them," Ron said. He hesitated for a moment, running his hands through his hair with a frustrated sigh. "Damn it, Harry, you should have come to me with this."

"You had your hands more than full without having to play nursemaid to me," Harry replied a bit angrily, turning to lean against the table.

"Harry," Ron said softly, resting his hand on the other man's back. When Harry didn't look around, he called his name again, and Harry reluctantly turned to meet his eyes. "I thought we were friends. Are friends."

"We are. Aren't we?" Harry said, sounding suddenly afraid.

"And doesn't friendship mean we're here for each other when the world goes to shit?" Ron asked.

Harry looked away again. He didn't know what to say.

Ron sighed. "If you had come to me, I could have handled things with Mum. She still gets really emotional whenever the war is mentioned. Well, we all do, really, but especially Mum. I can imagine what it would do to me to have to bury even one of my children, and Mum and Dad went through it three times. Part of Mum died with George, and another part with Percy, and another with Ginny." He paused to rather awkwardly embrace Harry. "God, don't cry, Harry. You'll get me started, too."

"Sorry," Harry replied softly, wiping away tears he hadn't even known were falling.

"When I talked to Mum, she was feeling really bad about whatever it was she said to you..."

"She said she couldn't stand to look at me," Harry replied tonelessly.

"She was upset," Ron rationalised. "She's still upset, actually, and disappointed that you took matters into your own hands instead of going through proper channels. But that's Mum - thinks you have to behave like a proper gentleman even in the middle of a war. Don't take it to heart, Harry. She'll come around."

"Thanks," Harry said, drying his eyes again.

"For the record, none of the rest of us feels any differently about you than we ever have. You're still an honorary Weasley. You can't get out of it that easily."

Harry chuckled softly. He felt better about the Molly situation, now, and just having Ron around always cheered him. He was in no hurry to part company yet. "Can I buy you dinner in Hogsmeade? Or at least a butterbeer?" he asked, hoping to prolong Ron's visit.

Ron gave Harry a calculating look from the corner of his eye. "If you're asking me out on a date, you're about a decade too late, mate," he joked, earning another laugh from his friend. "Actually, Hannah's expecting the both of us for dinner."

Harry accepted the invitation, and when he returned much later the same night, he was tired and relaxed enough that for once he was able to go to sleep without lying awake missing Draco.

\*

At last, exams were over and the Leaving Feast a distant memory. Harry packed his necessities and fled to Remus' for the summer without once looking back. He wanted to dash across the village to see Draco, but he forced himself to be patient and give Draco the weekend alone with his children.

Harry found it surprisingly easy to settle into living with Remus and Tonks. By the end of the weekend, he had become accustomed to hearing random thumps followed by Tonks swearing and adjusted to seeing the two lovers snuggled up together almost constantly. They seemed to be making up for lost time, a concept which Harry understood quite well.

On Sunday afternoon, Tonks and Remus finally managed to shock him. Emerging from his room after a relaxing morning spent reading, he stumbled into the parlour to find everything half-hidden in an avalanche of feathers. Remus and Tonks were engaged in a massive pillow fight in which they hurled conjured pillows at one another with increasingly aggressive spells. The game appeared to involve a lot of kissing. Harry had never seen Remus act so undignified, and the sight warmed him. He had known that Tonks would be good for Remus. He made a mental note to mention that to them later, and launched himself into the battle.

## Chapter Sixteen

Harry arrived at the Malfoy home precisely on time for the twins' birthday party. He smoothed the front of his shirt self-consciously before ringing the door chime. For many long moments, nothing happened. Just as he was debating ringing the chime again, however, the door flew open and Harry found himself face to face with Draco.

"You're early," Draco said, trying to force the idiotic grin from his face.

"I am not," Harry replied, taking in the sight before him. "You're an utter mess. What *is* that?" he asked, gesturing vaguely at the creamy white substance that was spattered across Draco's tee shirt, smeared on his face, and streaked through his hair.

"Pasta sauce," Draco answered, ushering Harry inside. "Sera wanted to try her hand at Muggle cooking, and it was a bit of a disaster," he explained, wiping sauce from his forehead with the hem of his shirt.

Harry laughed. "You're only making it worse," he said, setting the children's gifts aside and reaching for his wand.

"Leave it," Draco said dismissively. "I'm likely to get messy again. I've got to go and clean up our disaster and see if I can get Sera to stop crying." He huffed out a breath. "Damien's in the front room watching some horrid Muggle film. You can join him, if you like."

"I have a better plan," Harry said, leaning forward to lick a spot of sauce from the corner of Draco's mouth. "You go and get cleaned up, and I'll take care of Sera and the mess you two made," he suggested, unbuttoning and turning up his sleeves.

"You shouldn't have to," Draco began.

"I don't have to, but I want to. Go on now. I think I can find the kitchen on my own," Harry insisted.

Draco acquiesced, kissing Harry lightly before dashing up the stairs to shower and change. Harry watched him go, marveling at how good the other man looked in baggy lounge pants and a battered tee shirt with his hair tumbling messily from the elastic that held it back from his face. Shaking himself slightly, Harry stepped into the dining room and followed the sound of Adrian's voice to the kitchen.

Harry paused in the doorway, watching Draco's children. Seraphine was curled into a kitchen chair, crying against her bent knees; she was drenched in pasta sauce, the same as Draco. Adrian was hugging her tightly and speaking soothingly, assuring her that she hadn't ruined the birthday party and everything would be all right if she would just stop crying.

Brandishing his wand, Harry cleaned up the mess, wondering to himself how they had managed to make the sauce erupt from the pot in the manner of a volcano. Sera looked up at the sound, staring in utter mortification at her professor. Harry just gave her an understanding smile as he moved to sit next to her.

"It isn't as easy as you might think, is it?" he asked, reaching out to brush away the girl's tears.

"No, sir," Sera replied shakily.

"None of that," Harry chided gently. "We're not at school, so none of this 'sir' or 'professor' business. I'm just Harry."

Sera gave him a watery smile, and Adrian beamed at Harry over his sister's shoulder.

"Your dad told me you had a bit of a problem with dinner. Now, as I see it, we've three options..."

"Go out for dinner, let Dad cook, or starve," Sera interrupted, her voice a disturbing mixture of bitterness and forced joviality.

"Go out for dinner, use magic, or simply try again," Harry corrected. "I happen to know a little bit about Muggle cooking."

"You'll teach me?" Sera asked, looking up at him hopefully.

"Of course I will," Harry replied, squeezing her hand.

\*

When Draco came downstairs from his shower, he found Harry and all three of his children in the kitchen. Harry had the kids hard at work alongside him, and he was entertaining them with some story about a Quidditch game he had seen. Damien was spellbound, enthralled with the vivid images Harry was painting with his words. Adrian seemed to be trying to stick as closely as possible to Harry's side, while Sera remained intent on her task, wanting to make certain there were no more disasters.

Draco crossed the kitchen, letting his hand brush the small of Harry's back as he walked by. "Are things going a little better now?" he asked, stroking his daughter's hair lovingly.

Sera smiled up at him. "Much," she confirmed.

"Good," Draco replied. He watched the four of them working for a moment, marveling at the way Adrian treated the salad vegetables as if they were potion ingredients, chopping and dicing them just so. The precise movements of his small hands made him seem more like a miniature adult than a child, and the image of his children growing into adults before his eyes made him uneasy. Hoping to earn a reaction from his son, he plucked a bit of chopped tomato from in front of Adrian.

"Dad!" Adrian cried indignantly, swatting at his father's hand.

"That's for dinner," Sera reprimanded him primly. "Get your hands out of it, and make yourself useful. Go and set the table or something."

Grinning, Draco kissed his daughter on top of her head. He decided it would be wise to do as he was told.

Dinner was a relaxed affair. The five of them chatted comfortably over the meal and the birthday cake that followed. When the last of the food had been cleared away, the boys dug into their gifts in a flurry of torn paper and exclamations.

After the last of the gifts had been opened, and those present thanked repeatedly, Damien settled back into his chair with a slight frown. "I don't mean to sound greedy," he said, "but didn't Grandfather send us anything? I knew he wasn't going to be here, but I thought he would at least send our presents."

"He did," Draco replied tersely. "However, I felt that his choice of gifts was inappropriate, so I sent them back."

Damien's face fell. "I can't believe you did that," he said sadly.

Draco sighed. "Damien, I did what I thought best for you. Your Grandmother agreed that the gifts were inappropriate, and she promised to remedy the situation. I didn't do it to upset you or hurt you."

"Was it something like the last gift he gave me?" Adrian asked, his eyes wide and frightened.

"Yes," Draco replied quietly.

Adrian shuddered and crossed his arms across his chest. A moment later, Harry had moved to hold the boy, cradling Adrian's head against his chest.

"There were useful potions in that book," Damien argued. "It isn't Grandfather's fault that you chose to dose yourself with one of the bad ones."

"Damien, how can you say that?" Sera asked, horrified.

"There is not going to be an argument about this, Damien," Draco said coolly. "At least not tonight."

Damien glanced at their guest, and at his brother who was clinging to Harry and looking very frightened. He sighed. "I'm sorry, Adrian. I didn't mean to upset you," he said honestly.

"Not your fault," Adrian replied in a near whisper. "It's just really scary, thinking you're going to die. I don't like remembering that."

"You're safe now, Adrian," Harry said soothingly. "One day, you'll be able to remember without being so frightened. Things are going to get better."

"It is scary," Damien agreed quietly, thinking of the day he'd been attacked by the thestral. "I don't like remembering, either." He rose silently and left the dining room.

Sera glanced at her brother across the table. "I'm going to go fight with Damien over what movie to watch. Do you want to help?"

Drawing away from Harry, he gave his sister a half-hearted smile. "Okay."

As the two children disappeared into the foyer, Draco leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. Gentle hands began to massage his neck and back. For a moment, he allowed himself to relax under Harry's ministrations. Then he sat back, caressing Harry's cheek and giving him a very tight smile.

"I'm not going to deal with this tonight," Draco said. "I'm not even going to think about my father. I'm going to be in a good mood for the boys, even if it kills me."

So saying, he rose and led Harry to the front room.

Damien and Sera were already sprawled on the floor in front of the television, watching the opening credits of some movie or other. Adrian had placed himself in the dead center of the sofa and was alternating his attention between the television screen and the book in his hand, which Harry recognised as one of the ones he had given the boy for his birthday. Harry and Draco took up

positions on either side of Adrian, and the boy looked up, glancing from one man to the other for a moment before snuggling against Harry.

A few hours later, Draco finally insisted that the children go up to bed. Adrian had long since fallen asleep with his head in Harry's lap and had been more asleep than awake when he hugged Harry and Draco and shuffled off to his bedroom. Sera was more than ready to say goodnight as well, but Damien balked.

"But Dad, its summer hols," he reasoned. "And it's my birthday. Can't I stay up a little bit longer?"

"Actually, as of nine minutes ago, it is no longer your birthday," Draco replied.

"Please, Dad?" Damien begged.

Draco changed tacks. "You may stay up as late as you like, but no more television."

With a long-suffering sigh, Damien turned off the telly, hugged his dad, and said his goodnights. As soon as he was safely out of the room, Draco grinned at Harry. "I had a feeling that would convince him."

Harry stood then, and for a moment Draco was certain that he was going to make his excuses and head home for the night. To his surprise, Harry toed off his shoes and knelt on the sofa straddling Draco's lap. "I have been wanting to do this all night," he said, leaning down for a kiss.

"So have I," Draco admitted. He cupped the back of Harry's head with one hand, bringing their mouths together once again. With his other hand, he began to unbutton Harry's shirt.

Harry let his hands slide beneath Draco's tee shirt as he worked his mouth down his lover's jaw line pausing to suck gently on the pulse point in his throat. With a feral growl that sent shivers down Harry's spine, Draco slid his hands down to grip the other man's hips and pull him closer. Harry lost his concentration then, digging his fingers into the soft skin of Draco's belly and panting against the smooth column of his throat.

"Upstairs," Draco commanded.

Pausing only to retrieve his shoes, Harry followed Draco upstairs to his bedroom. The moment the door closed behind them, Draco spun around and pressed Harry back against the door, trailing kisses over his neck and down the stripe of skin that showed between the open halves of his shirt. Harry mewled and raised his hands to Draco's shoulders, but Draco pushed them down again and slid his hands up Harry's arms to slip the shirt from his shoulders. He stripped off his own, as well, and then the tables were turned. Draco's back was to the wall, and Harry was in control, his mouth mapping Draco's pale skin. Harry's tongue traced a line of fire down the smooth column of Draco's throat, drawing a desperate groan from the blond. His teeth nipped along Draco's collarbone, and Draco's hands fisted in his hair. Draco mewled softly in protest and tugged at Harry's hair when Harry pulled away for a moment to cast his glasses aside. Then Harry sank to his knees, his hands making quick work of the button and zip of Draco's jeans. The hunger in the verdant eyes peering up at him was almost more than Draco could bear; he'd never wanted anyone the way that he wanted Harry in that moment. When Harry took Draco into his mouth, his gaze still locked with Draco's, it was all the blond could do to remain standing; his knees went weak and threatened to buckle, and he was glad the wall was there for support.

"Harry..I..oh god..." he muttered incoherently. Then he gave up trying to talk, trying to slow things down, and gave himself over to the sheer bliss that was Harry's mouth. It was over quickly, and Draco was biting down on his own fist to muffle his pleased cry as his legs gave way beneath him and Harry eased him to the floor.



He lay there for a moment, panting. As his heart rate began to slow again, he became aware of Harry's naked body pressed to his side. Gathering the other man into his arms, he pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Thank you," he murmured.

"You're welcome," Harry whispered. He kissed Draco, then, a long, slow, leisurely kiss.

"I think I see what all the fuss is about, now," Draco said, letting his hands glide over the smooth skin of Harry's back.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, propping himself up on one elbow so he could look down into Draco's eyes.

"Nothing," Draco said dismissively, reaching up to caress Harry's cheek.

"Tell me what you meant," Harry said, running his palm lightly over Draco's nipples.

"I told you once what a selfish bastard Pucey was in bed," Draco replied distractedly, more interested in his body's reaction to Harry's touch than in conversation.

"Oh," Harry said, understanding at last. "If I had known, I would have taken my time," he added apologetically.

"I don't think it would have made any difference," Draco said. "Could you...just stop touching me for a moment? I'd like to actually make it to the bed before we continue."

"The bed sounds like a good idea, but you don't have to...I mean...we could just sleep. If you want to?" Harry stammered, uncertain.

Draco pushed Harry down on his back and rolled on top of him. "Are you saying you don't want to take this any farther?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

"Farther?" Harry said, his eyes widening slightly in surprise.. Did that mean what he thought it did? "I thought we had decided to wait," he ventured. Truthfully, he didn't really want to wait, but he also didn't want Draco rushing into anything he would later regret.

Draco brushed the back of his hand against Harry's cheek. "We don't have to do anything you're uncomfortable with. Sex can wait, if that's what you want."

"I want whatever you want," Harry said softly.

"I want to make love to you, Harry," Draco replied, his voice a soft, sensual purr. "I want to touch you, and taste you, and fuck you like no else has ever done - and I want to take all night doing it."

Harry raised his head to capture Draco's lips briefly. Draco rolled to the side and stood, pulling Harry to his feet. They made it to the bed, but only just. Only as the first light of day began to seep into the room many hours later did the two men settle in to sleep.

## Chapter Seventeen

Some hours later, Harry awoke to find Draco lying besides him, watching him. Turning on his side so that he faced his lover, Harry closed the small space between the two of them, wrapping his arm firmly around Draco's warm body.

"Good morning," Draco said softly, leaning in to brush his lips across Harry's forehead.

Harry just smiled and burrowed closer to Draco, tracing lazy patterns on the smooth skin of Draco's back.

"As much as I would love to lie here with you all day, we should probably get out of bed and get dressed," Draco murmured against Harry's hair.

"Just a few more minutes," Harry replied. "I think I need a few minutes before we have to explain why I'm still here."

Draco chuckled. "Adrian will be thrilled, I think. He's a bit taken with you." He could feel Harry's smile against his skin. He raked his fingers through Harry's hair, gently forcing the other man's head up so that he could kiss him.

The slow, gentle kiss was nothing like the ones the two had shared the night before. It held no urgency and only the barest hint of passion. Rather than speaking of overwhelming lust, it whispered of love.

Harry let his fingers glide over Draco's cheek as he looked into the other man's eyes. He wanted to tell him how much he cared for him, that he loved him, but he forced himself to remain silent. It was too soon for such declarations.

"Harry," Draco began, but Harry cut him off with another tender kiss. Now was not the time for words.

The door burst open, and Damien rushed inside. "Dad! You're not gonna...holy shit!" the boy cried. "What the hell are you doing?"

Draco turned to look at his son, obviously shocked by his unexpected presence, but trying to remain in control of the situation. "You should learn to knock," he said calmly.

Damien simply stood there, staring, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "I defended you," he said in a near-whisper. "That MacMillian bitch said you were queer, and I fucking defended you."

Harry wanted to die, or hide, or turn back time. This was not the way he had hoped to explain matters to Draco's children.

With an exasperated sigh, Draco climbed out of the bed and pulled on his jeans. "Go downstairs and wait for me Damien. We'll talk about this in a moment."

"No, we won't," Damien retorted, his voice stronger now. "There's nothing to talk about. You're a god damned cocksucker, and you're fucking one of my professor's," he shouted, his voice growing hysterical.

"Damien, that is *enough*," Draco snapped, fury blazing in his eyes.

Harry started pulling on his own clothes, ready to beat a hasty retreat. It might be easier for Draco to deal with this situation without him around. He did up his trousers and stuffed his wand haphazardly into one pocket.

"It is bloody well *not* enough!" Damien screamed. "You're a *faggot* for Merlin's sake! You. Fuck. Men. No wonder Mum left us."

Damien's shouts brought the other children into the bedroom.

"Mother didn't leave us," Sera tried to explain.

"You shut up!" Damien snarled.

Adrian took one look at his father's face and then pushed past his brother to run into Harry's arms. Harry hugged the boy tightly, understanding the boy's fear.

"Don't touch my brother, you fucking creep," Damien shouted.

"Damien, stop it," Draco commanded none too gently, grasping the boy's arms and trying to turn Damien to face him.

"Get your hands off me. You make me sick," Damien snarled. Draco immediately let his hands fall away. "Let go of my brother," Damien growled at Harry.

"No," Harry said quietly, stroking Adrian's hair.

"Don't touch him! Don't you fucking touch him!" Damien screamed hysterically. "He's not a pervert like you. He's just a kid. I won't let you hurt him. I won't let you fuck him...."

The sharp sound of flesh striking flesh cut off Damien's words. The only sounds in the room were Adrian's muffled sobs and Draco's harsh breathing.

"Oh my god," Draco whispered glancing from his son's frightened face, to his own hand, and back again.

Damien stood stockstill, one small hand held gently to the rapidly reddening handprint on his cheek. "I fucking hate you," he spat as he turned and ran from the room.

"I struck him," Draco said stupidly, obviously in shock. "I struck my own son." Tears began to spill down his cheeks, but he was too stunned by his actions to even notice them.

Harry gently forced Adrian away from him and looked down into the boy's eyes. "Look after your father for a moment. I'll go and see about Damien, all right?"

Adrian nodded bravely and slowly crossed the room to hug his Dad. Draco wrapped the small boy in his arms and buried his face in Adrian's babysoft curls, trembling. Sera moved to hug them both, looking up at Harry with fear and hope in her eyes.

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Harry moved through the house in search of Damien. As he opened the door to the boy's bedroom, he heard movement downstairs. He took the stairs two at a time, his bare feet pounding out an erratic rhythm, and inexplicable urgency rising up inside of him. Just as he stepped into the family room, he

saw Damien toss powder into the fire and heard him snarl 'Malfoy Manor' as he stepped into the green flames.

"Fuck," Harry muttered under his breath. The last thing he wanted right now was to deal with Lucius Malfoy. Cursing Damien mentally, Harry Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

Harry appeared in Lucius' study, right in front of a rather startled Damien. "I'm taking you home," Harry said, grabbing the boy by the arm and turning him back toward the fireplace.

"What precisely are you doing with my grandson?" said a familiar cold voice behind him.

Harry turned to face Lucius, his expression openly hostile. He knew how it must look - him standing there in his trousers and bare feet, his face flushed and his hair tousled, holding the small boy against his naked chest. The accusation in Lucius's voice only fueled Harry's anger. "That is none of your business, Lucius. You made certain of that when you fed Adrian all of your lies. I know that Draco has vowed to have nothing more to do with you, and I know you're not to have any contact with the children. Don't fuck with me, Lucius. Deals are made to be broken," he threatened, backing toward the fireplace with Damien in tow.

Without ever taking his eyes off the elder Malfoy, Harry fumbled for the Floo powder on the mantle. He accidentally knocked the container onto the hearth, sending up a massive cloud of dust, but he managed to come away with a pinch of the powder. Tossing it into the flames, he realised that he had no idea how to Floo back to Draco's cottage. "The Three Broomsticks," he cried in desperation and tugged Damien into the Floo.

The two landed in a heap on Madam Rosmerta's hearth. The Three Broomsticks was deserted at this time of morning, and Harry was secretly grateful. He didn't want to have to explain this mess to anyone. Harry scrambled to his feet and pulled Damien up after him.

"Stop touching me," Damien snapped.

"Fine," Harry said, dropping his hand. "Don't try to run, and don't argue with me. I'm taking you home."

Damien kept his head held high during the walk back to the cottage, acting as if he were a king or Minister for Magic rather than an insolent runaway. Harry wanted to add another handprint to the still-vivid mark on the boy's cheek, but he restrained himself.

When the two entered the Malfoy home, Draco gave a small cry and rushed forward to gather his son in his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Damien," he said, his fingertips hovering over the red mark on the boy's face. "Please forgive me."

"I don't think you are sorry," Damien said coldly. "I don't think you're one bit sorry for any of it."

"I *am* sorry," Draco insisted. "I love you, Damien. I didn't mean to hurt you."

There was a calculating look in Damien's eye that made Harry decidedly uncomfortable, but he stood back and kept silent.

"You'll have to prove it," Damien said calmly.

Harry's blood ran cold. He had a very bad feeling about all of this.

Draco looked as if he had the same feeling. There was a profound sadness in his eyes as he looked at his son. "Tell me what I have to do," he said quietly.

"I want him to go. And never come back. I want you to not...be gay," Damien replied with a disgusted grimace.

"I can't stop being who and what I am, Damien," Draco said quietly.

"You don't have to fuck men," Damien shot back.

"God, where did you learn to talk like that?" Draco asked rhetorically.

"The older Slytherins," Sera supplied. "I didn't have any idea he actually paid attention to the rubbish they say."

"Well?" Damien asked impatiently.

Draco stood silently for a moment, staring into the distance. He looked torn, broken.

Harry couldn't bear the sight of Draco in so much pain. He knew what he had to do. Stepping forward, he turned Draco's face toward his own. "I love you," he said quietly. "I'll always love you." He stroked Draco's cheek. "I'm going to miss you - so much." He felt a tear slip from the corner of his eye and ignored it. "I'll see you at school." He considered kissing Draco one last time, but he knew that if he kissed him now he wouldn't be able to walk away. Instead he summoned the rest of his clothes and left the house without another word.

As the door shut behind Harry, the family inside began to react. Sera burst into tears and fled to her room. Draco sank to the ground, numb and shaking, and Damien began to feel guilty for his rash words. Adrian wiped away his tears angrily and turned to face his brother.

"I will never forgive you," Adrian said coldly, moving to sit beside his father. His small hands patted and stroked the older man's back in just the way that his Dad had so often comforted him.

Draco wrapped an arm around Adrian, pulling him close. His other hand he extended to Damien. He was surprised when Damien flung himself into his arms, crying. He was even more surprised when Adrian punched his brother - hard - connecting with the only part of the other boy he could reach.

Damien's hand flew to his nose as it began to gush blood, his wide eyes trained on his twin.

"You. Are *not*. My brother," Adrian spat. He turned then and walked away.

Despite his pain and the feeling of helplessness that threatened to overpower him, Draco managed to get Damien healed and cleaned up. "Adrian never stays angry for long," he tried to assure the boy.

Damien nodded, but he knew that this time things would be different. Adrian wasn't going to just forgive and forget. And frankly, Damien didn't blame him. He'd really fucked up this time.

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Draco lay in bed, as he had most of the day, curled into a ball with his face pressed into a pillow that still smelled slightly of Harry. He knew from the quality of the light in the room that the day was almost over, and he knew that he should be seeing to dinner for his children. If only he could force

himself to care about that. But he couldn't. All he could do was play the events of the day over and over in his head, making small changes here and there that might have led to a different ending.

If only he had insisted on he and Harry getting out of bed, perhaps Damien wouldn't have reacted so violently. If only he had kept his temper in check, perhaps Damien wouldn't have made his horrible request. If only he had stood up to Damien and refused to let Harry walk away, perhaps he would be curled up with the other man right now. If only....

If only he had done things differently, he might not have lost the best thing to happen to him in twelve years.

With a tired sigh Draco rolled onto his other side, the pillow still clutched tightly to his chest. He knew he should get up and make certain his children weren't eating sweets for dinner or wasting away in front of the telly, but he simply couldn't. Perhaps tomorrow he would find the strength to worry about such things. Perhaps tomorrow he might find the strength to face life without Harry in it, but for now he wanted to be alone with his memories, storing up every kiss and every caress for the lonely months and years ahead.

"Dad?" called Sera timidly from the doorway.

Draco sighed. It was foolish to think he could hide in here. "I'm here, Sera," he replied.

Seraphine crossed the room slowly to sit on the side of her father's bed. She fidgeted with the coverlet for a moment. "I...we..." she stammered, then paused to take a deep breath. "Damien is a complete shit."

Draco couldn't help it. He laughed. "He learned from the best."

"Grandfather, you mean," Sera said matter-of-factly.

"Yes."

"Grandmere says she loves him in spite of it."

Draco sighed. "So do we all," he replied, reaching out to stroke his daughter's hair. He thought for a moment before speaking again. "You remember what I said about not wanting you to visit the Weasley girl?"

"How could I forget," she said sadly. "I was ever so disappointed."

"I've changed my mind. You may go to stay with her if you like."

"I think perhaps I should stay with you," Sera said, watching him closely in the dim light.

"I'm a grown man, Sera. I can take care of myself," he replied with a small smile. "I objected to your staying with Eleanor because of her cousin."

"Which one?" Sera asked, confused.

"I heard you fancy her cousin. I don't remember which one."

"Armand," Sera said, her cheeks colouring slightly. "I do rather fancy him. You don't approve?"

Draco gave her a sad little smile. "I wouldn't approve no matter who the boy in question was, Sera. I'm not ready for you to grow up yet. But...I'm not going to say who you can or can not fall in love with."

"Like Damien is doing with you."

"Yes. And...my father insisted I marry your mother because it was a good match. I don't regret marrying her, because I have the three of you, but I hate that she hurt you. And I hated then that I was forced to live a lie. I never want any of you to have to go through that."

Sera leaned forward and hugged her father fiercely.

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When Draco woke in the middle of the night to find both of his boys in the bed with him, one on either side, he knew that right or wrong, he had made the only decision that he could. Or rather, Harry had made that decision for him. Leave it to Harry to take that burden from him. He only hoped that wherever Harry was tonight, he didn't have the same aching emptiness inside of him that he was feeling. Harry deserved so much better than that, and Draco hated to think of the other man being in pain. He'd suffered enough - more than enough. Draco said a silent prayer to the powers-that-be that Harry wouldn't waste his time with pain and regret and that he would instead find a little bit of happiness.

## Chapter Eighteen

Summer had never been Harry's favourite time of year. Since his eleventh birthday, when he received his acceptance letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the summer holidays had been something to dread rather than to look forward to - a time when he had to live with his horrid relatives and a time of forced separation from his friends. In later years, the summer tended to herald a period of increased Death Eater activity, bringing with it the deaths of friends and loved ones.

The summer that Harry turned thirty-three brought none of these things. Everyone he cared for continued to thrive, and he had plenty of time to devote to visits with his friends.

In spite of all of this, it was one of the worst summers Harry could remember.

When he wasn't visiting his friends or preparing his lesson plans for the upcoming school year, Harry spent most of his time sleeping - or lying in bed pretending to sleep. Sometimes - perhaps once a week - he would go around to the pub and drink more than he ought and Remus would have to come collect him and help him home and into bed. Often when he was in such a state, he would end up crying on his friend's shoulder and begging him not to tell Draco that he had broken his promise.

Remus, of course, had no idea what promise Harry was on about; he had no intention of telling Draco anything, however, so giving his word to keep mum about Harry's broken promise was quite easy. Keeping Tonks from stalking down to Draco's cottage in a rage and shaking her cousin until he fixed whatever he had done to Harry proved to be a bit more difficult.

Shortly after his birthday, Harry disappeared, as he had done periodically throughout the summer. This time, however, when Remus went down to the Hog's Head to retrieve him, Harry wasn't there. He finally appeared at Remus' house around midnight, looking haggard but completely sober, and immediately shut himself up in his room without saying a word to anyone.

The next day, The Daily Prophet reported that Lucius Malfoy had been arrested.

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Two weeks later, on a sunny afternoon near the end of August, Harry nervously made his way to Molly and Arthur Weasley's home where the entire clan would be gathered for Hermione's visit. Hermione's job had involved a great deal of travel in recent years. During the war, she had gleaned helpful information from magic users around the globe and garnered a little support for the Order; now that some semblance of peace reigned in Britain, Hermione's job was one part research and three parts international goodwill ambassador. Her work kept her more than a little busy. This would be the first time that Harry had seen her in over a year.

And it would be the first time Harry had seen Molly since she had thrown him out of her house. He was a little unsure about attending, but Molly *had* sent him an owl inviting him to the gathering. He was glad that he would be arriving with Tonks and Remus rather than on his own. His emotional state had been in complete upheaval since the debacle following the twins' birthday party, and he didn't think that he could survive any more painful confrontations.

Remus, sensing Harry's apprehension, gave the younger man's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Tonks to take a place at Harry's other side, caging the man protectively between herself and her lover, and rapped sharply on the Weasleys' door.

Almost instantly, the door flew open. Molly completely ignored Harry's bodyguards and descended upon the young man at once, drawing him into a bone-cracking hug. It was as if their falling out had never happened.



Harry had no chance to speak with Molly about her apparent change of heart, to apologise, or even to wonder about her actions; as soon as he crossed the threshold, the entire clan was on him. All at once, the smaller children were trying to climb up 'Uncle' Harry's legs, the older children began vying for his attention, and the adults all tried to shake his hand at once. In spite of all the turmoil, Hermione somehow managed to shoulder her way through the crowd and throw herself into Harry's arms with a laugh. As he kissed his friend's cheek, he wondered how he ever could have worried that coming today would be the wrong thing to do.

Later, after the chaos had died down as much as it ever would at the Burrow, Harry settled comfortably on one side of a battered picnic table between Ron and Hermione. Had it not been for the fact that Ron was cuddling a toddler on his lap and popping up occasionally to see to one of his older children, Harry might almost have imagined the three of them were once again youngsters enjoying the summer away from school.

"So many children," Hermione noted as Ron hopped up once again. "How does one keep them all straight?" she asked, giving Harry a conspiratorial smile.

"The ones with red hair are Weasleys," Harry quipped. Hermione giggled. "I'm serious," Harry insisted. "The redheads are Weasleys, the blond boy is a Delacour, and the blonde girl is a Malfoy."

"Oh, honestly, Harry," Hermione exclaimed. "I almost thought you *were* serious for a moment."

Harry smirked. "The blonde girl really is a Malfoy, Hermione. And the blond boy, as I'm sure you remember, is Fleur's son, Armand Delacour. I think the rest are Weasleys, but I wouldn't swear it."

"That sweet girl is related to Draco Malfoy?" Hermione asked, intrigued. She turned around in her seat, watching the girl in question.

"She's his daughter. And honestly, Hermione, you needn't act quite so surprised," was Harry's indignant reply.

Hermione's expression was carefully controlled for propriety's sake, but Harry could see the confusion and surprise in her eyes. "I didn't mean to offend you, Harry."

Harry reminded himself that she hadn't been privy to the goings on in his private life and would of course think it strange that he had anything good to say about his childhood nemesis. "Draco has three children," he explained. His voice sounded calm and matter-of-fact, and he congratulated himself on not letting his heartache show. "They're all at Hogwarts. Sera - that's the blonde girl - is going into her third year. She reminds me a lot of you, actually. She's very bright, always has all the answers, and worries too much about 'the rules'," he teased, bumping his shoulder against Hermione's and grinning. "I think Ella - that's Fred's oldest, the girl Sera's talking to. I think she's been a bit of a 'bad' influence on Sera. Ella's as mischievous as both of the twins together, but she's so much more...subtle, I suppose. She should really be in Slytherin, though I would never tell her father that."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I can hardly believe Hogwarts still goes by that silly house system. I remember Professor Dumbledore telling us how we all needed to work together..." She paused, sighing. "I would have thought that by now the Board of Governors would have worked out something a bit less divisive."

"I doubt they ever will. For the most part, the Governors don't understand what it's like for the students, how much the house divisions can hurt the children." Responding to the sadness in Harry's voice, Hermione took his hand in both of hers. He smiled at her to let her know that he was all right. "One of my students is in therapy because of the damned houses," he added quietly.

Hermione's grip tightened. "Harry, that's horrible! The poor child. What happened?"

"He was separated from his brother and his sister and placed into a house that his grandfather thought beneath notice. Said grandfather took every opportunity to belittle the boy for not becoming a proper Slytherin," Harry snarled.

"One of Draco Malfoy's children?" Hermione guessed.

Harry nodded. "Adrian. The baby of the family, really, although only by a few minutes. He landed in Hufflepuff, and it nearly broke him. It's a good fit, though, and he's doing much better now. Well, he was..." Harry forcefully stemmed the flow of words before he ended up spilling his most intimate secrets.

"I was surprised to find out Malfoy has kids, myself," Ron interjected, startling Harry who hadn't known his friend had returned. "I always heard rumours about how he played for the other team, so to speak."

Harry looked at Ron, then, and shook his head at the knowing look in his eyes. When did Ron learn to understand people? *'Probably when he got married,'* Harry thought. Aloud he said, "Yes, well, could you imagine him telling Lucius that he prefers a good rogering to a bit of..."

"Harry!" Hermione gasped, cutting him off. She pointedly looked around at the children present who might or might not be close enough to overhear him.

Ron shook his head. "I imagine that wouldn't have made Lucius Malfoy a happy man."

"As if anything could, short of my head on a platter," Harry added.

"So did you?" Ron asked, with a sly grin. Seeing the blush rising in his Harry's cheeks, he crowed, "You did!"

Harry groaned.

"Did what?" Hermione asked.

"Malfoy," Ron answered. He gave Harry a congratulatory thump on the back.

For a moment Hermione's expression was one of blank confusion, then she squealed 'You slept with Malfoy?!'

"Hermione, shut up!" Harry hissed. He looked around to see if anyone was listening, and his eyes locked with those of Sera Malfoy. He was certain she had been too far away to overhear Hermione's exclamation. Swallowing hard, he forced himself to hold her gaze. His resolve wavered when she started walking toward him.

"Professor," she greeted him, her voice soft.

"Harry," he reminded her.

Sera smiled. "Harry," she corrected with a nod. "I wanted to apologise...for Damien. What he did was wrong, and everyone knows it. Only, he's a er...a bit stubborn and won't take it back even though I know he wants to." She was silent for a moment, shifting almost imperceptibly from foot to foot. "Harry...we miss you."

Looking into the girl's eyes, he knew what she was really saying: Dad misses you. He took the girl's hands in his own and gave her a shaky smile. "Thank you, Sera."

The girl leaned down and brushed her lips against Harry's cheek, and then Ella was dragging her away. The three adults watched her go, and then Hermione turned to look at Harry.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Nothing I want to talk about," Harry replied calmly.

"Harry..."

"No, Hermione. I can't talk about it. Not again. If you really have to know, ask Remus." With that, Harry stood and stalked into the house.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance and then quickly went to find Remus Lupin.

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Some time later, Hermione found Harry upstairs, in what had once been Ron's bedroom, lying on his back on Ron's old bed and staring up at the ceiling. Without a word, she climbed up on the bed and lay down beside him, her head resting on his chest and her arm around his waist. He brought his arm down around her and threaded his fingers through her hair.

"Are you going to lecture me?" Harry asked quietly.

"No."

"Planning to help Tonks beat the shit out of her cousin?"

Hermione stifled a giggle. "No. In fact, I spent a good half hour trying to help Remus talk her out of doing just that."

Harry scrubbed his hand over his face. "She won't do anything. She just feels helpless. For some reason, Tonks thinks it's her duty to look after me."

"And when she sees you hurting and can't fix it, it drives her mad. Believe me, Harry, I understand."

"I know."

For a moment they lay there in silence, Harry willing himself not to feel and Hermione weighing her words before speaking again. "Remus is worried about you," she said at last.

"He always worries about me."

"He says you've been spending a lot of time at the pub."

"He's got a big mouth," Harry grumbled. "And he doesn't know the half of it," he admitted, the words mumbled as if he meant them only for himself. He sighed and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "I'm working on it, Hermione. I've been talking with Sheila. I'll be fine."

"Good."

Harry shifted, wrapping both of his arms around Hermione and burying his face in her hair. "I miss him." The simple admission brought tears to Hermione's eyes.

"You love him." Her voice was soft and filled with wonder. After Neville, Hermione thought Harry would never truly love anyone again.

"I love all of them," he corrected. "Adrian is - was - the closest thing I'll ever know to a child of my own. And Draco... You'd like him, Hermione. He's a wonderful man, and a great father." His breath hitched a little. "We could have been a family. A real family."

"The family you always wanted," Hermione whispered against his chest. "Oh, Harry." She held him for awhile, sensing his inner battle to control his emotions. When he was calmer again, she leaned up on one elbow to look down at him. "My offer still stands, you know."

"One day, I will take you up on that offer, Hermione. Once I've worked some things out...." He sighed. "Right now, I have too many inner demons to raise a child."

"Just don't wait *too* long, Harry, or you'll have to find a younger surrogate."

The comment was meant to be humorous, but Harry didn't laugh. He merely hugged Hermione tightly and kissed her hair.

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That night, Harry's friends began a campaign to keep his thoughts away from Draco Malfoy. Hermione spent a great deal of time with him in the three days before she had to return to her work abroad; Ron and his wife Hannah issued a constant string of invitations for Harry to join them at their home; Tonks and Remus took care to ensure that he was included in their comings and goings more often than not. The last week of the summer holidays passed by in a blur, and before Harry had time to catch his breath it was time to move back to Hogwarts.

On the last day of August, Harry gathered up the few belongings he had brought away from the school and tossed them back into his battered travel trunk, carefully lay the reams of paperwork for the upcoming school term on top, and levitated the ancient trunk down the road to the castle. Not a single living being crossed Harry's path as he entered the building, though Sir Nicholas greeted him cordially as he made his way down the nearly silent hallway toward his quarters. It seemed as if no one was aware of his arrival, and Harry couldn't be more pleased. He had an entire academic year ahead of him in which he would see Draco every day - see him and yet be unable to hold him, to kiss him, to show any outward sign of his affection for the other man.

Tonight was his last night of peace before his descent into hell, and he'd be damned if he intended to waste it. Everyone thought he was safely ensconced at Hogwarts; there would be no one to hunt him down when he was in his cups and no one to look at him with pity and disappointment in their eyes. He'd been planning this night for the last week, dreaming of it while forcing a smile for one or another of his well-meaning friends. Their small-talk and reminiscences could not keep his mind from Draco, but Harry knew what would.

Stripping off his robes, Harry dressed carefully in a suit of casual Muggle clothing: jeans with a special pocket on the side of the right leg in which to conceal his wand; a snug-fitting, long-sleeved tee shirt; and a pair of heavy black boots. Glancing in the mirror - a normal, Muggle mirror which wouldn't force its opinion on him - Harry made a quick, half-hearted attempt to make his hair behave. Giving it up as a lost cause, he tousled the thick locks instead, making him look a bit dangerous. He thought the look fit.

Harry strode purposefully out of the castle and out the nearest gate. As soon as he was past the anti-apparition field that surrounded the school, Harry clutched his wand, closed his eyes, and Disapparated. An instant later, he appeared in a dark alleyway in a seedy part of one of the Muggle cities near to Hogwarts. He tucked his wand into its pocket and stepped out of the alley onto a

garishly lit street teeming with people. Somewhere along that street he would find what he needed to push Draco's memory from his mind - if only for a short time.

## Chapter Nineteen

Harry awoke reluctantly. He felt as if a hippogriff had tap-danced on his skull and then crawled into his mouth to die. He was, therefore, understandably unsure as to whether it would be safe to sit up, to open his eyes, or even to breathe. One day he really would learn to stay away from firewhisky.

Shifting over onto his back, Harry groaned as pain exploded behind his eyes. If he could drag himself out of bed, he would swallow his pride and beg Severus for a hangover remedy.

With a sigh, Harry forced his eyes open -- and realised immediately that he was not in his quarters at Hogwarts. He gingerly turned his head to one side to survey the room, trying to recall the events on the previous evening.

*"Definitely not Hogwarts,"* he thought. He suspected he was in a flat belonging to the young man lying in bed beside him.

Harry covered his face with his hands, wishing that when he looked around again that he would find himself safely in his own bed. He recalled very little of what had happened in the Muggle pub the night before; he could only remember choking down the Muggle equivalent of firewhisky and dancing, rather badly, with someone who looked nothing like the man whose bed he occupied. The not-unpleasant ache in his muscles made him think that he had probably done something that he would regret.

Carefully turning on his side, Harry felt on the bedside table for his glasses. His fingers closed over the cool metal and glass almost at once. He slipped on his glasses and took another look at the man lying beside him. At least the bloke was good-looking. In fact, Harry imagined that when he was drunk the night before the man had probably looked a good deal like Draco.

Harry turned away to ease out of the bed, and his eyes fell on a small packet on the table beside the bed. A small, empty packet. His heart gave a twinge as shame and regret settled in.

"A Muggle," Harry whispered into the quiet of the room. "Draco would be horrified." The thought of Draco brought a fresh wave of pain. Pushing his grief aside, Harry began to gather up his discarded clothing, dressing as quickly and quietly as his aching head and churning stomach would allow.

Once he was dressed, Harry turned to look at the man one last time. With his features relaxed in sleep, the man looked young and innocent. Harry sincerely hoped that the young man would not regret their night together the way that he himself did.

As Harry turned toward the door, he caught sight of the clock and cursed under his breath. He was late for McGonagall's start-of-term staff meeting. He slipped out of the stranger's flat, made certain that he would be unobserved, and then brandished his wand. He Apparated outside the wards surrounding Hogwarts, collapsing to his knees and clutching his roiling stomach. The disorientation of Apparation coupled with his hangover was almost more than Harry could bear, but he forced himself to his feet and walked toward the school as quickly as his current state would allow.

Some minutes later, he burst into the staff room. He mumbled an apology at McGonagall and then fell into a chair beside Snape, panting and sweating from the walk and from the effort he was putting into not emptying his stomach. McGonagall glared at him over the top of her glasses, and he couldn't meet her gaze.

"So glad you decided to join us Professor," Minerva said. The disapproval in her voice made Harry want to sink down lower into his chair.

Harry forced himself to sit up straight and not stare at the carpet like a naughty schoolboy. He set his jaw and forced himself to look up at McGonagall. A bit of movement and a flash of platinum blond hair in the periphery of his vision caused him to turn his head. He found himself looking right into Draco's eyes.

Harry knew how he looked. His hair was in wild disarray, his clothing - his Muggle clothing - rumpled and spotted with whisky and ale, his eyes bloodshot, his cheeks pale. He knew he stank of alcohol and sweat and sex and despair. He hadn't wanted Draco to see him like this. He lowered his eyes, ashamed.

Around him, the staff meeting had begun, but Harry had no idea what was being said. All he could see was the shock and pain in Draco's eyes. All he could hear was the pounding of his own heart. He didn't think he could do this. He didn't think he could see Draco every day and not touch him, kiss him, hold him. He knew he could not - and would not - see Draco every day and not love him. His feelings hadn't changed, and he didn't think they ever would.

Harry tried to attend to what McGonagall was saying, but all he could hear was the echo of his not-so-long-ago promise to Draco. He had sworn that no matter whether their relationship lasted or failed that he would not revert to his old, self-destructive habits. He had broken his word within days of Damien's ultimatum, and the guilt had been eating away at him since. But now Draco knew that Harry had cast aside his vow.

Glancing up, Harry saw Draco looking at him with some odd mixture of pity and disappointment. His heart clenched. Then his stomach rolled and he abruptly fled the staff room. He dashed down the hall, barely making it to the nearest boys' toilet before losing the contents of his stomach. He knelt on the cold tile for what seemed like forever before the violent retching finally subsided.

Harry simply knelt there on the floor, too spent to try to get up. He instinctively recoiled when gentle hands lifted him to his feet. To his surprise, it was Severus who had come to his rescue. The older man helped Harry to the sink to wash his face and rinse out his mouth.

"Can you make it to your room unaided?" Severus asked. His voice was neither gentle nor sarcastic; rather, his tone was the same matter-of-fact one he had adopted for conversations with Harry during the war. Somehow, Snape's lack of emotion comforted Harry in a way that gentleness would not have.

Harry nodded. His rooms seemed impossibly far away, but he wouldn't ask anyone for help. He could feel Severus' eyes on him, weighing the truth for himself.

"I'll send one of the house elves with a potion," Snape added. "And I will let Minerva know that you've taken ill."

Harry jerked his head up to look at Severus. "Why would you lie for me?" he asked, his abused throat making his voice raspy.

A hint of a smirk ghosted across Severus' mouth. "I would think, Potter, that you of all people would have realised by now that love is the most debilitating illness of all."

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Thanks to Snape's potion and several hours of sleep, the physical effects of the alcohol faded from Harry's system. He arrived in the Great Hall clean and dressed in his best robes shortly before the students were due to arrive. As he made his way toward the Head Table, a familiar flash of pale blond caught his eye. He swallowed his hurt and fear, and turned to face his fellow professor.

"Draco," he greeted quietly.

"Harry," Draco replied civilly. There was nothing in his words, his tone, or his manner to indicate any of what he might be thinking or feeling.

Harry drank in the sight of the other man, really seeing him now in a way he hadn't in the staff room earlier. Draco was beautiful, as ever. He was dressed in simple black robes, but Harry could still picture him sprawled, naked, on his bed, his pale skin and hair a perfect contrast against the midnight blue of the satin sheets. His eyes held none of the joy or ecstasy that Harry had seen in them when they had made love, but neither did they hold the anguish he had seen in them when Damien had issued his ultimatum. His expression was the same carefully cultivated neutral expression he usually showed the world.

"You cut your hair," Harry said, absently reaching out as if to touch Draco's hair, but pulling away before he made contact.

"Sheila suggested it," Draco replied levelly. "For Adrian's sake. To disassociate me from my father."

"How is Adrian?" Harry asked, unconsciously shifting closer to Draco as he spoke.

"Adrian isn't the one I'm worried about," Draco replied, his emotions carefully masqued. Harry's own expression held concern as well as confusion. "Damien thinks you used your influence with the Ministry to have his Grandfather arrested. He thinks you did it to get back at him, and he's understandably upset about the whole situation."

Harry blanched. He had considered how Lucius' arrest might affect the children - and Draco - but he had decided in the end that he couldn't let their reactions weaken his resolve. He had not, however, expected Damien to blame himself. "You know that isn't true, Draco. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. I...it was just time."

"And how exactly am I supposed to explain *that* to a twelve-year-old?" Draco spat, the masque slipping for a moment to reveal the hurt and fear in his silver-grey eyes.

Harry turned away sadly. He had no idea what to say.

The other teachers were trickling into the Great Hall now. Harry took a seat as far from Draco as he could without being terribly obvious about it. He ended up sitting between Snape and an empty seat that would be occupied by whoever had been found to replace Madame Hooch as Hogwarts' flying instructor.

Harry watched as the Malfoy children entered the Hall; he assumed that they had arrived earlier in the day with their father and had been tucked out of sight somewhere until now. Adrian gave his sister a quick hug before moving off to find his seat, but he ignored his twin completely. Damien flopped down at the Slytherin table, sulking. Between Draco and his children, Harry knew he had a difficult year ahead of him.

A few minutes later, the students began to file into the Hall and take their seats. Eleanor Weasley gave Sera a friendly wave from across the room and patted Adrian's head as she walked by him on the way to the Gryffindor table. Armand followed behind her, but gave no acknowledgment to Seraphine; once he was seated, however, he allowed his eyes to stray to the girl, and the two exchanged a shy smile.

The side door opened as Professor Sprout brought in the stool and the Sorting Hat. It opened again a moment later to admit the Headmistress and the new flying instructor. Harry stared in shock, the colour draining from his face.



"No. Oh Merlin, no. No, no, no." The colour returned to Harry's cheeks in the form of an embarrassed blush. He glanced around the Great Hall, looking for a way to avoid being seen by the new teacher. Flustered, he turned to Snape and said "Tell Minerva I quit."

Harry stood, intent on getting as far away from this unwanted encounter as possible, but Snape closed his hand around Harry's wrist in a vice-like grip, preventing his escape. "Sit down," he hissed.

"Let me go," Harry said, his voice weak. "Please."

The shock of hearing Harry beg him for anything registered briefly on Severus' face before the emotionless masque slipped back into place. "I will not spend the rest of the term making excuses for you," he said coldly.

"You won't have to. I'm going. I can't do this," Harry said, struggling ineffectually against Severus.

"Let him go," Draco said quietly. Snape let go at once, as Harry looked up at Draco in confusion. "Take my seat, Harry," he murmured. "Go."

Harry fled. Draco turned just in time to greet a puzzled-looking McGonagall and the new flying instructor.

"Ah. The famous Oliver Wood," Draco said courteously. He extended his hand to the new teacher and forced himself not to gouge the other man's eyes out. "Hogwarts is a bit of a step down from the International Quidditch League, isn't it?"

Wood launched into a boring and likely well-rehearsed spiel about needing something more challenging. His rambling was thankfully cut short as the Sorting began.

At the other end of the High Table, Harry forced himself to breathe slowly and evenly. He pretended to watch the students being Sorted, but his mind wandered. He wondered if Oliver's unexpected appearance was karma fucking with him. Now that the school term had started, he wouldn't be able to indulge himself the way he had over the summer; he had promised himself from the beginning that his drinking binges would stop on the first day of the academic term. He would have to find a constructive outlet for his misery.

When "Weasley, Lauren," was called, Harry forced his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Lauren, unsurprisingly, was sorted into Gryffindor, and Harry made a mental note to owl Ron and congratulate him. The Sorting done, Minerva made a few announcements and introduced the new teachers before giving the signal for the feast to begin.

Harry pushed his food around on his plate. When Professor Sprout asked if he was still feeling poorly, Harry merely nodded. How could he possibly explain even half of what was really wrong with him? His life was a complete mess. He was a complete mess. In fact, he felt very much the way he had in the months following Sirius' death. There was something about the unknown that was infinitely harder to deal with than cold, hard fact.

He remembered various people - Dumbledore, the counselor, Remus, and others - mentioning 'lack of closure' after Sirius fell through the veil. That lack of closure - that sense that things were not settled - applied to the end of his relationship with Draco, as well. And to the disaster that was his short-lived romance with Oliver. Nothing had truly been settled in either case, though decisions had been made. Maybe what he needed was to face the both of them - separately, of course - and really settle matters.

Harry was startled out of his ponderings when the dishes changed to desserts. He eyed the sweets warily, but finally gave in to the desire to try just a bit of the treacle tart. He forced himself to focus

on the tart and give his mind a rest. When the students left for their houses, Harry hurried away to his room. Tomorrow was soon enough to deal with Draco and Oliver. Tonight he would wallow in his misery a bit and hopefully get a little more sleep.

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The next morning, Harry skipped breakfast in the Great Hall, opting instead for tea and biscuits in the comfort and seclusion of his room. After his impromptu meal, he placed a quick fire call to Dr. Ponsford to schedule a meeting for the afternoon.

By staying away from the Great Hall and keeping only to his classroom and office, Harry was able to avoid any sort of confrontation with either Draco or Oliver. His first day of teaching passed with a minimum of fuss - thanks in no small part, he was sure, to the fact that none of the Malfoy children were in his classes. As he settled back into the comfort of the familiar routine, he began to think that perhaps he had overreacted to Wood's presence at Hogwarts. Just the same, he felt it wise to keep his distance from the other man.

So thinking, he wandered from his classroom down toward the entrance hall. If he left for Hogsmeade now, he would have time before his appointment to fill Remus in on the latest. He had barely stepped through the front doors when a familiar voice caught his attention.

"Professor Potter?"

Harry looked around, smiling automatically as Adrian Malfoy jogged up the steps toward him. "Hello, Adrian."

"Hi," Adrian replied, grinning. "Uh...I have to go into Hogsmeade today, and I was wondering if you'd like to walk with me and Dad. You know, like you used to?"

Before Harry could think of an appropriate response, Draco appeared from somewhere behind Harry. "I don't think that would be wise, Adrian," he said simply.

"Because of Damien?" Adrian asked, his hands clenching into fists.

"We are not going to discuss this here," Draco hissed.

"No?" Adrian challenged, his eyes blazing. "I think we are. I think I intend to stand right here and tell you exactly what I think of your perfect son." Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Adrian cut him off. "No! I'm not going to listen to any more of your...your *bullshit* about family ties and loyalty and sticking together. Damien hurt you. He hurt all of us. And if you don't have the balls to stand up to him, then I guess it's up to me to do it for you."

Adrian turned and stalked away, leaving Harry and Draco staring after him, speechless. Harry was startled and somewhat disturbed by this sudden outburst from the usually mild-tempered child. Tendrils of guilt wrapped around his heart again; he knew that he was at the center of this family's turmoil and responsible for hurting the very people whom he wanted most to protect.

The boy marched across the grounds to where his brother stood talking to a group of fellow Slytherins, and Draco swore beneath his breath. He fully expected yet another fistfight to break out between the two boys. To his surprise, Adrian grabbed Damien by the front of his robes and dragged him away from the other Slytherins. Damien resisted at first, but something that Adrian said obviously persuaded him to go along willingly. He shook off Adrian's hand, and the two walked side-by-side towards Hogsmeade.

Draco started down the steps, intending to intercept the twins, but Harry's hand on his arm stilled him.

"Maybe it would be better to let them work this out on their own," Harry said. "Likely, Adrian is only going to give Damien a piece of his mind on the walk to Sheila's office. Perhaps it will help relieve some of the tension between them." Secretly, Harry also hoped that Adrian would be able to persuade his brother to set things right.

His eyes never leaving the retreating forms of his sons, Draco nodded almost imperceptibly. Harry had a valid point. The boys were quickly becoming young men. Sooner or later, they would have to fight their own battles, and he would have to let them. Might as well start now.

Suddenly aware of the warmth of Harry's hand on his arm, Draco pulled away. "I've got work to do," he said. He turned toward the doors and trudged up the steps, forcing himself not to react to the wounded look in Harry's eyes. He had to be cold; he had to be cruel. If Harry knew how much he cared, he wouldn't move forward with his life. He would not, could not, break his word to Damien, which left no future together for himself and Harry. It didn't matter whether Draco loved Harry; in love or not, his children came first. And he *did* love Harry. He loved him enough to let him go.

## Chapter Twenty

Later that evening, Harry settled behind the desk in his office to go over his lesson plans for the next day. His mind wandered often from his work, shifting between replaying his visit with Dr. Ponsford and worrying over Adrian and Damien. His session with Sheila had been both comforting and reassuring, leaving him feeling more able to cope with his many stressors. It had troubled him, though, that the boys had not been at the counsellor's office as he had expected they would be, and he was unsure as to whether they had returned from Hogsmeade. Just as he was steeling his resolve to go and ask Draco about the boys, the door to his office opened unexpectedly and a small, cloaked figure slipped into the room. The cloak's hood fell back to reveal the slightly battered face of Adrian Malfoy.

Harry swore under his breath as he rounded the desk and moved to the boy's side. "What happened?" he asked as he gently took Adrian's face in his hand and leaned in to inspect the damage.

"Damien wouldn't listen," Adrian replied in a hoarse whisper. "We got into another fight. I don't want Dad to know. He'll worry."

Drawing his wand, Harry closed and locked the office door and set to work patching up the worst of Adrian's wounds. "I'm not as good as Madame Pomfrey, I'm afraid."

"It's okay," Adrian assured him. "Harry, I'm really sorry." The boy looked up at Harry with tears glistening in his eyes, and Harry felt his heart do a funny little somersault in his chest. The sorrow in the child's eyes spoke more clearly than his words - he had tried to convince Damien to recant, and failed. The last bastion of hope had fallen.

"You've nothing to be sorry for, Adrian," Harry said, resolutely squashing down the desolation that the unspoken pronouncement had caused to well up inside of him. Now was not the time to mourn; he had to be strong for this boy, his almost-son. "I very much appreciate your taking a stand for me and your father. You'll never know how much that means to me. But your father is right, Adrian. About 'family ties' and 'sticking together.' You need to forgive Damien and try to get along with him."

Adrian sighed sadly and looked down at his hands. "It just isn't that easy," he said.

Harry understood all too well.

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When Damien returned from Hogsmeade, he slipped through the castle and down to the Slytherin dungeons, doing everything in his power to keep his face hidden. He didn't want to answer any questions about how he had come to have a bloody nose and a black eye. In the Slytherin common room, he caught Sera's attention and motioned for her to follow him to his room.

"You and Adrian were fighting again," Sera accused as Damien shut the dormitory door behind her.

"He refuses to listen to reason," Damien replied evenly.

"*You* refuse to listen to reason, you mean," Sera countered as she set about healing the wounds on her brother's face. "When are you going to admit that you're the one in the wrong?"

"I am not in the wrong!" Damien snapped. "You can't possibly condone the idea of Father seeing Potter after what happened with Grandfather. Or have you forgotten about that?"

"I haven't forgotten anything," Sera said. "Neither of us knows what really happened with Grandfather. You shouldn't judge Harry based on whatever horrible story you've made up."

"I didn't make anything up, Sera. I heard Potter threatening Grandfather. Next thing you know, Grandfather's been hauled off by the Aurors. It's obviously Potter's doing. The Ministry'll believe anything Saint Potter says. The probably never even looked into whatever he accused Grandfather of to have him arrested."

Sera sat down on the edge of Damien's bed, one hand still firmly gripping her wand and the other twisting nervously in the folds of her robes. "I've heard things," she said quietly.

"What sort of things?" Damien wanted to know. His eyes held suspicion and distrust.

"Things about Grandfather. And about the war."

"And where did you hear these things? From your low-class Weasleys?" Damien asked, his voice dripping with contempt. "They're as gone on Potter as the Ministry is, and it's no secret that the Weasleys and the Malfoys have never gotten on. You can't trust what they say about Grandfather."

Sera shot to her feet, her hand rising as if on its own volition to strike Damien solidly across the cheek. "How dare you?" she hissed. "You are never, ever, to insult my friends again. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

If Draco had seen his daughter, standing toe-to-toe with her brother, looking him square in the eye with righteous fury etched on her face, he would have thought her the very picture of her Grandmother. If Harry had seen her just then, he would have been reminded strongly of her cousin, Sirius Black, in one of his infamous face-offs with Severus Snape. All Damien saw when he looked at his sister was his life flashing before his eyes. He knew from years of experience not to test her when she was in a mood like this. He wisely kept his mouth shut.

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For Harry, the second day of classes seemed on track to go as well as the first. He gone to the Great Hall for breakfast, but luck had been on his side and he had not seen Oliver. Draco had been present, but seated at the other end of the Head Table where Harry could ignore him. The morning classes had gone smoothly, and he had lunched in his office. The majority of the day was past, and there had been no major mishaps. Harry approached his first class after lunch with a slight spring in his step.

When he arrived at the Dark Arts classroom, the second year Slytherins were already present and seated. The students were talking animatedly, but fell silent as he stepped into the room. His spirits plummeted as he realised that he had walked into a trap.

Someone - and Harry had a very good idea as to who that someone might be - had covered the blackboards in homophobic slurs, spelled Harry's desk a sickening shade of pink, and tacked a very realistic drawing of Harry in a dress to the wall behind his desk. Drawing-Harry had a speech bubble over his head reading "I like it up the arse."

Harry clenched his teeth to keep from yelling and took a deep, calming breath. He walked slowly to the front of the classroom and dropped his heavy attaché case on the now-pink desk with a loud thump that caused some of the students to flinch.

"I should very much like to know who is responsible for this," Harry said, surprised at the calm, even sound of his own voice. "If no one comes forward in the next...sixty seconds, either with a confession or with evidence, you will all be serving detention." He paused a moment for effect. "During next

week's Quidditch tryouts." He made a point of pulling out his pocket watch - a gift from Remus some years ago - and looking at the time. "You now have forty-five seconds."

A few of the students twitched in their seats. Damien Malfoy looked smug, and Harry had a feeling that the boy thought his father could get him out of detention. Harry stared back at the boy, silently challenging him. With a slight smirk, he looked down at his watch again. "Fifteen seconds." The students remained steadfastly quiet, although Isabella Zabini looked as if she wanted to cry. One last glance at the watch. "Time's up," Harry said casually, as if he were not pronouncing their doom. "Detention during next week's tryouts, and 10 points from Slytherin - each."

Harry made no attempt to clean up the Slytherins' handiwork. He merely launched into the day's lesson as if nothing out of the ordinary had transpired. Only when the class was over and the last student had filed out did he allow himself to sink down into his chair behind the horrid pink desk and rest his head in his hands. He allowed himself to wallow in self-pity for a few minutes, and then stepped out of the classroom, spell-locking and warding it behind him. He wanted to make certain that the evidence remained undisturbed until he could show it to Snape and the Headmistresses. He taught his last class of the day on Hogwarts front lawn, and then went in search of his colleagues.

McGonagall and Sprout agreed at once to meet Harry at the Dark Arts classroom, although he had been purposefully vague about why he had wanted them there. He imagined he would have to be more forthright with Severus, and as he made his way to Snape's office, he contemplated how little he could actually get away with telling the man. He thought the element of surprise would work in his favour.

Snape's door opened almost the instant Harry's knuckles made contact with the wood. "Potter," he said coldly. "What is this about my house losing 100 points in your class today?"

"I came to speak with you about that, actually," Harry replied with a calmness he didn't feel. "I'd rather show you than explain. If a single picture really is worth a thousand words, I could talk forever and not make my point half so well as what you can see with your own eyes." Snape's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Please, Severus," Harry said, sounding put upon. "I've asked the Headmistress and Professor Sprout to meet me at the Dark Arts classroom, and I'd like you to join us as well."

Harry watched the battle play out in Severus' eyes. After a moment of calculation, Snape consented with a half-nod and locked his office door behind him as he moved to follow Harry toward the Dark Arts classroom.

Once the four of them were gathered in the hallway outside the classroom, Harry took a deep breath and removed the spells guarding the door. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. Two sharp gasps from behind told him that McGonagall and Sprout had followed him. Snape brushed past him, going at once to inspect the spell-work and the drawing.

Harry quickly explained how he had dealt with the situation and was surprised when he received a small nod of approval from Snape.

"Do you have any idea who might have done such a thing?" Sprout asked.

Before Harry could answer, the classroom door swung open again and Draco stepped inside.

"Harry, Damien just came to me with....oh my God," he finished breathlessly, his eyes darting back and forth as they tried to take in the scene before him.

Harry gave Sprout a meaningful look, and he was certain that she understood just who Harry thought was responsible.

"What happened?" Draco asked.

"The second year Slytherins decided to have a bit of fun at my expense," Harry explained.

"I shall speak to my students," Snape said as he handed the drawing to Draco. He swept from the room, already working out in his head exactly what he would say to the Slytherins.

"Coral isn't really your colour," Draco joked, the light tone a sharp contrast to the tightness around his eyes. "I'm sorry," he added more seriously. He met Harry's eyes for a moment, and Harry instinctively reached out to twine his fingers with Draco's. Draco allowed the contact, resolutely holding on to Harry's hand. Harry wasn't certain what it meant, but it felt good.

"Draco," Harry began. Draco cut him off with a shake of his head.

"I know what you're going to say. I wish I could deny it with any certainty, but I can't. I'll see what I can find out."

"Thank you," Harry said in a near-whisper.

Draco forced a slight smile. He drew his hand away from Harry's, and then slipped out of the room.

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As Draco made his way down through the castle toward the entrance to the Slytherin common room, he turned over the situation in his mind. He wasn't entirely certain what he intended to say to Damien in regards to the re-decoration of the Dark Arts classroom. More importantly, he had no idea how to pull his son aside for a private conversation without drawing unwanted attention. As he paused for a moment near the entrance to weigh his options, the door to the Slytherin common room opened.

"I will handle the situation, Draco," Snape said almost before he was through the doorway. There was no need to explain which situation he was speaking of. "Your interference can only make matters worse. I assure you that I'm perfectly capable of dealing with my own house."

"Of course, Severus," Draco replied. "I would never imply that you were not able. Are you certain...?"

"Professor Malfoy," Snape interjected. "You will *not* interfere. You will, in fact, pretend you know nothing of the personal attack on Professor Potter until you hear it through the Hogwarts' rumour-mill. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Professor," Draco ground out. He hated being talked down to, and he took exception to the idea that speaking to his own son would be seen as 'interference'. "If I may be of any help to you, do let me know," he added rather snidely before turning to walk away.

"You should perhaps consider your own part in this incident, Draco," Snape advised. With that, he turned on his heel and strode away, effectively ending the conversation.

Draco resisted an urge to run after Snape and hex him. His part in 'this incident' indeed. As if he was responsible for the foolishness of a handful of children.

He stalked off toward his private room, struggling to quiet the voice in the back of his mind that insisted that the Slytherins would never have launched today's personal attack on Harry if only Draco had been brave enough to defy the ultimatum of a twelve-year-old boy.

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Seraphine Malfoy was furious. Professor Snape had just left the Slytherin dungeons after dressing down the second years - and anyone else who happened to be nearby - about the defacement of school property and vilification of a member of the Hogwarts staff. He had assured the second years that if no one came forward with information on the matter within the next hour that they would be all be assumed guilty and dealt with appropriately.

Not all of the second year students had been present, of course, but those who were present had dispersed at once to spread the word. Alliances were being formed, deals made, bribes offered. And Damien was looking both smug and a bit worried.

Sera had her suspicions about what was going on. She knew her brother rather well, after all, and knew what that particular expression on his pointy little face probably meant. She had her suspicions, but she wanted more information before she passed any judgments. Willing herself calm, Sera left the common room in search of her Head of House.

The door to Snape's office was partially open - an invitation for anyone with information about today's incident to come in and speak with the man. Sera stepped inside and shut the door. "Professor Snape?"

Snape looked up from the notes he was copying, his emotions carefully concealed. "Miss Malfoy."

"I'd like to know what happened today, sir," Sera said.

Snape laid his quill aside and straightened in his seat. "What precisely would you like to know, Miss Malfoy?"

"It was Harry, wasn't it, sir?" she asked. Snape's eyes narrowed minutely at her use of Harry's given name, but he said nothing. "The second years did something to Harry."

"What would lead you to believe that Professor Potter is in any way involved?"

Sera flushed slightly, realising that she had not only called Harry by his first name but also given her hand away in a very un-Slytherin way. "Just something I noticed in the common room, sir," she hedged. "Was it Professor Potter?"

"It was."

"God damn it!" Sera swore, stamping her foot ineffectually.

"Language, Miss Malfoy," Snape rebuked mildly.

"What did they do to him?" she demanded. Snape gave her a look that would have had a lesser woman quaking where she stood, but Sera merely tilted her chin a touch higher and waited for an answer.

"You will address me with respect Miss Malfoy," Snape commanded.

Sera sighed softly, and she relaxed her stance slightly. Her eyes softened from defiant to worried, and she wrapped her arms around her chest, hugging herself. "Forgive me, sir. It isn't you I'm angry with. Please, will you tell me what they did to Harry?"

Although he could tell that Sera's concern for Potter was genuine, he felt that her sudden change in demeanor was anything but. At thirteen, she already had womanly wiles down to an exact art. He smothered a smirk and answered her question. "Professor Potter was not harmed in any way, Miss



Malfoy, so you needn't worry so. The students simply felt it would be humourous to deride certain aspects of Potter's character."

"What could they possible...?" The puzzled look on Sera's face turned to one of outrage as the pieces clicked into place. "They made fun of him because he's gay," she said flatly.

"Does this fit in with your suspicions, Miss Malfoy? With what you observed in the common room?"

Sera looked him dead in the eye. "You know it does. Sir."

"Do I?" Snape asked, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his desk and steeple his fingers together in front of him.

To his surprise, Sera laughed. Then she slumped down in one of the chairs facing Snape's desk, buried her face in her hands, and cried.

Even after thirty-odd years of teaching, Snape was no expert on crying girls. Or crying boys, for that matter. He simply sat where he was, waiting for the storm to pass, and then escorted Sera out of his office as quickly and kindly as possible.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Damien felt a little guilty as he slid into his seat at the Slytherin table. He had caused a great deal of trouble for some of his classmates who really had no idea what was going on or who was behind it. He and his co-conspirators had not backed down, however. They weren't about to admit they had done anything, and certainly weren't going to admit they had done anything *wrong*. Potter was a threat and a disgrace. They were doing the school a favour, really.

Just as Damien shoved a large bite of roast into his mouth, he felt a presence behind him. Had he not known better, he would have sworn his Grandfather was standing just behind his chair. Turning around slowly, he met the dark, forbidding gaze of Professor Snape. The look in the man's eyes made Damien's knees turn to jelly.

"Come with me," Snape instructed in that deadly, silky tone that never failed to strike fear into the hearts of his students.

Damien carefully laid his fork aside and forced his legs to carry him out of his seat. From the corner of his eye, he saw the panic etched on the faces of his partners-in-crime and the looks of pity from the rest of the Slytherins. He had a sinking feeling that this might be his last meal - at least his last meal as a Hogwarts student. Somehow he managed to keep his head held high and his feet moving forward as he followed Snape from the Great Hall down to the professor's office in the dungeons.

"Mister Malfoy," Snape said, shutting the office door behind the both of them. "Several of your classmates seem eager to lay the blame for denigrating Professor Potter at your door."

"Do they, sir?" Damien asked, trying his best to look innocent.

"They do indeed. Sit down," Snape commanded, not at all graciously. After Damien took a seat, Severus folded his arms across his chest and leaned ever so slightly against his desk, towering over the boy. "Do you take exception to the fact that Professor Potter has a preference for the company of other men?"

Damien gave a little snort. "Why would I care where he sticks it? As long as my father isn't involved, I really couldn't care less."

"So you aren't concerned at all by Potter's...sexual orientation? It doesn't make you feel threatened or uncomfortable?"

"No, sir. I honestly don't care," Damien repeated. Truthfully, he didn't care that Potter was gay. If his affinity for men had made him an easy target, so much the better, but it had nothing to do with his hating the man.

"Hmm..." Snape paused for a moment, his eyes fixed on Damien's. "So Potter's sexuality isn't the reason why you staged today's incident. There was some other motivation behind it."

"You know the bloody motivation behind it," Damien snarled without thinking. He shot to his feet, his hands clenched into fists and his face contorted with hatred. "The bastard sent my Grandfather to Azkaban! And the Ministry has its collective head so far up Potter's arse that they just believed him. Grandfather never even had a trial!"

Snape tangled one fist in the front of Damien's robes and drew the boy up on his toes as he leaned forward until their noses were almost touching. "Your Grandfather is *precisely* where he should be," he hissed. "He was jailed immediately because his trial was held some years before you were ever born, boy. He managed to escape from Azkaban then, and has been wanted dead or alive since. I imagine

that it was only Potter's intervention that stayed the Ministry's hand when your Grandfather was arrested last month; I can see no other reason why they would have imprisoned him rather than putting him to death. You should be thankful that the Ministry has its head up Potter's arse, and you should be thankful that the venomous nuisance that is your Grandfather is out of your life." He paused, breathing hard and forced his anger down, running through the calming techniques he had learned over the last several years. He disentangled his hand from Damien's robes and shoved the trembling child back into the chair he had been sitting in. "I want to know who else was in on this."

Damien stared at the floor. He knew Snape would eventually find out what he wanted to know. Perhaps if he gave the information willingly his punishment would be less severe. He rapidly spouted off four names, and Snape was not at all surprised that Damien's accomplices were the children of men and women who had sympathised with the Death Eaters.

"You will serve the detention Professor Potter assigned, and an additional week's worth besides. The loss of house points will stand." He paused for effect. "And you will apologise to Professor Potter."

"In public or in private, sir?" Damien asked quietly. His hands were still clenched into fists, but he was too frightened of Snape now to even consider standing up to him.

"A private apology will be sufficient."

"Yes, sir. That's a lot of house points, though, sir."

"Indeed it is. Attacking a teacher in such a manner is a serious offence. Regardless of my, your, or anyone else's opinion, Potter is a Hogwarts Professor and should be treated with respect."

Damien nodded in understanding, but inside he was screaming. He couldn't believe that this man - of all people! - was standing up for Potter and maligning Lucius Malfoy. "May I go now sir?"

"You may return to your dormitory."

Damien slunk out of the room, and Severus shut the door behind him. The professor needed a moment to himself before he began to deal with the other students involved in Damien's plot against Harry Potter.

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Harry avoided dinner in the Great Hall. He knew there was a very good chance that the Slytherins' prank would be *the* topic of discussion at the evening meal, and he simply wasn't up to dealing with the sideways glances, curious gazes, and shocked stares. Rather than face the Hogwarts rumour mill, he chose to sequester himself in his office with a sandwich and a pot of tea.

After his meager dinner, Harry shifted the tea things aside and drew a single sheet of parchment closer. For a long while, he sat studying the sketch he had found in the Defence classroom earlier in the day. Whoever had drawn it had a great deal of artistic talent; Harry felt it was a real shame to see such talent used to such ill ends.

A knock on the office door drew Harry from his thoughts. "Come in," he called as he slipped the drawing into the top drawer of his desk. The door opened to admit the very person Harry least wanted to see.

"Harry," Oliver greeted with a soft smile. "I heard about what happened today. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Harry lied smoothly. He fluffed the feathers on his quill to have something to occupy his hands.

"I haven't had a chance to talk to you since I arrived," Oliver said. As he crossed away from the still open door and rounded the desk, Harry's eyes automatically darted around looking for an escape route. Oliver was mere inches away now, and his nearness was making Harry more than a little nervous. "I wanted to apologise, Harry."

"A..apologise?" Harry stammered, surprised.

Oliver leaned against the solid oak desk, his slouched posture bringing him closer to eye-level with Harry. "I panicked. I never meant to hurt you," he murmured. He reached out a hand to trail his fingertips along Harry's jaw.

Harry looked up into Oliver's eyes, wondering how much of the man's apology was genuine and how much was designed to get Harry back into his bed. Oliver's eyes were hooded, his lips parted ever so slightly. His fingers glided up Harry's jaw to comb through his hair, coming to rest cradling Harry's head.

"I've missed you," Oliver whispered. He leaned down to bridge the distance between himself and Harry, but a sharp rap on the office door stilled him.

Harry turned to face whoever had just saved him from Oliver's nefarious intentions.

"Harry," Draco greeted coolly from the doorway. His eyes held contempt, and Harry felt his heart clench in his chest.

"Draco," Harry managed to reply levelly.

"I was hoping I could speak with you. Privately."

Harry couldn't help feeling relieved. Even being alone with an irate Draco was better than being alone with Oliver Wood. He turned to look at Oliver, silently entreating him to grant Draco's request for private counsel.

"I'll just be going then," Oliver said with a forced smile. "I'll see you later, Harry."

Draco shut the door firmly behind Wood the instant he cleared the threshold. "I just spoke with Severus. He's found out who was behind the attack."

Harry smiled wryly. "You make it sound so much worse than it was, Draco."

"It was bad enough." Draco sighed and leaned back against the closed door. He crossed his arms across his chest and lowered his head. "Damien was involved. There were others, but he was the mastermind. Snape wouldn't tell me how he managed to get the rest of the class to keep silent."

Acting on instinct, Harry rose and rounded the desk, moving to stand beside the other man. "I'm sorry, Draco."

Draco's head snapped up. "You're sorry? *You* are sorry? You have nothing to be sorry *for*, Harry." His head dropped forward again. "It is I who should be apologising to you."

Harry laid a hand on Draco's arm. "This is in no way your fault, Draco."

"Rubbish!" Draco snarled. "I should never have.... Well, what's done is done, as they say." Another sigh. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Harry replied automatically. At Draco's unbelieving glare, he lowered his eyes. "All right, I'm not fine, but I will be. It isn't as if they outed me, after all. The entire Wizarding World already knows I'm gay."

"And thinks you're some sort of predator, thanks to the likes of Oliver Wood," Draco spat.

Harry looked up, shocked at the heat in Draco's voice. He suddenly felt the need to explain Oliver's presence in his office. "Draco, what you walked in on - it wasn't what you think."

"Don't presume to know what I think," Draco snapped. "I saw how you looked at him, Harry. And I saw how you looked at me." His voice softened as he continued. "You looked at me like I was some sort of god or guardian angel, like I had just saved you from a fate worse than death."

"He makes me nervous," Harry blurted out, both embarrassed and relieved to have that bit of information out in the open.

Draco unfolded his arms and reached for Harry's hand. "Do *I* make you nervous, Harry?" he asked gently.

"No," Harry answered honestly. He met Draco's gaze. "You make me feel a great many things, Draco, but 'nervous' isn't one of them."

Draco smiled softly, apparently pleased by Harry's declaration. "Good," he said softly and gave Harry's hand a little squeeze. "It's getting late. I should probably go."

Harry nodded his acknowledgement, but neither man moved. They simply stood, smiling at one another, hands held loosely between them.

Finally, Draco forced himself to move. "I am sorry for what happened, Harry. All of it," he said. He moved forward slightly, shifting his weight from the door to his feet, and Harry stepped back to let him go. Draco opened the door to leave, but then he paused, turning to face Harry once again. He moved to cup Harry's head in one hand and then leaned in to claim Harry's mouth in a brief, possessive kiss. "Good night," he whispered and was gone, leaving Harry to stare after him in confusion.

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As Harry made his way to the Great Hall for breakfast the next morning, his encounters with both Draco and Oliver played over again in his mind. Oliver's intentions had been perfectly clear; it was obvious the man wanted back in Harry's bed. The question was what to do about it. As for Draco, Harry wasn't sure what he was playing at. They hadn't seen one another or even talked for over two months, Draco had been acting strangely towards him since term started, and then last night he had up and kissed him. The man was making no sense whatsoever, and he had Harry thoroughly confused.

Still musing, Harry dropped into a seat at the Head Table, his eyes automatically scanning the assembled students in search of certain faces. At the Gryffindor table, Lauren and Ella Weasley were in some heated discussion with their fair-haired cousin. At the Slytherin table, Damien Malfoy sat with his head propped up on his hand, trying to look bored rather than sleepy. Finally, over at the Hufflepuff table, Adrian Malfoy was looking round with a rather puzzled expression on his face. Harry followed Adrian's gaze, and a similar confused expression crossed his own features as Sera pointedly turned up her nose and stalked past the Slytherin table to join Adrian among the Hufflepuffs.

Harry cast a quick glance at the Headmistress, who was watching the goings on critically. She said nothing, either to the students or the staff, choosing instead to merely observe. Harry followed her example and ignored the unexpected breach of tradition in favour of tucking into his breakfast.

Halfway through the morning meal, Oliver Wood made an appearance in the Hall. Where he had been heretofore, Harry had no idea, but his late arrival meant that he ended up sitting next to Draco at the Head Table. Draco glared at the man, but said nothing. Oliver scowled at Draco in return. Suddenly, Harry felt fairly certain as to why Draco had decided to kiss him the night before. The thought that the kiss might have been a jealous reaction to Oliver's obvious intentions sent a little thrill through Harry's system. Perhaps the situation with Draco was not quite as hopeless as he had thought.

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Harry's morning classes went smoothly, to his relief, and before he knew it lunchtime had rolled around again. Instead of making his way to the Great Hall, Harry headed out of doors. If his calculations were correct, Oliver would be hanging around the broom shed about now, doing a little maintenance work on the school brooms. The idea of being alone with Oliver was still a bit daunting, but he had some things he wanted to say to the other man.

"Oliver?" Harry called as he neared the shed where Oliver was, indeed, working on the brooms.

Oliver looked up from his work and flashed Harry a dazzling smile. "Hullo, Harry. Something I can help you with?"

Harry stood in the doorway, feeling more than a little self-conscious. Something about the way Oliver always looked at him made him feel as if the other man were constantly sizing him up - or undressing him with his eyes. He took a deep breath before speaking. "I wanted to talk with you about last night."

"Oh?" Wood replied, looking intrigued. He set aside the broom he had been working on and gestured for Harry to take a seat on the grass beside him.

Harry shifted from foot to foot, weighing his options. Finally, he settled onto the grass beside Oliver. "I was thinking about what you said last night. When you apologised, and when you said that you've missed me."

"I *am* sorry, Harry," Oliver insisted. "And I do miss you." He reached out to caress Harry's cheek, and for a moment Harry allowed the contact, the earnestness in Oliver's expression touching him despite himself.

"Oliver," Harry said gently, guiding the other man's hand away from his face and holding it loosely between them. "I believe that you are sorry for what happened, and I forgive you. I do. But I've thought about...a lot of things, really. What happened between us, and how it made me feel, and what's happened to me since. I've thought about what we could be to one another. You're a good man, Oliver, and whoever you give your heart to will be very fortunate. You have a lot to offer. But you can't give me what I want, what I need. And I can't give you my heart, because I've already given it to someone else. So, you see, we can't go back to where we were before things went wrong. We can't be lovers, Oliver. But I would like it if we could be friends again."

Oliver swallowed hard and looked away. "It's Malfoy, isn't it?" he asked, daring to glance back at Harry. Harry didn't answer the question verbally, but his refusal to meet Oliver's eyes was answer enough. "I understand," Oliver said, his voice hardly more than a whisper. He pulled his hand from Harry's. "You can't choose who you love. At least that's what my Gran always said. I'm so sorry I fucked things up, Harry. You'll never know how much."

"I'm sorry, too," Harry answered honestly. He reached out to touch his friend in a gesture of comfort and reassurance, but Oliver flinched away from him.

"Try to understand, Harry," Oliver pleaded, his voice threatening to break. "We can't go back to being friends. Not now. Maybe not ever."

Oliver turned his attention back to the broom he was working on, grateful for the excuse to hide his face so that Harry couldn't see his emotions. Harry, mercifully, left without another word.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

His emotions in complete turmoil, Harry avoided the Great Hall to hide away in his office until the beginning of afternoon classes. The classes went by in a sort of slow-motion blur, and eventually Harry was able to return to his office where he attempted to collect his scattered thoughts.

Harry felt guilty for hurting Oliver, even as a small voice in the back of his head, which sounded suspiciously like Draco, shouted at him that he shouldn't feel guilty because Oliver had hurt him first. Regardless, Oliver had been his friend for a long time, and he hated that he had been the cause of the pain he had seen in the other man's face.

Pushing the feelings of guilt aside, Harry went down to dinner. As soon as he entered the Great Hall, he noticed the hushed whispers of the faculty. Only when he realised that the other teachers' attention was directed toward the students did he relax, secure in the knowledge that the whispers were not about him and the incident in his classroom. Taking his seat, he let his eyes slide over the assembled students, wondering what had caused the stir amongst the other teachers. As his mind processed what his eyes were taking in, he couldn't help grinning.

Sera Malfoy was seated across from Adrian at the Hufflepuff table. Armand Delacour sat to her right, with his cousin Ella opposite him. Isabella Zabini perched nervously on the edge of a seat in the midst of a group of second year Ravenclaws. A few other students sat with their friends rather than at their own House tables.

"What should we do?" Harry overheard Professor Sprout asking the Headmistress. He looked down the table at Minerva, eager to hear what she had to say about the situation.

McGonagall sat quietly for a moment, watching the students and mentally examining the unexpected turn of events. "As long as there are no disciplinary issues, I think for the moment we should do nothing. I should be very interested to see what will come of this." That said, the Headmistress turned her attention from the unusual sight before her to her dinner plate. The rest of the staff took their cue from her and did the same.

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Snape had been kind enough - or, more likely, wise enough - not to spread about the information that Damien had been the one to rat on his fellow pranksters. The entire house was treating the boy coolly as it was, incensed over the drastic loss of house points. Even Damien's partners-in-crime were angry with the boy, despite the fact that they were every bit as guilty of any wrongdoing. With Sera defecting to the Hufflepuff table for meals, Damien was forced to sit more or less alone, slightly apart from the rest of the Slytherins.

As Damien sat glowering at his brother and sister and contemplating the gross unfairness of life as he knew it, someone dropped into the space that separated him from his housemates. Glancing over, Damien noted that the occupant of said space was one of the other boys who had been in on the prank - a fellow second year student named Leopold Middleton. He wasn't certain whether he should be grateful for the company or worried about what the other boy might want with him.

"Malfoy," Leopold snapped, the single word conveying an infinite amount of anger and loathing. Damien cringed inwardly but looked his friend in the eye. "Thanks to you, I'm stuck in detention during tryouts next week," Leopold continued. "And I've got to write a four-foot essay on the properties of murtlap and its use in potions. It's bad enough that I know shite about murtlap, whatever in the hell it might be, but if I can't try out, the Slytherin team is doomed! Aldridge and Hayman say I'd be perfect for seeker, and Merlin knows we need a good one. But I'm stuck in detention next week. Slytherin is going to come in dead last in Quidditch *and* in the house point



competition, and it's entirely your fault!" Leopold paused for breath at last, panting slightly as he waited for Damien's response.

Damien let his eyes flick back to the Hufflepuff table, and a sinister smile curled his lips. "Not to worry, Leo," he said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "I've got an idea."

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After dinner, Harry immediately headed for his office. Although he didn't have anything pressing waiting for him, he liked to be available for his students. Without any work needing his immediate attention, Harry allowed himself to indulge in the rare treat of a Muggle paperback novel. He secretly hoped that none of his students would seek him out and that he would be allowed to relax a little after the horror of the past few days.

Just as Harry was becoming engrossed in his novel, a knock at his office door drew him out of the story again. With a tired sigh, he lay the paperback aside and tried to not sound terribly aggravated when he called 'Come in'. To his surprise, his visitor was not a student, but Draco Malfoy.

"Draco," he greeted.

"Harry. I talked to Minerva about the little student rebellion. She seems to think it's a good thing," Draco said by way of explaining his presence in Harry's office. He pushed the door partially shut and crossed the room to half-sit, half-lean on the corner of the desk.

"I think it could be, as well," Harry agreed, leaning back in his chair to look up at Draco. "You know that Professor Dumbledore always advocated the Houses inter-House cooperation. He had put various proposals before the Board and the Ministry to try to integrate the Houses, but none of them ever passed. Perhaps letting the children take matters into their own hands might be a step in the right direction."

"Perhaps," Draco replied distractedly. He seemed more focused on the folds in his robes than on their conversation.

Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Draco," he said in a firm, commanding tone. He waited until Draco's eyes met his own before continuing. "Why don't you tell me why you're really here?"

"I'm here because I was a complete arse to you yesterday evening," Draco explained. "I came to apologise to you. Again. I know I had no right to..." Draco paused to swallow, looking away from Harry's eyes. "I had no right to be jealous," he continued in a quieter tone. "I certainly had no right to kiss you. I'm sorry."

"It's true that you had no right to act the way that you did," Harry affirmed. "It isn't fair to give me false hope, Draco."

"I never meant to. Harry, I know I made a mistake when I let you walk away that day. I know I was wrong to let Damien dictate my life. But it's done now, and I'm not certain how to undo it without tearing my family apart." He paused for a moment, his attention fixed once again on the folds of his robes. "I'd like it if we could...if we could reclaim our friendship while I figure out what to do."

In that moment, Harry understood how Oliver must have felt that very morning when he himself had issued a similar request. The situation was different, though. Draco honestly wanted things to go back to the way they were, and Harry was willing to wait. And in truth, he had never stopped thinking of Draco as his friend.

"I like to think that we're both mature enough to handle being friends, despite what's happened," Harry said at last. "As for anything else.... I'll only wait for so long, Draco. I *can* only wait for so long." Even as the words left his mouth, Harry knew they were a lie - he'd wait forever for Draco if he knew he would be with the other man in the end.

"I understand," Draco said quietly. He lifted his head to look at Harry and smiled almost shyly. "I never asked you to wait for me, you know." Harry flushed slightly, and Draco's smile grew as he took the other man's hand in his own. "I'm glad you're willing to wait, Harry."

The two men sat for a time simply smiling at one another, their hands clasped loosely between them. Draco grazed Harry's jaw-line with the back of his knuckles and leaned forward with the intention of capturing Harry's lips with his own. Damien's voice stopped him cold.

"Potter," Damien said, his voice dripping with venom. "I'm here from Professor Snape."

Draco turned to look at his son, guilt etched on his pale face. He glanced back at Harry. "I'd better be going," he said in a near-whisper.

"Good night, Draco," Harry said, forcing his voice into what he hoped sounded like a professional tone.

"Good night," Draco replied. He slipped past Damien, leaving his son alone with Harry.

"You said Professor Snape sent you?"

"Yes," Damien replied insolently. "As part of my punishment, I'm to apologise to you."

Harry repressed the urge to vent his skepticism. He could hardly wait to hear Damien's completely insincere apology.

"Professor Snape is right, though," Damien continued, his voice softening slightly. "I do owe you an apology. What I did was wrong, and I'm sorry."

Completely shocked by the earnestness of the boy's tone, Harry sat up straighter and looked at Damien, searching for some sign that the boy actually meant the apology. His very manner supported the genuineness of his words.

Now that he had Harry's full attention, Damien continued. "It was completely unconscionable of me to attack you for being gay when I hate you for entirely different reasons. From now on, I'll give more thought to my motivations before acting on them."

With that, the boy turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. Harry sat staring after the boy, open-mouthed and stunned.

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Damien reported to the Potions classroom for his first night of detention immediately after leaving Potter's office. To his surprise, it was the Headmistress rather than Snape who met him at the door.

"Professor McGonagall," he greeted civilly. His forehead wrinkled in confusion as he glanced around the classroom in search of his Head of House. "Is Professor Snape not here?"

"I will be overseeing your detention, Mister Malfoy," the Headmistress explained. "Please take a seat." She gestured vaguely at one of the worktables which was laden with books, parchment, ink, and quills.

Damien dropped down at the worktable with an inward groan. He'd likely be stuck copying who-knows-what out of the textbooks, slaving over endless sheets of parchment for half the night.

"Your detention for this evening is as follows: you will complete a brief essay on the Mandrake Restorative Draft; you will also complete a research report on the Chamber of Secrets; lastly, you will compose an essay tying the two topics together. All of the information you need is contained in those books, but if you have any further questions, I should be able to answer them. I suggest you use your time wisely, Mister Malfoy, as failure to complete this project in a timely manner will result in further detentions."

Damien gaped at the Headmistress for a minute or two before realising that she was completely serious about the evening's detention. With a scowl, he pulled open the first book and began his research.

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Over two hours later, Damien stood up from the desk, stretching his aching muscles. McGonagall peered over her glasses at him, clearly doubting that he had completed his assignments.

"Just taking a bit of a break, Headmistress," Damien assured her. "And I do have a question about the Chamber of Secrets."

Minerva closed the cover on the book she was reading and laid it aside. "What do you wish to know, Mister Malfoy?"

"This book," he said, indicating a tome authored by a Miss Hermione Granger, "spins an interesting tale about how the Chamber of Secrets was reopened about twenty years ago."

"It isn't an interesting tale, Mister Malfoy. It is a true account," the Headmistress huffed. "I was Deputy Headmistress here at the time, and I remember the events as if they happened only yesterday. I assure you that Miss Granger's book is completely factual."

Damien gazed at the book with renewed interest. Since the story had revolved around none other than the famous Harry Potter, he had automatically assumed it was simply a tall tale. If the Headmistress said it was true though, perhaps there might be some validity to it. The woman didn't seem the type to be taken by flights of fancy.

"Let me try again," Damien said. "What I was saying is that this book says that an enchanted diary led to the Chamber being reopened. Does anyone know how a little girl managed to get her hands on Voldemort's diary?"

McGonagall flinched slightly at the boy's nonchalant use of the Dark Lord's name, even though the wizard was long dead. Although it was slowly becoming more common to hear Lord Voldemort referred to by his self-given name, Minerva doubted that she would ever grow accustomed to hearing it uttered so nonchalantly. "Apparently, the diary was slipped in among Ginny Weasley's other school books during an altercation that took place just before Ginny came to Hogwarts."

"Why would someone give her Voldemort's diary?"

"Perhaps he gave Ginny the diary because he wanted the Chamber of Secrets reopened. Perhaps he had other reasons that never came to light. I believe he chose the Weasley girl because of a long-standing feud between himself and Ginny's father."

"Who?"

"Your grandfather, Lucius Malfoy."

Outrage blazed in Damien's eyes. "Rubbish!" he snapped. "Why would Grandfather want the Chamber reopened?"

"I think that is something you need to puzzle out for yourself, Mister Malfoy. Now, I suggest you finish your essays. It's getting late, and I'd like to get to bed at a decent hour."

Fuming, Damien returned to his work. The Headmistress' accusations made no sense. Why would his grandfather want some monster to petrify a bunch of Hogwarts students?

As he continued his research, Damien began to see a trend; all of the students who were attacked by the basilisk had been Muggleborn or half-blood, and only dumb luck had kept them from being killed. Memories of Lucius' lectures about the purity of blood sprang to mind, but he forced the traitorous thoughts aside. Perhaps Headmistress McGonagall had some sort of vendetta against his grandfather. Whatever the case, he would not let the woman's theories colour his own opinions.

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Oliver Wood slumped in his seat at the Head Table, listlessly pushing scrambled eggs around on his plate. There were dark circles under his eyes, and misery rolled off of him in nearly palpable waves. Just the sight of him sitting there looking so forlorn tore at Harry's heart. He hadn't thought it possible for him to feel any worse about hurting Oliver, but he did.

"It isn't polite to stare at people, Harry." Draco's soft drawl drew Harry out of his brooding, and he turned his attention away from Oliver. "Something wrong?" Draco asked gently.

Harry shook his head slightly and let his eyes drop to his own half-eaten breakfast. "Just feeling a bit guilty," he admitted in a hushed voice.

Draco's brows drew furrowed slightly in puzzlement. "Whatever for?"

"Not being a better man," Harry replied. "I have to go." He tossed his napkin down beside his plate, rose, and all but ran from the room.

Draco hesitated for only a moment before following.

In the hallway, Draco found Harry leaning against one of the cool stone walls for support. His eyes were squinted shut, his face pale and covered in a fine sheen of sweat.

"Harry," Draco gasped, moving to the other man's side. "What is it? What's wrong?" he asked. He pulled Harry into his arms. "You're trembling."

"I'll be all right," Harry assured him in a shaky voice. "Just a bit dizzy."

"Vertigo?" Draco guessed, remembering a long ago conversation about the effects that the war had wreaked on Harry's mind and body. He felt Harry nod an affirmation. "What do we do about it?"

"Potion. In my room. And I need to lie down," Harry answered breathlessly. His strength seemed to be fading quickly.

Mindless of anything except Harry's well-being, Draco began the arduous task of helping the ill man back to his quarters. The short walk seemed to take half a lifetime, but at last they were safely at their destination. Draco guided Harry to the bed.

"Top drawer," Harry said, pointing vaguely in the direction of a small writing desk.

A row of neatly labeled potions lay in a small teakwood box nestled into a rear corner of the desk. "Calming potion?" he asked, pulling one of the vials from the box.

Harry didn't respond verbally, but held out one quivering hand for the potion. Draco pushed the hand aside gently, uncapped the vial, and held it to Harry's lips.

The potion began to work almost immediately, and Harry sank back into his pillows with a relieved sigh. His eyes slipped closed, and within minutes he was sleeping soundly.

Draco didn't waste time pondering the situation. He needed to speak with the Headmistress. Classes would be starting soon, and someone would have to take over for Harry for the day.

Moving carefully so as not to wake Harry, Draco slipped off the man's glasses and set them on the table beside the bed. He pulled the bedcovers up and kissed Harry's forehead before slipping almost silently from the room.

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Much later, Harry awoke with a start. His brain was a bit fuzzy from sleep, but he was certain he was supposed to be somewhere. He rolled on his side to peer at the clock, and his eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he had slept through the better part of the day; it was late afternoon, and classes would be ending soon.

Dragging himself from the bed, he took a quick shower to wake up and then dressed quickly and left his rooms. He needed to talk to Draco.

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Draco strode out of the Transfiguration classroom and nearly ran right into Harry. He scowled for a moment, the response almost instinctive, and then forced a smile. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much." Harry assured him. "Listen, I wanted to talk with you about what happened this morning."

Draco glanced around at the students moving about in the hallway. "We can talk in my office."

Once inside Draco's office, Harry flung himself into an armchair and took a deep breath. He opened his mouth to speak, but Draco cut him off.

"So the vertigo is triggered by stress?"

Harry nodded. "Usually."

"God knows you've been under a great deal of stress lately. Will it happen again, do you think?" Draco sat down on the arm of the chair Harry occupied, feeling the need to be as physically close to the other man as possible.

"I hope not," Harry replied wistfully. He turned his head so that his cheek was pressed against Draco's side. "I promised myself that when the term started, I would find some way to relieve stress that isn't self-destructive. I just haven't gotten around to it yet."

Draco stroked Harry's hair absently. "Have you considering taking a sabbatical?"

Harry sighed. "There isn't anyone to take my place. But even if there was, I'm not ready to admit defeat." He snuggled further into the warmth of Draco's body. "I'll be fine."

For a time, Draco sat stroking Harry's hair, lost in thought. "What can I do to help?" he asked at last, breaking the stillness of the room and causing Harry to startle slightly.

"What you're doing right now is rather nice," Harry said softly. At Draco's quiet laugh, Harry pulled away and looked up at him. "I've got Sheila to talk things out with and the potions for when things go pear-shaped, but neither of them do me nearly as much good as time like this."

Draco caressed Harry's cheek and smiled down at him tenderly. "You've got me when things go pear-shaped, too, you know. And I'd like to think you can talk things out with me as well."

Harry's expression darkened slightly. "There are some things you're probably better off not knowing."

"I don't want you to ever feel you need to protect me, Harry," Draco said, cupping Harry's chin in his hand and meeting his gaze directly. "I'm willing to listen to anything you want or need to say - even if you think I won't like it."

"If you're certain," Harry replied, sounding unsure.

"I'm certain. Now you'd best clear off before one of my students stumbles in and starts some sort of crazy rumour about us," Draco teased, rising from the arm of the chair.

The instant that Harry gained his feet, he found himself wrapped tightly in Draco's arms. Draco's lips found his own and they brushed together in the lightest of kisses. "And for God's sake, quit making me worry about you."

Harry laughed. "I'll try my best," he promised.

"I'll find you after dinner," Draco said. "If that's all right, I mean."

"Of course it's all right," Harry replied. "I'll be in my room. I'm fairly certain you remember the way."

"I think I can manage to find it. I'll see you later, then, and you can tell me about what's troubling you."

"Must I?" Harry asked, his expression pained.

Draco's answer was very Snape-like glare. It might have been more effective if his mouth hadn't been threatening to turn up at the corners.

Feeling a hundred times better than he had that morning, Harry let himself out of Draco's office. His troubles might not have all spontaneously disappeared, but at least he wouldn't have to face them alone.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Harry was lounging in one of the two battered armchairs in his room, completely immersed in his Muggle novel, when the knock sounded on his door. Setting the book aside, he rose to greet his visitor and usher him into the room.

"You look like you feel much better, Harry," Draco told him.

"I do. Amazing what a calming potion can do."

Draco gave him a weak smile, obviously less than amused with Harry's attempt at humour.

"Erm. Would you care for some tea?" Harry asked.

"No, thank you," Draco replied politely, taking the seat that Harry had neglected to offer him.

Harry moved toward the other chair, but Draco's hand on his arm stopped him. He looked down at the other man, puzzled. Draco gave him an uncertain smile and pulled him down onto his lap. Harry never even thought of protesting.

"Is this crossing some sort of line? Breaking some unwritten rule?" Draco asked quietly.

"Probably," Harry conceded. "But when have we ever given a toss about the rules?"

Draco laughed softly and settled Harry more comfortably on his lap. "So are you going to tell me what's troubling you?"

"You honestly want to know?" Harry asked. He lazily slid one hand through Draco's hair.

"Yes, Harry. I honestly want to know, and to help you if I can," Draco replied. The earnestness in his voice - and his face - caused Harry's heart to do a funny little flip in his chest.

With a soft sigh of resignation, Harry slipped his glasses off and leaned down to press his face against Draco's neck. He was certain it would be easier to talk to Draco about his worries if he didn't have to watch the expressions flitting across the other man's face.

Draco wrapped his arm more firmly around Harry's waist and raised his other hand to stroke Harry's back. He turned his head, rather awkwardly, to brush a soft kiss against Harry's hair.

Harry sighed again, this time in contentment. Then he took a deep breath and started telling Draco about his woes. He began with a brief recount of his encounter with Oliver. Draco was quiet for some minutes after Harry stopped talking, turning the matter over in his mind and formulating a response.

"There really isn't anything I can say that will help you, I'm sure," Draco began uncertainly. "I can't even tell you that I understand, because you're in a position I've never been in. I want to tell you that he brought this on himself, and that he doesn't deserve you, but I know that I don't deserve you, either, and I know how I'd feel if you had let my idiocy drive you away." Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Draco cut him off. "I know it isn't about that, Harry. I know you've other reasons for turning him away. You can't control who you love, Harry. You can't make yourself feel something for someone, and you shouldn't try to." Draco chuckled softly. "And I'm not just saying that because I don't want to have to fight him for you."

"You'd win, anyway," Harry assured him. He was quiet a moment before he added "It helps just to talk about it."

"There's something else, isn't there, Harry? Tell me what else is troubling you," Draco encouraged, his hand once again stroking Harry's back.

"You know that Damien came to see me last night at Snape's behest."

"Yes," Draco replied, his brows furrowing in a frown.

"Part of Damien's punishment for the prank was to apologise to me. That's why he came to see me. To apologise."

"And?" Draco prompted, wishing Harry would get to the point.

Harry sighed. "The apology...it wasn't exactly a traditional one. He said he was sorry that he had attacked me for being gay when he hated me for completely different reasons."

The hand on Harry's back stilled; the one on his hip tightened painfully. Harry could feel Draco's jaw tighten where their faces touched. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I shouldn't have told you."

Draco forced himself to relax. He began to rub Harry's back again. "No. I'm glad you told me, that you trusted me with that. I know how much his words must have hurt you."

"I'm not sure you do know," Harry said softly.

"Tell me."

"It's just...the night of the boy's birthday dinner, things were so...right. We felt like a family. All of us. Together. I had hoped..." The words trailed into silence as Harry burrowed closer to Draco, seeking comfort.

Draco wrapped his arms tightly around Harry. "I had hoped we could always be like that, as well," he said softly.

"I keep thinking that maybe, if we hadn't..."

"No," Draco interrupted. "Wondering 'what if' will drive you mad, Harry. We can't change the past, but perhaps there is hope for the future."

"I should like to think so."

"Me, too," Draco murmured into Harry's hair. "Me, too."

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Breakfast the next morning was much the same, with Oliver looking like some sort of corporeal spectre and Damien sulking and the children sitting wherever they pleased without regard to House lines. The most notable differences from the previous morning were a lessened feeling of guilt on Harry's part, coupled with a lack of ensuing illness, and that Draco decided to surreptitiously hold Harry's hand under cover of the table.



After the meal, as Harry was meandering towards his classroom and relishing the remembered feel of Draco's hand in his, Snape appeared at his side. His sudden appearance startled Harry out of his daydreams.

"Can I help you, Professor?" he asked cautiously. He knew the man wanted *something*. He never sought out Harry's company otherwise.

"I would like you to speak with one of my students," Snape informed him.

Harry wondered if the man was being vague intentionally or if Severus had simply developed a habit of speaking to him in abstracts. "And what exactly would you like to me say to this student?" he asked.

"I should like you to tell him your life history, more or less. You may leave out the romanticized versions of your heroics."

"I've never done anything heroic," Harry retorted angrily.

Snape held up his hand in a shushing gesture. "I'm not here to get into a pissing match with you, Potter," he said coolly. "I'm here because I believe that a first-hand account of certain events in the war would be beneficial to one of my students."

For a moment, Harry merely stared at the other man, trying to make sense of his request. Then the pieces clicked into place. "You want me to talk to Damien Malfoy about his grandfather," he said in an emotionless voice.

"Yes."

"I'm not sure that's wise," Harry replied.

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "It's the best idea I've come up with. I'd talk to him myself, but I doubt that Draco would appreciate another of his children ending up in the care of a psychotherapist. There are some stories that a boy that age simply does not need to be subjected to."

"Do you think it could truly help?"

"At this point, I do not believe that it could truly hurt."

With a small sigh, Harry relented.

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When Damien arrived at Snape's office after dinner for the day's detention, he was unpleasantly surprised to find Harry Potter seated next to the Potions professor.

"Another attempt at brainwashing disguised as detention?" Damien spat haughtily as he slammed the door shut behind him. "Oh, honestly. What a waste of time for all of us. I'm not going to believe a word that Potter has to say, and you damned well know it!"

A vein throbbed visibly in Severus' temple as he fought to reign in his formidable temper. "Professor Potter," he corrected harshly. "And you will do as you're told or suffer the consequences."

"What consequences? Are you going to boot me out of school? Preferable to listening to whatever rubbish he's come up with to slander my grandfather."

Eyes narrowing dangerously, Snape held up a vial of clear liquid. "You needn't worry about Professor Potter telling you anything that is not the absolute truth."

"Some truth potion you've made?" Damien asked insolently. "Am I to trust you, then, even though this entire brainwashing effort was your idea?"

"That is quite enough!" Snape roared, unmindful for the moment of his own health. He levered himself out of his seat, but Harry rose fluidly beside him and held him back from advancing on Damien.

"He has a valid point, Severus," Harry said quietly. "It's horrid to find yourself unable to trust anyone, especially at such a young age. It must be even worse to be unable to trust the very people who care the most."

Damien's face contorted, a facade of rage carefully concealing the hurt that Harry's words had conjured.

"I'm sorry, Severus. I can't help you," Harry added, sounding sincerely contrite. "I should go."

"Go," Snape commanded in a low voice. "Mister Malfoy, you may go as well. I fear for your safety and my sanity if you remain in my presence for another minute." Damien hesitated, held in place by a desire to hurl some scathing comment at Potter, and Snape snapped. "Out!" he roared.

Damien turned and fled, racing from the room as fast as his legs would carry him.

As soon as the boy was safely out of the room, Snape collapsed back into his chair. He no longer looked angry; he just looked defeated.

"I am beginning to think that there truly is no hope for that boy," Snape said in a soft, regretful tone.

"There's always hope, Severus," Harry refuted quietly. "He's just a child, after all. Just a very confused and hurt child."

"A dangerously arrogant and willfully disobedient child. He's headed for real trouble, you mark my words. I haven't seen a child who was so much a danger to himself since..."

"Since me," Harry finished for him.

Snape gave Harry a wry little smirk. "Indeed. And look how you turned out."

Harry didn't take offense at the barb. After all, Severus was right. "Exactly," he agreed sadly. "You have to find a way to get through to him, Severus. Don't let him end up like me." With that, Harry let himself out of Snape's office, closing the door almost soundlessly behind him.

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Harry, disturbed by his encounter with Snape and Damien, wandered distractedly through the halls. Without quite knowing how he got there, he found himself standing before the door to Draco's private room. Glancing around to be certain there were no students observing his actions, he raised one hand and knocked on the door.

A moment later, the door swung open to reveal Draco. His hair was damp, and he was dressed in a silk dressing gown over silk pyjama bottoms. The instant his eyes settled on Harry's face, his brow furrowed in a worried frown.

"What's the matter?" he asked worriedly as he ushered Harry into the room and shut the door behind him.

Harry shook his head slightly and stepped closer to Draco. In the next moment, he found himself wrapped protectively in Draco's arms. The silk of Draco's dressing gown was damp beneath his cheek, the other man's hands warm and reassuring against his back. The sweet, spicy scent of Draco's soap smelled like paradise. The touch of Draco's lips to his forehead felt like coming home.

"Tell me?" Draco coaxed softly.

Although Harry tried to answer, the words refused to come. He settled at last for shaking his head again. He sighed softly, his breath warm against Draco's throat, and the blond threaded his fingers through Harry's hair.

"Harry?"

"I don't know how to explain," Harry replied quietly.

"Did something happen?"

"No. Not exactly. I met with Snape and Damien, but it wasn't so much what happened there as the feelings that were brought to the surface."

"What feelings?"

Harry shrugged. "Bad feelings. Unhappy feelings." He paused, trying to find a way to voice his emotions. "I've made more than my share of mistakes, and sometimes I don't exactly like the man that I was when I made those mistakes. Sometimes I don't even like the man that I am now."

"Everyone feels that way sometimes, you know," Draco said soothingly.

"I'm tired of feeling that way, Draco. All my life, all I've really ever wanted was a quiet, normal, happy life. I know, now, that there is no such thing, but I still keep looking for it. I keep thinking that if I can just do this or be that then everything else will fall into place...."

Draco gently pulled Harry's head back so he could look into his eyes. "Even I know that life doesn't work that way." He brushed the messy black hair back from Harry's forehead. "You can't spend your whole life regretting the mistakes you've made or wondering how things would be if only you'd done something differently. If you do that, you're going to wake up one day and realise that life's gone and passed you by. I used to wish that I'd never given into my parents' desire for me to marry Pansy, but then I came to understand that if I hadn't married the stupid cow that I wouldn't have Sera, and Adrian, and Damien. Everything in my past - mistakes included - has led me to be who I am and where I am. And I wouldn't want to be anyone else. Or anywhere else. I rather like where I am right now," Draco said with a boyish grin. He gave Harry an affectionate squeeze to emphasize his meaning.

"I rather like where I am right now, too," Harry murmured against Draco's neck. "I like who I am when I'm with you. I'm stronger with you, a better man."

Draco tilted Harry's head up again, a tender smile unconsciously curving his lips. "That works both ways, you know. You're good for me as well." Harry beamed radiantly up at him. Again, Draco brushed the dark hair from Harry's brow. For a moment he stood looking down into the face of the man he cared for, and then he leaned forward, aching to claim Harry's mouth with his own. Mere inches from Harry's lips, he paused, searching Harry's eyes and silently asking for permission to kiss him. Harry moved to close the gap between them, kissing Draco hungrily and clinging to him like a

drowning man. Draco responded eagerly, his tongue tracing the fullness of Harry's lips before diving between them to explore the recesses of Harry's mouth.

Harry gave himself over to the passion of the kiss, pressing impossibly closer to Draco and his knees weakening in desire. Draco wrapped one arm firmly around Harry's waist to hold him upright. He wound his free hand into Harry's hair, tugging gently at the thick locks. Harry moaned into Draco's mouth, encouraging Draco to tug harder. After another moment, Draco drew back slightly to catch his breath, resting his forehead against Harry's.

"God, what you do to me," Draco murmured in a silky, seductive tone.

To Draco's surprise, Harry's entire demeanour suddenly changed. He crossed his arms across his own chest and leaned into Draco's embrace, letting his head fall forward against Draco's chest. Slightly confused, but determined to be understanding, Draco let his hand drift down from Harry's head to stroke his back.

"I'm sorry," Harry muttered, his voice muffled against Draco's chest.

"For what, exactly?" Draco asked gently.

Harry turned his head slightly to one side, both so that he could breathe more freely and so that his voice wouldn't be muffled. "For this," he answered vaguely. "I told you before that I developed an unfortunate habit of trying to solve my problems through sex. But you mean more to me than that, and... It isn't that I don't want this, don't want you. But... I don't want to push the issue - again."

"I promise I won't mind if you do," Draco replied with a mischievous grin.

"Damn it, this isn't a joke, Draco," Harry snapped in a harsh, raw voice, pulling away roughly and turning his back on the other man.

"I didn't think that it was," Draco said softly. He cautiously reached out a hand to rest comfortingly on Harry's shoulder. After a moment, Harry turned to face him.

"I...I'm just feeling very vulnerable right now," Harry explained, his voice barely above a whisper, his eyes fixed firmly on the floor.

"You're afraid I'll hurt you again," Draco said. "I understand that. I do. And I can't promise you that it won't happen, because from what I've been told, that's what people in relationships do - they hurt each other. Whether or not they mean to or want to."

"We aren't in a relationship, Draco. We're friends, or had you forgotten?" He still refused to meet Draco's gaze.

Draco gave a small, humourless chuckle. "I was a fool to suggest that we try to be only friends, Harry. I feel far too much for you for that."

"And if I said I didn't want anything more?" Harry asked quietly.

For a moment, Draco stood frozen, a hard lump in his throat making it impossible for him to speak. "If you were to say that it would kill me," he answered honestly. "But if that were the case, then...I'd do my best to put my feelings aside and salvage our friendship."

As soon as the last word fell from Draco's lips, he found himself wrapped in Harry's embrace. Harry claimed Draco's mouth in a bruising kiss, tangling his fingers in his soft, blond hair. "I do want more,"

he murmured between kisses. "I want everything." His hands slid down Draco's back and around his waist to untie the sash on Draco's dressing gown. He ran his hands up the slightly damp skin of Draco's chest, pushing the thin silk garment from his broad shoulders. Draco allowed the dressing gown to fall away as Harry bent to trail hot, open-mouthed kisses down his throat. Harry's tongue danced over Draco's skin, tracing a path down his chest to his taut stomach. Draco gasped and tightened his fingers in his lover's hair. Harry responded by continuing his journey down Draco's body, moving to mouth Draco's hardness through the now damp silk of his pyjamas. Draco whimpered, his knees threatening to buckle and drop him to the floor, and he firmly - and reluctantly - pulled Harry's mouth away from its task.

"Harry," he panted. "Shall we see if we can make it to the bed this time?"

Harry grinned up at Draco, his face flushed with arousal, and allowed the other man to help him to his feet. He led Draco to the bed before leaning in to claim his mouth once again. Draco pulled away almost immediately and carefully slipped Harry's glasses off his nose, folded them, and set them on the bedside table before resuming their kiss. His fingers found the fastenings on Harry's robes and, making short work of them, deftly parted the thick, black fabric. He explored each newly revealed inch of Harry's skin, first with his hands and then with his mouth, reveling in both the feel and taste of Harry and in the soft sounds of passion rising unbidden from Harry's throat. He slipped Harry's boxers down the smooth muscles of his thighs to let them pool at his feet. Draco knelt as Harry stepped out of the under shorts, sitting back on his heels to look up into Harry's face. When Harry's gaze met his own, he gave him a diabolical smile and then leaned forward to take him into his mouth. Harry groaned and tangled his fingers in Draco's hair, urging him on.

After a short time, Draco pulled back, letting Harry slip from his mouth. He smiled at Harry's dismayed groan. "Patience," he murmured as he stood, rubbing his body against Harry's. "I didn't want it to end there," he explained, taking a step backward to put a small amount of space between himself and Harry. He crawled onto the bed, sprawling out in the center of the mattress, and beckoned Harry to follow. Harry hurried to obey, covering Draco's body with his own and leaning down for a soul-searing kiss. Draco moaned into Harry's mouth and arched up against him. When Harry finally paused to catch his breath, Draco looked up into his eyes. "I want you inside of me," he said in a near whisper.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Draco had fallen naturally into the dominant role in their relationship, and he wasn't the type to cede control easily. Harry understood instinctively that his lover wanted to put him at ease, to reassure him by making himself as vulnerable as Harry. He loved Draco more in that moment than he had ever thought possible. He pressed a tender, almost reverent kiss to Draco's lips.

"I know it's been a long while," Harry said, his lips brushing against Draco's as he spoke. "I promise I'll be gentle with you."

"I trust you," Draco breathed, and with that he closed his eyes and gave himself over completely to Harry's lovemaking.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Harry awoke the next morning to find himself still wrapped in Draco's arms. He lay for a few minutes just watching the other man sleep, and then he began to gently nuzzle Draco's neck in an effort to slowly bring him to wakefulness. Harry's efforts paid off, and Draco stretched lazily, a smile curving his lips even before he opened his eyes.

"Good morning," Harry murmured in his lover's ear.

"Good morning," Draco replied. He turned on his side and pulled Harry more firmly into his embrace. A moment later, he sat up quickly, swearing under his breath.

"What is it?" Harry asked sleepily.

"It's nearly noon," Draco replied, gesturing vaguely at the clock behind Harry. He seemed to think that was a perfectly adequate explanation enough for the fact that he had vaulted out of bed and was hurriedly pulling on his clothes.

"And?" Harry asked. "It's Saturday. It isn't as if we have classes to teach."

Draco paused to give Harry a withering glare. "The children are joining me here for lunch today. You can't be here."

"Oh," Harry said softly. He slipped from beneath the warm duvet and, keeping his back to Draco, began to dress. He was rather upset by being summarily dismissed, and Draco could read the hurt in every line of Harry's body.

"Harry," Draco murmured softly, gently resting his hands on the other man's shoulders. "It isn't that I want to keep this a secret. I want to shout it from the rooftops...but it's just better for Damien not to know right now."

Harry turned to look Draco in the eye. "Don't you think you should be honest with him?"

"I don't know," Draco admitted. He sighed and straightened Harry's robes. "Severus seems to think that we should keep our relationship quiet. He saw us holding hands yesterday morning at breakfast, and asked me to exercise discretion, especially where Damien is concerned. He believes that going public with our relationship will make it that much harder to get through to Damien."

With a tired sigh, Harry nodded. He knew that Snape was right, that his relationship with Draco could very well make it more difficult to help the troubled youth. Looking up at Draco, he managed a weak smile. "I can't help being disappointed," he admitted. "It would be nice if we could actually just lie in bed for a while after waking in one another's arms."

Draco laughed softly and pulled Harry close to him. "Yes, it would be nice. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Harry. Perhaps I could make it up to you?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I thought if you've nothing pressing, we could slip away tonight and go into Hogsmeade. You could come home with me, and we could have a nice, romantic candlelit dinner," Draco suggested. "We could spend the night together, and wake up in each other's arms without having to hurry away."

Harry beamed his approval. "I like the way you think," he said, stretching up to press his lips to Draco's.

"It's settled then," Draco replied. "Meet me outside the wards around 7:00?"

"I'll see you then," Harry agreed. They sealed the pact with a kiss before Draco peered into the hallway. Seeing that the coast was clear, he ushered Harry out, the both of them grinning foolishly at the absurdity of sneaking around the school like a couple of naughty students.

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"Sorry I'm late. Lunch with Dad ran a little later than I expected," Damien said by way of greeting as he slid into the deserted Quidditch stands next to Armand Delacour.

"I haven't been waiting long," Armand assured him. "Now what is it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"I have an idea I want to run by you," Damien explained. "I think it could be beneficial to both of us."

"I'm listening," Armand replied, turning to study the younger boy's face.

Damien began to outline his idea - one he hoped would reconcile him with his siblings, placate the other Slytherins, and earn him the respect of his classmates all in one fell swoop. For Armand, he explained, the plan should have the benefits of impressing Sera Malfoy and furthering his own ambitions. Armand listened carefully, sitting in quiet contemplation for some minutes after Damien finished speaking.

"I think I rather like the idea," he said at last.

"You do?" Damien asked, both relieved and slightly surprised.

"Of course I do. I only wish I'd thought of it."

Damien grinned so widely it made his cheeks ache. He had hoped the older boy would accept his plan and help him with it; that Armand genuinely liked the scheme was an added bonus that pleased Damien immensely. "There's just one problem," he said, his grin fading into a worried frown.

"What's that?"

"Wood."

Armand laughed. "He'll go along gamely enough if he thinks it will get him in good with Uncle Harry."

"Why should he care what Potter thinks?" Damien asked with a scowl.

"You're so cute," Armand deadpanned. "What rock have you been living under, Malfoy? The entire school knows that Wood wants Uncle Harry."

"Wants?" Damien asked in a strangled voice.

"Wants," Armand confirmed. "As in would do anything to shag him."

Damien made a disgusted noise, his face wrinkling up, and Armand laughed at him.

"Don't be such a child, Malfoy," Armand admonished him. "Anyway, we'd best go before someone decides to interfere in our business. I'll talk to Wood and let you know what he says." With that, Armand stood and made his way down from the Quidditch stands.

A moment later, Damien stood as well. As he headed back towards the castle, his thoughts bounced from the satisfaction of seeing his plan put into action to the disappointment of realising that the Quidditch star, who he actually admired, fancied men. The more he thought about Oliver, however, the more forgiving he became of the man's proclivity. In fact, he began to feel quite charitable toward the man and decided that he would do anything he could to see that Wood got what he wanted. After all, if Wood managed to woo Potter then Harry might actually stop making calf-eyes at Father. And the less he had to worry about Potter taking his dad away from him, the happier he would be.

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Harry had been waiting outside the gates for only a few minutes when Draco strode into view, his head held high and his cloak whipping in the chill breeze that had sprung up rather unexpectedly. Harry crossed his arms across his chest, trying to stay warm in the rapidly cooling air, and fell into step beside Draco. "How was your lunch date?" he asked.

"It went rather well, actually," Draco replied. Catching the edge of his cloak, he wrapped his arm -and the cloak - around Harry and pulled him in close to his side. "The boys were on their best behaviour. They actually managed a rather civil conversation. I hadn't dared hope for as much after their boxing match on Monday."

"You knew about that?"

Draco chuckled. "Of course I knew about it. Sera let it slip the very next day, but another matter pushed it to the back of my mind."

Harry sighed, knowing that the other matter Draco referred to was the defacement of his classroom. Draco responded to Harry's sigh by giving his arm a little reassuring squeeze.

"Speaking of which," Draco continued, "Severus apparently has had an epiphany, or a stroke of genius, or some such thing in regards to his reeducation of Damien. I only hope he can reverse the damage my father has done."

"I've no doubt that he can change Damien's opinion of Lucius," Harry replied. "He knows things that would likely shock even you. I'm worried how revealing such things will affect Damien. Snape's secrets aren't exactly the kind an impressionable young mind needs to hear."

"I know more than you might think, Harry," Draco said softly. "I sincerely hope that Severus finds another way to get through to Damien. I'd prefer my son be spared the nightmarish stories of my father's past."

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence, Harry managed to steer the conversation to safer topics. He asked how Draco's classes were going, and for the remainder of the walk to the Malfoy cottage, the two men talked of nothing more personal than their classes and students.

At the cottage, Draco invited Harry to make himself comfortable in the family room while he saw to dinner.

"Nonsense," Harry replied with a little smile. "I'll help you."

So the two men worked side by side. Harry hand-fed Draco a choice bit from the salad he was throwing together, biting his lip to hold back a moan when Draco nibbled on his fingers in the process



of retrieving the morsel. A short time later, Draco offered Harry a taste of the sauce he was simmering. With a mischievous grin, Harry accepted the offer, bypassing the spoon Draco held out to him in favour of tasting the sauce from Draco's lips. The gentle teasing continued thus all through the preparation of dinner and through the meal itself, interspersed with lighthearted banter and easy conversation.

After dinner, Draco led Harry up the stairs and headed straight for the bath. He set the taps to begin filling the enormous clawfoot tub and then turned his attention to undressing Harry.

"When I first saw this tub, I thought it was a shame I didn't have anyone to share it with," Draco said, making quick work of the catches on Harry's robes. "I rarely use it. It's much too big for one person; it seemed to emphasise my hopelessly unattached state."

Harry toed off his shoes and tossed his robes aside. "So this is fulfilling some sort of fantasy of yours?" he asked, amused.

"Oh yes," Draco answer in a low, husky tone. He seductively stripped off his own clothing and added it to the heap of Harry's clothes. He pulled Harry into his arms and nuzzled his neck. "Isn't it every man's fantasy to have a pretty boy to scrub his back?" he murmured against Harry's throat, fighting hard to keep a smirk from his lips.

Harry laughed, hugging Draco tightly. "You're so odd," he remarked.

Draco didn't argue. He just smiled and leaned his forehead against Harry's. He rubbed their noses together, drawing a rather unmanly giggle from his lover.

"You've still too many clothes on," Draco noted, pulling away to shuck the last of his own clothing. He climbed into the tub, turned off the taps, and watched as Harry stripped off his socks and boxers before climbing in as well.

Harry settled between Draco's legs, his back pressed against Draco's chest and the back of his head resting on Draco's shoulder. Draco, in turn, rested against the high, sloped back of the tub, his head dipped slightly forward and turned into the side of Harry's face and his arms wrapped loosely around Harry's chest.

For a long time, they merely sat in the warm water, embracing lightly and content just to be together. After quite some time had passed, however, Harry slipped out of Draco's arms and moved to straddle his lover's lap. Their lips and tongues met in a slow, sensual dance, the intensity gradually building until slow and sensual gave way to bruising, demanding, and possessive.

By the time they finally climbed from the tub, sated for the moment, the water had grown quite cold.

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For Harry, waking the next morning in Draco's arms, secure in the knowledge that they had the entire day in which to enjoy one another's company, was one of the better moments in his life. As he watched Draco sleep, he felt a peace and contentment he had never known. Snuggling closer to his lover, he closed his eyes, trying to etch every detail of the moment in his memory: the love he felt for this man beside him, the softness of Draco's skin beneath his fingers, the heat of Draco's body where it touched his own. Without even realising it, he followed his thoughts down into the spiral of sleep.

When Harry awoke again it was to the warm wetness of Draco's lips and tongue tracing a trail of fire over his skin. They took their time, teasing, caressing, exploring one another's bodies and learning the finer points of pleasing each other. For once, there was no urgency, and they were able to lose themselves, heedless of the passing of time.

The two men spent most of the day in bed, sometimes making love and sometimes just lying wrapped up in one another's arms, dragging themselves from their nest only when necessary. It was the most perfect day that Harry could ever recall, and he hoped with everything that he was that there would be many other such perfect days with the man he loved.

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On Monday morning, notices popped up all over the school announcing that the Quidditch tryouts had been moved to the weekend. Current team members were to meet with Master Wood on Tuesday afternoon during the time that had originally been set aside for tryouts. Hopefuls were encouraged to attend the tryouts on Saturday morning and to try for any position, vacant or not. The notices became the hot topic of conversation as students and teachers alike speculated on the reasons for the unexpected changes.

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Tuesday afternoon found Snape sitting in his office contemplating his latest - and next-to-last - stratagem in his struggle to save Damien Malfoy. A knock at the door drew him from his musings, and he moved at once to open the door.

"Narcissa. What a pleasant surprise," Snape greeted the woman at his door. Neither his voice nor his manner suggested that he was either surprised or pleased, but Narcissa had known the man long enough to know his words were more than just a social nicety.

"I shouldn't think you would be surprised, Severus," Narcissa returned, stepping into his office. "After all, you did ask for my assistance."

"Please, sit down," he offered, with a gesture towards a chair. "I wasn't expecting you to come to Hogwarts."

"What would you have me do when one of my grandchildren is in danger?" she responded coolly, taking the offered seat and setting her shoulder bag down carefully at her feet. Without waiting for a response, she continued. "I should like to see Damien."

"He's serving detention with Professor Potter at the moment, so it shouldn't be difficult to track him down."

Narcissa crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair. "In a moment, then. Severus, I must admit that I was surprised when I received your owl. It isn't that I was surprised to learn that Damien had been negatively influenced by his grandfather, or that you are concerned about Damien following blindly in Lucius' footsteps. I am concerned as well. What I don't understand is the emphasis you placed on the troubles between Damien and Potter - and the vague way in which you spoke of those troubles."

Severus remained quiet for a moment, trying to decide how best to explain the situation. "As a Hogwarts teacher, Potter deserves the respect of his students. Damien has been anything but respectful. In fact, he and some of his year-mates made Potter the butt of a rather cruel prank this past week."

"What sort of prank?"

"Potter arrived to teach the second year Slytherins and found his classroom had been vandalized -- homophobic epithets on the blackboard...his desk spelled pink...a slightly obscene drawing of him dressed in drag."

To Snape's surprise, Narcissa smiled. "So what you are saying, without coming right out with it, is that you're concerned about Damien's behaviour toward Potter because Draco has fallen in love with the man."

"Essentially, yes."

"You should have just said," Narcissa chastised. "Or did you think that I share my husband's prejudice against such inclinations?"

"I would not presume to guess your thoughts on the subject."

"As long as my son is happy, I don't give a whit who he chooses to love - provided the person in question doesn't treat my grandchildren the way that Pansy did." She smiled wryly. "Despite the unconventionality of their relationship, I'm actually quite pleased with Draco's choice. A connection with Potter will be a great help in redeeming the Malfoy name."

An almost-smile turned up the very corners of Snape's mouth. He was glad to know that Narcissa was very firmly in Draco's corner. Unlike Narcissa, he himself would have been decidedly more pleased had Draco found someone other than Potter to involve himself with, but since Potter was the man that Draco had chosen to give his heart to, Severus would do all in his power to help the two of them.

Narcissa retrieved a box from her shoulder bag and set it on the desk in front of Snape. "I should like to see Damien now," she said, lifting the lid to reveal a pensieve nestled inside the box. "I have a gift for him."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Damien answered Professor Snape's summons with a mixture of relief and anxiety. Anxiety because it was Snape - the man who was determined to change his good opinion of his Grandfather. Relief because answering the summons meant he got out of the dull-as-mud detention with Potter, who had him copying lines from some old Muggle book.

A smart rap on the door to Snape's office, and Damien was immediately granted entrance. He paused in the doorway, disbelieving what he was seeing. Then with a glad cry of "Grandmere!" he hurried into the room to greet his grandmother with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "What are you doing here?" he asked, unable to contain a wide smile, as he dropped down into the seat beside Narcissa.

"I'm here for a visit," she answered vaguely. "I brought you a gift." She gestured toward the box on Snape's desk.

Damien glanced up at his Head of House before standing and making his way to the professor's desk. He hesitated only briefly before lifting the lid from the box and peering inside. He cocked his head to one side, studying the unfamiliar object in the box. "What is it?" he asked.

"It is a pensieve," Narcissa replied.

At Damien's blank stare, Snape explained. "It is a magical device that records memories. In this case, the pensieve holds memories belonging to your Grandmother."

"Look into it, Damien," Narcissa instructed.

Damien did as he was bid, leaning over to peer at the swirling surface of the pensieve. Moving closer to the silvery surface, the swirl solidified into an image: the familiar, if somewhat younger, face of Lucius Malfoy. "Grandfather," he breathed.

"Touch the surface," Narcissa encouraged.

Damien obeyed at once, giving a surprised little gasp as he was sucked into the memories stored in the pensieve.

The pensieve contained several carefully selected memories. The first was of Lucius harshly dressing down a four-year-old Draco for an unacceptable display of affection (hugging his mother in front of his father's contemporaries). The next showed him kicking an unwary house elf and ranting about Harry Potter. The next confirmed the Headmistress' story about the chamber of secrets. There were a few other such scenes, and then the final memory - Narcissa's memory of an interview between Lucius and an anonymous Auror. Under Veritaserum, Lucius had confessed to a long list of heinous crimes. Each crime confessed to was more sinister than the one before, and the retellings became more graphic as Lucius stopped fighting the effects of the Veritaserum and began to take pleasure in revisiting his crimes. Not wanting to subject Damien to the worst of the interview, Snape brought the boy out of the pensieve at a proscribed time.

Damien stood stock still for a moment, his eyes wide and shocked, his breathing shallow and laboured. His entire body was shaking, and his face was pale and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. His frightened gaze flickered from Snape to Narcissa and back again. Then, without warning, he turned and bolted from Snape's office. He made it only as far as the corridor before doubling over and emptying his stomach. Snape cleaned up the mess with a wave of his wand and then helped the trembling child to the nearest boys' toilet. He held Damien while he was sick again and then helped him clean up.

"You were telling the truth," Damien rasped, grasping the edge of the sink for support. "All of you were telling the truth, the whole time. You, and Potter, and Professor McGonagall. Grandfather really did all those things." The boy burst into tears and sank to his knees on the cold tile, his strength gone. Snape, uncertain what to do with the crying child, crouched down beside Damien and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. To Snape's surprise and dismay, Damien rocked forward, flinging his arms around the older man and pressing his face into Snape's chest. The move knocked Severus off balance, and for one harrowing moment he thought he was going to end up sprawled on the lavatory floor with a crying boy atop him. He managed to keep the two of them more-or-less upright, however, ending up with one arm braced against the nearby wall and the other wrapped around Damien. Against his better judgment, Snape held the position until the boy's sobs had subsided somewhat. When the worst of Damien's crying jag had passed, Snape extricated himself from the boy's stranglehold and stood, dragging Damien up with him. Without a word, he led Damien from the loo and down the hallway to his office. The moment Damien saw his Grandmere sitting there placidly, he began to cry again. Narcissa pulled the boy down rather awkwardly to sit on the arm of her chair. She stroked his hair, patted his back, and spoke to him in a soft, soothing tone. Only her eyes and the gentleness of her voice gave any indication of what she might be feeling; otherwise, her masque remained intact, as always. When Damien's sobs had turned to hiccougths, Narcissa spoke quietly to Snape.

"Perhaps you should send him to his dormitory with a sleeping draught."

Snape nodded once, then found the requested potion and instructed Damien to come with him. Damien kissed his grandmother goodbye and followed Snape from the office. Only after Damien had downed the potion and was safely asleep in his bed did Snape take his leave of the boy.

Damien was extremely vulnerable now. Severus would have to watch him closely for a time to be sure that Narcissa's intervention had not done more harm than good.

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Damien awoke to find Sera sitting at the foot of his bed, her back against one of the four posts, watching him sleep. He gave her a weak smile and struggled to sit up with his back against the wall at the head of his bed.

"You've been asleep all afternoon," Sera said, worry clearly etched on her face. "Are you ill?"

Damien shook his head slightly. "What do you know about pensieves, Sera?" he asked quietly. "Can what's in them be...faked?"

"Pensieves record memories. They're often used to record an incident so that a person can go back later and look at the incident more objectively, without the influence of whatever their own emotions were at the time that it occurred. If there is any way to fake those memories, the books don't mention it," Sera replied matter-of-factly. "Why do you ask?"

"Grandmere came to see me. She brought a pensieve," Damien replied, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "I should have listened to you, Sera," he added, his voice sad and tremulous.

"What do you mean?" she asked, moving to sit beside her brother, ready to offer comfort.

"Remember when you tried to tell me that you'd heard things about Grandfather?" he asked, fighting valiantly to keep his tears at bay.

"Oh, Damien," Sera sighed, understanding at once what he hadn't said. She gathered her brother into her arms and held him while he cried silently, soothing him in just the way that Narcissa had earlier. Unlike her Grandmere, Sera's emotions showed plainly on her face. Her heart ached for her brother.

She knew how much Damien adored their grandfather, and she could only imagine how much it must hurt him to have his image of the man shattered by the truth.

After a time, Damien's tears stopped falling. He wiped the traces from his cheeks but stayed snuggled in his sister's arms. "I still miss him," he said softly. "And I still love him."

"Of course you do," Sera said soothingly. "We all do."

"Sera," Damien said seriously, turning so that he could look into his sister's eyes. "What do I do now?"

Sera was silent for a moment, thinking. "You should apologise to Dad and Adrian. And you should apologise to Harry." She paused to watch his reaction to her statement - he only nodded sadly - and then she added "And you should sit with Adrian and me tonight at dinner."

"You want me to?" he asked incredulously. Sera nodded and smiled. "Do you think Adrian will let me?"

Sera laughed softly and hugged her brother. "He misses you, you know. He just feels that he needs to show Dad and Harry his support. If you're planning to make things right, then Adrian will be glad to have you back."

"I guess I'll find out soon enough," he said, eyeing his watch critically. He slid from the bed and helped Sera up, tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, and escorted her down to the Great Hall.

Sera, it turned out, was right - as usual. Adrian not only accepted his brother's presence at the Hufflepuff table with a wide smile, but also made certain they were sitting side by side.

At the Head Table, Draco saw his children sitting together and smiled.

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It took two days and an offer of moral support from Sera before Damien felt ready to face his father. He knew he owed his dad more than just an apology or explanation, but he had no way of taking back the hurt he had caused. If he was honest with himself, he would have to admit that he probably wouldn't change things, even if he could. He was rather glad that Harry was safely out of the picture.

After dinner on Thursday, Damien decided he was as ready to face his father as he would ever be. He excused himself from the Hufflepuff table, and, dragging Sera after him, made his way to his father's office.

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Harry stepped into Draco's office and shut the door quietly behind him. Draco looked up from the quizzes he was grading and smiled. Setting his quill aside, he stood and rounded the desk to stand before Harry. He cupped Harry's face in his hands and placed a tender kiss on his lips.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Blessedly uneventful for once," Harry replied as he wrapped his arms around Draco's waist.

"No detentions to supervise?" Draco asked. He slid one hand up to slide through Harry's hair; the other stroked Harry's cheek in a tender caress.

"No, thankfully."

"Good," Draco said with a mischievous grin. The hand stroking Harry's hair twisted, tangling in the silky lock and pulling Harry's head back slightly. In the next instant, Draco's mouth was on Harry's, demanding, tender and passionate.

After a moment, Harry pulled away, grinning. "Don't you ever get enough?"

"Of you? Never," Draco replied in a sensual murmur. He chuckled. "I'm making up for lost time, don't you know?"

Harry laughed softly and stretched up to resume his exploration of Draco's mouth. Draco tangled his fingers more tightly in Harry's hair and let his other hand glide down Harry's back to cup his arse. He pulled Harry flush against him and kissed him harder, needing to be as close to the other man as possible.

Caught up in one another as they were, the two men never heard the office door open. A small, wounded cry caused them to spring apart, their gazes falling at once on Damien's hurt, shell-shocked face.

"Damien," Draco said breathlessly. He hadn't meant for his son to find out about him and Harry this way.

"You lied to me!" Damien spat. "You're a goddamn liar!" he roared, stalking across the room to stand before his father. "You promised - you said you loved me. You said I was more important to you than him. You promised you wouldn't see him anymore. But you lied!"

Draco shook his head slightly and reached out to his son, but Damien took a quick step backward, his eyes wild and his small hands clenched into fists.

"You *lied* to me!" Damien shouted, raising one fist and letting it smack rather ineffectually into the center of his father's chest. Before Draco could react, Damien whirled to face Harry. "And you! I fucking hate you! You think you can just walk right in and take him without a fight? Well you can't. You can't have him," Damien continued, his voice rising quickly towards hysteria. "I won't let you take him...take him away...from me." Damien's words trailed off into broken sobs.

Harry pulled the boy into his arms, surprised when Damien came without a fight. The boy leaned into Harry's embrace as sobs began to wrack his small body; he suddenly felt too weak to stand on his own.

"Hush, now. It's all right," Harry crooned as he cradled the boy against his chest. "You silly boy," he said tenderly. "I never wanted to take your father away from you, and I couldn't even if I tried. He loves you. He will *always* love you," he murmured soothingly.

Draco bridged the slight distance between himself and Damien, his hands joining Harry's in stroking the child's hair and rubbing his back. When Damien's sobs had subsided somewhat, Draco turned his son around to face him. Looking the boy directly in the eye, he said "No one could ever take me away from you, Damien. And nothing you could ever do will ever make me stop loving you. And I will always, always be here when you need me."

Damien's chin wobbled and he blinked tears from his eyes. He crossed his arms protectively across his chest. "How can I trust you?" he asked tearfully.

"He didn't lie to you, Damien," Sera said, ever the voice of reason. "He never promised you anything."

An angry retort died on Damien's lips and a frown of deep concentration settled between his brows.

"No, I didn't," Draco confirmed quietly, "but that is completely irrelevant. I should have been honest with you - with all of you. I should have told you when I started seeing Harry again. That was an error in judgment on my part, and I am truly sorry. But I can't change that now."

Damien stood quietly for a moment, using the back of his sleeve to wipe the tears from his face with quick, annoyed motions. He looked up at his father, then glanced at Sera, and then at Harry. Shaking his head slightly, he turned and walked with stiff dignity toward the door.

"Damien?" Draco called, concern evident in his voice.

Damien paused with his hand on the doorknob, neither opening the door nor turning around. "I need time. To sort this out," he said shakily. Then he opened the door, slipped out, and shut it behind him with barely a sound.

For a moment, the three of them simply stood, staring at the door. Sera was the first to pull herself together. She shook herself slightly and turned to give her father a sympathetic smile. "It could have gone much worse," she said.

Draco let out a wry little laugh, a sound that spoke of nervousness rather than humour or joy. He opened his arms to his daughter, who immediately stepped forward to let herself be wrapped in his warm embrace. He rocked Sera slightly and kissed the top of her head.

"I should go," Sera said simply. "Good night, Dad." She hugged him tightly and stretched up to kiss his cheek. Then she turned to Harry and smiled shyly at him. "Good night, Harry," she said before hugging and kissing him as well.

"Good night, Sera," Harry returned with a warm smile. As soon as the door shut behind her, Harry wrapped his arm around Draco's waist. "Come on," he said.

"Where?"

"To bed. You look exhausted."

"I am," Draco acknowledged. He let Harry lead him to his rooms where they curled up together in Draco's bed. "I'm such a fool," Draco lamented in the darkness.

"Hush, now," Harry murmured, comforting Draco just as he had comforted Damien earlier that same evening. "You're allowed to make mistakes. Everything will work out all right. You'll see."

"I hope you're right, Harry. I really hope you're right."

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The instant the door shut behind him, Damien let his shoulders slump. Too much had happened in the last few days. Too many revelations, too much disappointment, and too many tears. He couldn't believe he had cried - again - and let Harry cradle him to his chest like a small child. He was far too old for such nonsense.

At twelve, he felt, his childhood days were over and it was time for him to be a man. His grandfather had instilled that belief in him. Regardless of the pensieve's revelation, Damien thought that perhaps his grandfather had been right about this one thing.

As Damien's mind wandered over and around the events of the last week - among other things - his feet wandered the corridors of Hogwarts. When he finally pulled himself from his thoughts, he had no



idea how much time had passed and no idea where in the castle he might be. A quick check of his watch showed he still had some time before he needed to be back in the Slytherin dungeons for the night. He wondered absently if he had enough time to find his way back there from wherever he was.

Squaring his shoulders, Damien turned to go back the way he came, hoping to be able to retrace his footsteps. The corridor which faced him, however, was completely unfamiliar. He silently cursed himself for not paying attention to where he was going, and then resolutely strode down the hallway. Hopefully, he would find a teacher, a student, or even a ghost before he got more lost than he already was.

Half an hour later, Damien was still lost and growing more frustrated by the second. He was certain that he was in the very spot in which he had been when he started trying to find his way back to his common room. He swore loudly and kicked the wall, immediately regretting the action and swearing again as pain blossomed in his foot.

"Who's there?" a voice called out harshly from somewhere in the darkness.

Damien whirled, his heart pounding in his chest at the unexpected presence. Relief washed over him when he saw a familiar face. "Armand," he breathed. "Am I ever glad to see *you*."

"What are you doing up here, Malfoy? This corridor is off-limits."

"Would you please stop calling me that?" Damien requested with an exasperated sigh. "And if this hallway is off-limits, why are you here?"

"I'm a school prefect, or had you forgotten? Now, tell me why you're here," Armand replied levelly.

"I kind of got lost," Damien replied sheepishly. Armand raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "I was kind of wandering around and thinking and wound up here," Damien clarified.

"You must have really been wrapped up in your thoughts to have gotten so lost."

"Yeah."

Armand watched the emotions flickering across the other boy's face and wondered what it was that was on his mind. Damien had been acting rather odd the last few days, but this quiet, almost shy demeanour was something entirely new. "If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm willing to listen," he found himself offering.

"You are?" Damien asked incredulously, his gaze lifting from the floor to Armand's face for a brief moment before dropping down again.

"Of course I am. That's what friends do," Armand replied gently. He slid gracefully to the floor to sit with his back against the cool stone wall. "Come and sit down."

Damien hesitated only a few seconds before moving to sit beside Armand. "We're friends?" he asked uncertainly.

"Aren't we? I rather thought we were."

Damien simply shrugged, keeping his thoughts on the matter to himself.

"So, do you want to talk about what's bothering you?" Armand said, guiding the conversation back on track.

"It's...a lot of things really. I feel like my whole life's been turned on its head, and I'm not quite sure what to do about it."

"Go on," Armand encouraged.

Slowly, haltingly, Damien retold the story of his grandmother's visit and the secrets that the pensieve had revealed. "I've realised that most of what I believe and think and feel is based on what Grandfather taught me, and now I don't know what to think about any of it," he said, swallowing hard to keep the now ever-present tears at bay.

"I can imagine that would be overwhelming," Armand said sympathetically. He slipped his arm around the smaller boy's shoulder in an offer of comfort and support. "You're just going to have to sort through things one at a time. Really think about them, you know? Talk to your friends and your dad, maybe, and see what other people have to say about things, and then form your own opinions."

"Think for myself," Damien said softly, remembering a long ago conversation in which his father had told him essentially the same things Armand was telling him now.

"Exactly," Armand replied, giving Damien's shoulder a little squeeze.

"Can I talk to you about those things?" Damien asked, glancing sideways at the older boy's face.

Armand rolled his eyes. "We're friends, Damien, and I said you should talk to your friends about things. What do you think?"

Damien bit his lip and ducked his head, feeling rather silly for having asked a question that he obviously should have known the answer to. Beside him, Armand sighed softly.

"Sorry," Armand muttered. "My sarcasm was totally out of line. Of course you can talk to me about things, Damien," he apologised.

Damien sat quietly for a moment, trying to put his thoughts into some semblance of order. Finally, he licked his lips nervously and began to talk. "Grandfather was always so proud of me. He liked to show me off to his friends. He said I was a true Malfoy and would be a credit to him. He said I was the complete opposite of my brother. Grandfather always said that Dad coddled Adrian too much, that he was going to ruin him. He said that being babied like that was going to make Adrian soft, make him weak - that he'd probably end up...that he'd probably end up being 'a damned queer'."

Armand scoffed. "That's stuff and nonsense. Hugging your son doesn't cause him to be gay. You are or you're not, and that's all there is to it," he said angrily.

"I think I might be," Damien blurted out. His eyes widened in horror when he realised what he had said, and he hid his face against his drawn-up knees.

"Is that why you freak out whenever anyone as much as mentions homosexuality?" Armand guessed, moving his hand from Damien's shoulder to rub soothing circles on the boy's back. Damien nodded slightly. "Why do you think you might be?"

"There's a boy I kind of fancy," he muttered, his voice muffled against his knees.

"Just one?" Damien nodded. "I thought you fancied Ella."

"I do," Damien replied miserably. "But not as much as I fancy...the boy that I fancy."

"Look, Damien, I'm not exactly an expert on any of this, but I'll tell you what my Dad told me. What my uncles told me, too, for that matter. According to them, a lot of boys - maybe even most boys - get a little confused. You get all these strange hormones running around in you, and for a few years, everything is sexual. Doesn't seem to matter what you're thinking about - boys, girls, Quidditch, potion recipes - everything gets you hard."

"Is it like that for you?" Damien wanted to know.

Armand laughed. "Good Merlin, yes."

Damien let out a relieved sigh. At least he wasn't alone in his confusion. He sat up again, brushing his hair back out of his face as he leaned back against the wall.

"Feeling better?" Armand asked.

With a shy smile, Damien nodded slightly. "Armand, have you ever... You know...kissed a boy?"

"Once or twice," Armand replied with a mischievous grin.

"What's it like?"

Armand shrugged. "It's pretty much the same as kissing a girl. There isn't much difference until you get beyond kissing."

Damien's eyes widened. "You've..."

Armand's laugh cut him off. "You're so innocent it's adorable," he said. "Yes, I've gotten off with another boy. No, I've not had sex with a boy, or a girl for that matter. And for the record, I've been a perfect gentleman where your sister is concerned."

Damien flushed and looked away. A moment later, he turned to face the older boy. He sat for a moment, watching Armand. Then, before he could lose his nerve, he closed his eyes and leaned forward to press a kiss to Armand's lips. When the older boy didn't respond, Damien retreated and opened his eyes, disappointed and hurt.

"Please tell me it isn't me you fancy," Armand said in a near whisper.

Damien looked away again, trying to hide his emotions.

"Fuck," Armand breathed. He ran his hands through his hair distractedly, watching as Damien hid his face against his knees again and his small body began to shake with silent sobs. "Damien, please don't," he begged. He moved to stroke the boy's hair, but Damien threw off his hand angrily. "Damien," Armand said softly, "I'm really very sorry. I didn't mean that the way it must have sounded. It isn't that you're not...that I'm not...because you are, and I am, and...It's just...Sera." After a moment, Damien nodded slightly, his face still hidden against his knees. Armand tried again to comfort the younger boy by gently stroking his hair, and this time Damien let him.

"This is all so confusing," Damien whimpered.

With a tired sigh, Armand pulled the younger boy into his arms and guided the blond head to rest on his shoulder. "It doesn't ever get any less confusing, as far as I can tell."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Damien managed to more or less avoid most everyone for the better part of the week. He retreated to his lonely seat at the Slytherin table and made a point of steering clear of his dad and Harry outside of classes. On Thursday morning, Sera joined him for breakfast, but as he was sullen and uncommunicative, she decided not to try the venture again. He would, she knew, climb back out of his self-imposed solitude when he felt the time was right.

Saturday came at last, bringing with it the long-awaited Quidditch tryouts. Almost the entire school, staff and students alike, turned out to watch, hoping for some revelation regarding the mysterious notices and the changes made to the tryout schedule. No great mystery was revealed, and the team captains kept mum about which candidates would land a spot on their teams.

On Sunday morning, another round of notices went up. The notices quickly drew large crowds as students lingered to discuss them.

"What's all this then?" Ella Weasley asked, elbowing her way past a crowd of her fellow Gryffindors so that she could catch a glimpse of the notice.

"Team rosters," someone answered. "Only they don't seem to make much sense."

"Let me see then," Ella demanded. When no one moved to let her have a clear view of the notice, she heaved a sigh and squeezed in between the two smallest and most easily moved people in the group. She snatched the notice from the board, ignoring the loud protests of the small crowd, and began to read aloud.

"Quidditch Roster. Black Team, headed by Captain Armand Delacour, Keeper. Seeker: Rand McDermott; Beaters Leona Huff and Damien Malfoy....' Wait a minute! Malfoy's in Slytherin. This can't be right."

"And Huff's in Ravenclaw," Armand supplied helpfully from where he lounged on the common room sofa.

"I don't think I understand."

"Oh, come now. I know you aren't *that* thick," Armand teased.

"But....why? No, not why. How?"

"I don't think the particulars are public knowledge," Armand replied, giving his cousin a look that promised he'd fill in the blanks in private, "but it's rumoured that a couple of students presented the idea to Wood, and he presented it to the Headmistress. Professor McGonagall thought it would be another good step in tearing down the house rivalries, so here we are."

"That's bloody brilliant!" Ella crowed. She turned her eyes back to the paper. Her face fell as she continued to read.

"What's wrong?" Armand asked, vaulting over the back of the sofa and making his way to Ella's side.

"I made Chaser," she replied tonelessly.

"Isn't that a good thing?" her younger cousin, Lauren, chimed in.

"I'm on the Brown team," Ella said in the same flat voice.

"And?" Armand prompted.

"And you're not. Neither is Damien. In fact, I don't know a single one of my team-mates," she explained, crumpling the notice in one fist.

Armand gently pried the notice out of Ella's hand and gave it to one of the other Gryffindors who was waiting for a turn to look it over. He put his arm around his cousin's shoulders. "Well, you'll get to know them. That's part of what this is about - getting to know the students in other houses, working together, and all that." He gave her a little squeeze.

"It just isn't what I expected," Ella said with a sigh. "Sera will be thrilled though."

"She isn't the only one," a second-year boy chimed in. "I made Keeper for the White team. I wasn't even sure why I was trying out, what with Armand playing for Gryffindor. But I made a team!"

Ella managed a smile then; the bright-eyed boy's joy was infectious. She took a deep breath. "Well. I wonder when practice starts."

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Armand's Quidditch team - the Black team - began training later the same day. He was a little worried about having Damien on his team because of the unresolved issues between them, but he had chosen the boy because Damien was a strong player and would be an asset to the team.

As it turned out, Armand's fears were unfounded. Damien handled himself like a seasoned professional, setting aside his personal life to focus completely on the game. The players would need time to adjust to working together as a team, but by and large the practice was an overwhelming success. He dismissed his players a little earlier than he had planned as a reward for working hard and working well.

After the others had gone, Armand sat in the changing rooms making notes for future practices. When a shadow fell across his parchment, he looked up, surprised to see Damien standing in the doorway to the change rooms. He smiled up at the other boy.

"Practice went well today, don't you think?" he asked.

Damien grinned. "Yeah, it did. We've got a good team."

"We do," Armand agreed. "It was a bit difficult, having to fight the other captains for the best players."

Damien nodded his understanding as he moved from the doorway to sit beside Armand on the bench. "Do you think this whole thing is really going to work?"

"Do you mean the new Quidditch teams, or all the changes in the school?" Armand asked, his brows furrowing as he considered Damien's query.

"All of it, I guess. Mostly I meant the Quidditch."

"I would never have taken the Quidditch idea to Wood if I didn't believe it would work. I told you before that I thought your plan was a stroke of genius," Armand replied matter-of-factly. He tried not

to smile as Damien flushed under the praise. "As for the rest of it... Well, the Board of Governors might be a bit hard to convince, but...yeah, I think it will all work out all right, eventually."

Damien was silent for a moment, seemingly fascinated with the light patterns playing across the stone floor of the changing room. "I didn't come to talk about Quidditch," he said quietly.

"I didn't think that you did."

"I came to apologise. I seem to be doing an awful lot of that lately," Damien said with a sigh.

"You've nothing to apologise for, Damien."

"I tried to kiss you, or have you forgotten?" Damien snarked.

"I didn't forget," Armand replied in a near whisper. "I've thought about it quite a lot in fact. Even though I know I did the right thing that night, sometimes...." He sighed. "Sometimes I wish I had let you kiss me."

Damien's head jerked up, surprise written in the wide eyes that met Armand's. "You...wish that?"

"Sometimes," Armand admitted. He dropped his gaze to the floor and sighed again. "Most of the time. And I know I shouldn't feel that way...."

"Because of Sera," Damien interjected, his voice soft and a little sad.

"Yes. But Merlin help me, I can't help it. I want to kiss you."

"Then kiss me," Damien said softly, shifting closer to the older boy. "Just this once."

Armand pulled the smaller boy into his arms, guiding the blond head to his shoulder as he had the night of Damien's confession. They sat there for a time, wrapped in a loose embrace as Armand's emotions warred inside him.

"Just this once," he whispered into Damien's hair.

Damien tilted his head back and closed his eyes, waiting. After a moment, he felt the soft, warm pressure of Armand's mouth against his own. Armand deepened the kiss almost immediately, and they began a slow, thorough exploration of one another's mouths.

A sharp gasp drew them out of the kiss, and Damien felt a strange sense of *déjà vu* - only this time he was one of the guilty parties rather than an observer. Any second, he knew, the hysterics would begin. He forced himself to look toward the door.

Ella Weasley stood staring back at him. "Sera's going to kill you both," she informed them coldly before turning and stalking away from the changing rooms.

\*

As soon as the shock of Ella's unexpected interruption passed, the two boys hurried back to the castle. Neither boy knew what to say to the other, so the walk back was made in awkward silence. In the entrance hall, Armand told Damien that he was sure that Ella would go immediately to Sera with what she had seen and went to seek out the girls in hopes of controlling the damage. Damien slowly made his way to his father's room, collecting his thoughts as he went. He felt it was time for a long overdue apology.

Damien paused outside the door to his father's quarters, wondering if he should knock before entering. He decided not to and slipped inside. The room was quiet but not dark; there was no sign of Draco.

"Dad?" Damien called softly as he padded across the room towards the adjoining bath.

"We're here, Damien," Draco replied, his voice coming from behind the half-closed curtains surrounding his bed.

"Oh. Er. I didn't mean to...um...interrupt," Damien stammered, quickly backpedaling away from the bed. "I'll just...go."

Draco laughed and cast a spell to pull the curtain open a little wider, revealing himself and Harry - both fully dressed. Draco was sitting with his back against the headboard; Harry sat between Draco's legs, leaning back against his chest. "You weren't interrupting anything important," Draco assured his son.

"We were just looking through this," Harry added, holding up the latest "Quality Quidditch Supplies" owl-order catalog.

"It still hasn't been decided what to do about the uniforms for the new Quidditch teams. Most are in favour of just spelling the old ones to match the new team colours, but they're really rather out-of-style. Harry and I thought we'd do a little research," Draco explained. "We could use your input."

Damien frowned. "I didn't come to talk about Quidditch uniforms."

Harry sighed and sat upright. "Should I leave you two alone to talk?" he asked, directing the question at Damien.

"No. This involves you as well," Damien replied levelly. He took a deep breath and tried to gather his thoughts again. The Quidditch conversation had caused him to forget his carefully planned apology. "I... Do you think you can ever forgive me?" he blurted out.

"Already have," Harry said softly.

Behind him, Draco nodded his agreement. "Can you forgive us?"

Damien smiled shyly and nodded his head. "I...uh...kind of understand things better now, I think."

Draco arched an eyebrow, waiting for further explanation.

Damien sat down on the foot of the bed, his back against the corner post and his knees drawn up, his face mostly hidden in shadows. "I understand that you loving Harry doesn't mean you don't love me. But it's more than that. I understand that you can't control who you care for, and you can't just stop caring for them even if it's the right thing to do. I even understand about keeping secrets to keep from hurting people you love."

Harry scooted forward on the bed and laid his hand on Damien's arm. Draco moved to sit beside his son, wrapping an arm protectively around his shoulders.

"If you want to talk about...if you ever need to talk about anything, Harry and I are both here for you."

"I know," Damien replied quietly, covering his face with one hand. "There are some things I just don't think you'd want to know, though."

"No matter what it is, we're willing to listen, Damien," Harry assured him. "And nothing you can say is going to make either of us love you any less."

Damien's hand fell away from his face, and he looked at Harry with a perplexed expression on his face.

Harry smiled softly. He brushed Damien's hair back from his face. "Haven't you figured out yet that I love you, and Sera, and Adrian as much as I love your father?"

"Even after what I did?" Damien asked in a near whisper.

"It would take a hell of a lot more than lashing out because you're confused to make me stop caring, Damien."

"Though I would suggest coming and talking to us in the future rather than keeping everything to yourself," Draco admonished gently.

"You're trying to get me to tell you what's bothering me, aren't you?" Damien asked, giving his father a calculating glance.

"Partly," Draco admitted.

Damien sighed. "I did something I shouldn't have. I...er...I fancy someone I shouldn't. Someone who's...involved."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting someone you can't have," Draco assured him.

Damien shook his head. "That's not all. I...we kissed."

It was Draco's turn to sigh. He wasn't ready to start dealing with his children's relationship problems. He felt he was doing well to keep his own relationship running more-or-less smoothly.

"And Ella saw us. I think it...hurt her feelings."

"You can't live your life to make other people happy," Harry said. "If you hurt Ella's feelings...well, it's unfortunate, but her happiness isn't your responsibility."

"And while it isn't exactly admirable to kiss someone who's involved with another, it isn't so terrible, either," Draco added. "At least you understand that you shouldn't have done it."

"You don't understand," Damien said, his voice laced with anguish. He dropped his head down to rest against his knees.

"What don't we understand, Damien?" Harry asked gently.

Damien mumbled something against his knees, and Harry's eyes widened slightly in surprise. Draco's brows furrowed; he hadn't been able to understand his son's mumbled response.

"That does complicate things a bit, doesn't it?" Harry mused, reaching out to stroke Damien's hair.



"What does?" Draco wanted to know.

"It's Armand," Harry replied.

"What's Armand?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Armand is who Ella saw Damien kissing."

"But..." Draco paused, dumbstruck. He drew his son into his arms and guided the boy's head to his shoulder, too stunned to speak.

"It was only supposed to happen the once. I wanted him to...to be my first, you know? My...my first time kissing a...another boy. It wasn't going to happen again. I would never hurt Sera," Damien explained as tears filled his eyes and began to spill over onto his baby-soft cheeks.

"Sera will understand that, I think," Harry said. "She might be more inclined to forgive and forget if she hears it from you first."

"I think it's too late for that," Damien replied.

\*

Armand found Sera in the library, just as he knew he would. He settled into the seat beside her, but she didn't look up at him. She seemed intent on the book that was open on the table before her, but he was certain that she was upset with him.

"Sera, I don't know what Ella told you, but I swear it wasn't what it looked like," he said, forgetting to pause for breath.

Sera looked up from her book then, with an odd expression on her face. "If it wasn't what it looked like, then what was it?" she asked calmly.

Armand found himself spilling the entire story - from finding Damien in the off-limits hallway, to agreeing to give him his first kiss, to Ella's interruption - in hushed tones, mindful of being in the library. He never met her eyes, staring instead at his own hand tracing the wood-grain of the table.

When he was done talking, he waited, but Sera remained silent. He gathered his courage and looked up at her, expecting to see tears or fury in her eyes. Instead, he saw concern and compassion.

"I'm glad it was you," she said softly. "Poor Damien."

"That's it?" he asked a little too loudly. Sera shushed him, and he continued. "I expected you to be angry with me."

"I can't say I'm thrilled about it. I'm...a little disappointed. But being angry with you isn't going to help anything."

Armand laughed softly. "I think the Sorting Hat made a mistake with you," he said affectionately. "You should have been a Ravenclaw."

"I'm not pretentious enough for Ravenclaw," she replied with a mischievous grin.

Armand smiled back at her. "So we're all right, then?"

"Hmm..." Sera put her hand to her chin and cocked her head to one side, pretending to think about it. "I don't know...." she teased. "Perhaps you should make it up to me."

"With pleasure," Armand replied. "So long as making it up to you doesn't involve studying."

Sera grinned, but the grin dissolved quickly. "Armand...I think you should know. Ella didn't tell me anything. I haven't seen her all day."

Armand's brows furrowed. "I'm glad I told you, though. I feel better about it. But...if Ella didn't come talk to you, then where is she?"

\*

Ella, hurt by Damien's casual betrayal of her feelings, wandered down to the lake. She sat on the shore and watched the giant squid glide lazily just below the lake's surface. Her hand closed idly over a rather sizable rock, and for a moment she considered hurling it at the squid, wanting to strike out at someone or something. She forced the destructive urge aside, tossing the rock aside and curling her hands into tight fists. The feeling of her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms grounded her somehow.

It wasn't as if Damien owed her anything. He wasn't her boyfriend or anything. Still, she had thought he rather liked her, and to find him kissing her cousin cut her to the core. He couldn't kiss just anyone, it had to be a boy - an almost ethereally beautiful boy - who also happened to be her favourite cousin. Or he had been her favourite. She wasn't so sure now.

When gentle hands pried one of her fists open, her head snapped up, wondering how anyone had gotten so close without her knowledge. Adrian ignored her surprise and carefully massaged the half-moon indentations in her palm.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Don't really know," Adrian replied, looking up at her. "Just seemed like the thing to do." He stopped rubbing her hand, but didn't let go of it. "What's wrong, Ella?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, looking away from his intense scrutiny.

"You're a terrible liar," Adrian informed her. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. But if you do, I'll listen."

"It's that asshole brother of yours," Ella spat. "I found him kissing...someone else."

Adrian sighed. "It figures."

"I just thought...I thought he really liked me. He's the first boy that ever did, you know. The only boy who ever has," she confided, tears pooling in her eyes.

"I'm sure that isn't true, Ella. Maybe the other boys just...I don't know. Maybe they're shy, or they didn't want to say anything because of Damien."

Something in Adrian's voice caused Ella to turn and look at him again - really look at him. There was something in his eyes, something she wasn't sure she recognized.

"Anyway," he continued, looking down at where their hands lay, still joined, on his thigh. "Dad says we're all too young for committed relationships. He says we shouldn't have steady boyfriends or

girlfriends until we're older. That at our age, we shouldn't limit our options." He paused. "Dad's a bit weird, sometimes."

Ella laughed. "My dad told me almost the same thing. And who knows?" she said, tilting Adrian's face up so she could look him in the eyes. "Maybe he's right."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Adrian," Ella said thoughtfully, raising her head from his shoulder, "I think there's something else you should know."

Adrian looked a bit apprehensive but nodded. "Go on," he said.

"It was a boy," she said. "I saw Damien kissing a boy."

"Are you sure?" Adrian asked, his eyes going wide. "That's a stupid question," he answered himself. "Of course you're sure. I just never thought..."

"Neither did I," Ella said. "I mean, I knew Armand fancies boys, but..." She clapped her hand over her mouth, realising she had said more than she meant to.

"Armand?" Adrian asked sadly. Ella nodded an affirmation, and then settled her head on Adrian's shoulder again. "I can't believe he'd do that to Sera," Adrian added.

"Love makes people do crazy things, or so my Mum always says."

"Or maybe it isn't love," Adrian said thoughtfully, "There are other things that make people act a little odd."

"So what, then? A hex?"

"I don't know," Adrian replied. "A person would have to be either awfully brave or awfully mad to muck about with a professor's kid, though, don't you think?"

Ella nodded against his shoulder. They sat in silence, contemplating.

"Ella," Adrian said after a moment. "I just remembered a rumour I heard about your cousin. Something Kira MacMillan told me."

Ella snorted. "I was going to say that if it's about Armand, then it's probably true, but you never know what Kira is going to come up with. I swear she starts half the rumours she spreads just to see who will believe them. Anyway, what did she tell you?"

"She said that Armand's mum was a veela, and that's why all the girls swoon over him. Her words, not mine."

Ella's face broke into a wide grin. "For once MacMillan's got it right - or close enough. His mum's part-veela. I wonder..."

"It would make sense," Adrian said.

Still grinning, Ella leaned up to kiss Adrian's cheek.

"You're brilliant," she told him. She jumped to her feet and pulled him after her. "I've got to see if I can find Uncle Harry, find out if he thinks that we might be right about this."

Adrian gave her a shy smile. "I think I know where to find him."

\*\*\* \*\*

Draco looked up as the door to his room opened, automatically holding his hand up to his face in a shushing gesture. He watched as Adrian led an uncharacteristically shy Ella Weasley inside and silently shut the door behind her.

Ella's gaze flitted around the room, coming to rest almost at once on Harry. He leaned against the headboard of Draco's bed, absently stroking the tousled blond head that rested on his thigh.

"I take it he's made up with you, then," Adrian said quietly, nodding towards his brother who was curled against Harry's side.

Draco smiled. "We've reached an understanding," he said softly.

"Is he all right?" Ella asked.

"He'll be fine," Draco assured her. "And you?"

Ella glanced at Damien and then at Adrian before meeting the elder Malfoy's eyes again. "I'm thirteen. I'm not allowed to be all right," she replied with a grin.

Draco laughed softly.

"Dad," Adrian said, sitting carefully on the arm of the sofa "What do you know about veela?"

"Veela?" Draco asked, obviously confused at the unexpected question.

"Fuck," Harry exclaimed from across the room, drawing their attention and causing Damien to stir in his sleep. He petted the boy's hair, soothing him, and then answered the unspoken question in Draco's eyes. "Armand's mum is Fleur Delacour. I'm sure you remember the stir she caused during the Tri-wizard tournament."

Draco's eyes widened. "You don't think...?"

"I don't know. Maybe. There's no real way to know, though, is there?"

Ella and Adrian glanced at each other.

"Convince him," Adrian said, his voice quietly confident. He crossed the room to climb into the bed beside his brother. "You have to make him believe it, Dad. You have to give him a way out."

"Adrian," Harry began.

"No," Adrian cut him off. "I'm right about this." He lay down and curled protectively around his brother.

Draco mused for a moment how different his boys were from one another. Adrian, so innocent still, and Damien facing the trials of impending adulthood. And suddenly he understood what Adrian was driving at. "I think he's right, Harry," he said.

And even if Adrian wasn't right, even if it was wrong to convince Damien that what he felt for Armand was the result of a very typical reaction to veela charm, he would do it anyway. He would give his son the chance to be a child for a little longer.

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After much discussion with Harry, Draco decided that he wouldn't try to force the idea on Damien. The next afternoon, he and Harry explained the situation and told him that it was very likely that his attraction to Armand was simply because of the boy's heritage. Harry made certain to explain that the cause of the attraction didn't make Damien's feelings any less real, but merely made his reactions to those feelings harder to control. Harry pointed out facts and anecdotes from a couple of books to back up their logic.

Damien was more than willing to let himself be convinced.

\*\*\* \*\*

Before breakfast the next morning, Sera had heard about the veela conversation from both Damien and Adrian. She absorbed their words thoughtfully and then passed them on to Armand as soon as classes were finished for the day.

Armand just shook his head tiredly. "It doesn't seem to work that way," he said. "Apparently, it's kind of rare for a woman with veela blood to have a male child. There isn't much written about boys like me because of it, but what Dad and I have managed to find says that males of veela descent have little, if any, of the same charm capabilities that the females have."

"So you don't think that had anything to do with Damien...liking you?" Sera asked uncomfortably.

"It's possible, I guess. Just not likely. Still, maybe it's better for Damien to think that. It makes things a little less complicated, at least." Armand sighed and leaned his head back against the tree behind him.

"So... you don't think it has anything to do with...with me liking you?" Sera asked shyly.

Armand leaned forward and tilted Sera's face up, forcing her to look him in the eye. "The books were absolutely clear on one thing: veela charm, as you call it, only works on males."

Sera smiled at him and blushed, then blushed again when he pressed a quick kiss to her flushed cheek. Slightly flustered, she pulled away and scrambled to her feet. "I've got revising to do."

"So do I," Armand replied. He gathered both of their school bags into one hand and offered her his free arm. "I'll walk you up," he said.

\*\*\* \*\*

Damien seemed to brighten somewhat, but he still blushed slightly anytime Armand spoke to him and pain still lingered in his eyes Draco had noticed all of this, and he worried.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" he asked Harry as they lay curled together late one night.

"I think we did the only thing we could do," Harry replied, stroking Draco's arm that lay wrapped around his waist. "If, in time, Damien discovers a true attraction for men...well, maybe he'll be better equipped to understand and deal with it. He's enough to deal with right now without that."

"Do you think he'll be angry with me? Will he think I lied to him?"

"Draco," Harry sighed, turning over to face his lover. "Whatever his reaction might be, if any, he'll eventually come to realise that you always do what you think is best for him."

"This was so much easier when they were small children," Draco lamented. "Some days I'm certain I'm going to royally fuck up and turn them all against me."

Harry snuggled closer to Draco, offering comfort. "You worry far too much, Draco. They love you, and they know you love them. We'll all make mistakes, but we'll work them out again."

Draco sighed softly. "At least there are only a few years left in that awkward, rebellious stage. Maybe things will be easier after that."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Draco Malfoy stood before the full length mirror in what had once been his bedroom at Malfoy Manor, struggling to get his ruffled silk cravat to lie down properly against the front of his new dress robes. He had been fighting with the cravat for a full fifteen minutes, and it simply refused to cooperate.

Sera gently pushed his hands away and made quick work of the cravat. "There," she said. "You look quite handsome."

"Thank you, love," Draco said, pressing a kiss to the top of his daughter's carefully coifed head.

There was a rap at the door, and then it opened. "It's time," Damien announced.

Draco took a deep breath and allowed his children to lead him down the stairs and out into the arbor.

The summer sun shone down brightly through the trees, casting cool, shifting shadows over the rather sizable group assembled in the clearing there. The children left Draco at the edge of the clearing, and a moment later Harry appeared at his side.

With a timid smile, Draco took Harry's hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. "Are we sure about this?" he whispered.

Harry bit his lip to hold back a laugh. "Too late now," he whispered back.

And in that moment, it was too late to turn back. Everyone moved to create a pathway through the middle of the clearing, their eyes on Harry and Draco. Draco tightened his grip on Harry's hand, took a deep breath, and then they walked together to stand on a slightly raised dais before their friends and family.

The hand-fasting was simple and uncomplicated, the exact opposite of Draco's wedding so many years before. He and Harry exchanged heartfelt vows of fidelity surrounded by people who cared for them and wished them well. A kiss, and they were wed.

The newly married couple radiated joy as they stood accepting the congratulations of their friends and watching the goings on around them. Sera and Armand, whose youthful romance had died out around the time of final exams, sat under a tree, sharing stories of their summer holidays. Adrian and Damien were standing near the punchbowl and looking awfully suspicious; Draco had a feeling that, should he investigate, he would find a bottle of firewhisky missing from the liquor stores. The appearance of an especially giggly Ella Weasley, who seemed hardly capable of standing upright and was leaning heavily on both boys, strengthened Draco's suspicions. Before he could gather the will to go and discipline them, Narcissa and Molly Weasley converged on them, Narcissa calmly reprimanding the twins while Molly harshly scolded her granddaughter. Once the children were safely tucked out of harm's way, the two women actually engaged in conversation, commiserating over the struggle to raise well-behaved children in the modern wizarding world.

"Can we slip away yet?" Harry murmured in Draco's ear.

Draco chuckled and wrapped his arm more securely around Harry's shoulder. "Someone's impatient," he teased.

Harry replied with a nip to Draco's earlobe, and Draco decided rather suddenly that it was, indeed, time for them to make their getaway. Taking Harry's hand, he led him to the edge of the clearing, and then looked back over his shoulder one more time.



A back garden full of Weasleys, and Harry Potter in his bed. Never in his wildest dreams would Draco have imagined even wanting such a thing, much less seeing it come to pass. And yet, here they were.

Turning his back on the celebration, Draco led Harry out of the arbor, pausing on the doorstep. He threw open the door with a flourish, and then surprised Harry by sweeping him up into his arms and carrying him across the threshold. Harry retaliated by nipping at Draco's ear again, and then at his throat.

They made it as far as the front parlour, and only remembered at the last possible moment to lock the door.

Later, as they lay on the parlour sofa, wrapped in one another's arms, Draco apologised quietly. "It isn't quite how I had envisioned our wedding night."

Harry smiled up at his husband, his eyes shining with love. "It was perfect," he said.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### Vignette One - Armand

"In my time as Headmistress of Hogwarts, I have never been more shocked or more disappointed," Minerva McGonagall stated levelly, the tightness of her mouth and the fierceness of her gaze stating more clearly than any words the depth of her anger.

On the other side of the desk, Oliver Wood bowed his head, suddenly very interested in the pattern of the carpet. Beside him, Armand Delacour straightened in his chair, holding his chin just a bit higher, quietly defiant.

"The two of you have put me in a very difficult position," she added.

Nearby, Deputy Headmistress Sprout and the Gryffindor Head of House sat listening to the conversation. Neither had spoken much since this meeting had started. Harry had only been appointed Head of House this term and had never before had to deal with any infraction of this magnitude. Sprout was simply stunned to silence.

"I have no choice, Wood," McGonagall continued, "but to terminate your employment at Hogwarts, effective immediately. However, since Mr. Delacour is of age, there will be no charges filed against you."

"It isn't right." Armand's voice was soft and calm, but the words were spoken with conviction.

"And I suppose that seducing a student is right?" Sprout asked, finding her voice at last.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Armand spat, rolling his eyes. "I was hardly seduced."

"Be that as it may," McGonagall said, her voice raised slightly. She sighed. "The school charter is very clear, Mr. Delacour. Any teacher found to be engaged in an inappropriate relationship with a student can not continue to teach. As for you - as a general rule, students in these situations are assumed to be unduly influenced by the adult member of the relationship; as such, they are counseled rather than reprimanded. However, as you are past the age of consent, you have, according to the charter, broken no rules."

"So Oliver gets sacked, and I get off without so much as a point taken, is that it?" Armand snapped, the colour rising in his cheeks.

"Under the circumstances, I will allow Master Wood to resign so as to keep his reputation intact and not cause unnecessary complications in whatever future career he may choose."

"Thank you, Minerva," Oliver said quietly. "You'll have my letter of resignation as soon as I can get it written."

Armand's hands curled around the ends of the armrests on his chair, his fingertips digging into the fabric. His face was blood red now, his breaths coming in short, jagged bursts.

Harry had never seen the boy so angry in all his life. He half expected his Veela heritage to choose that moment to come forth, causing the boy to sprout the ugly visage unique to a pissed-off Veela. Instead, the boy clutched the chair even tighter and forced his voice to remain calm as he spoke.

"It isn't right. Those rules are there to protect students from being unfairly used by those in a position of power. That isn't the case here. Oliver - excuse me, Master Wood - and I were involved in a consensual, mutually satisfactory arrangement. I hesitate to call it a relationship as it was hardly the stuff of romance." He paused. "If anything, I seduced and used him. I knew he was vulnerable, and I used that to my advantage. I should be the one to go, not him."

"Regardless, we must adhere to the bylaws," Minerva began.

"Fuck the bylaws!" Armand roared, leaping to his feet.

"Armand!" Harry snapped, grabbing the much taller young man by the shoulders and shaking him.

Armand looked down at Harry with tears in his eyes. "I never meant to hurt anyone," he said softly. "I just wanted Oliver to smile again."

"And I did," Oliver said quietly. "Because of you. Armand, I knew the risk I was taking. I knew what would happen if I got caught. The Headmistress is being quite kind, letting me resign. I believe her when she says she has no choice." He stood then and turned Armand to face him. "If I had known that we would be found out...if I had known it would end this way..." He swallowed thickly. "I would have loved you anyway."

"Forgive me," Armand whispered, his arms going around Oliver's waist and his head dropping down to rest on Oliver's shoulder.

"There's nothing to forgive," Oliver assured him, rubbing comforting circles on the younger man's back. After a moment, he gently pushed Armand away. "I have to go and pack," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Armand watched Oliver turn and walk quickly towards the door. "So do I," he called out.

Oliver turned. "What?" he asked incredulously.

"So do I," Armand repeated. "I have to go and pack."

"Armand," Oliver began.

"No. I deserve the same fate as you. I'm going to pack my bags, and then I'll go to my father in Egypt."

"He'll be furious," Harry cautioned Armand quietly.

"He'll understand. Uncle Fred never made it through to his NEWTs, and he's done just fine. And so will I," he said resolutely. With that pronouncement, he opened the door and stepped out, a wide-eyed Oliver following close behind.

\*

Despite further arguments from both Oliver and Harry, Armand stayed his course. He packed his trunk, said goodbye to his cousins and the Malfoy children with promises to stay in touch by owl, and met his father in the entryway.

As Harry predicted, Bill was furious that his son had quit school. But as Armand had known, he was quite understanding once he heard the whole story.

And so at seventeen Armand Delacour entered the adult wizarding world and never looked back.

## Vignette Two - The Girls

"Three 'O's and two 'E's, Harry!" Draco cried. He took the newly-arrived letter from Sera's hand and looked it over, as if needing to see the NEWT results for himself.

"Yes, I heard, Draco. Congratulations, Sera," Harry said, giving the young woman a hug.

Draco gently tugged Sera from Harry's arms and hugged her tightly. "Do you have any idea how proud I am of you?"

"It's fairly obvious, I would think," Harry teased.

"I don't see what the bloody fuss is about," Damien drawled from where he lay sprawled on the sofa. "We all know Sera's a genius."

Ella Weasley, who had hurried to the Malfoy house as soon as she'd received her own results letter, cuffed Damien on the back of the head. "Behave."

"Oi! Adrian, control your wench, would you?"

"Would if I had one," Adrian replied casually as he took Ella's letter from her hand. He beamed down at her. "Even better than you'd hoped."

Ella nodded, smiling slightly.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Harry teased his honorary niece. "How well did you do?"

"O's in Potions and Charms, an 'E' in Defence, and 'A's in Transfiguration and Arithmancy," Adrian announced proudly, wrapping his arms around Ella.

"Not bad," Damien. "Especially considering she spent more time snogging you than studying this past year."

Adrian blushed but didn't deny the accusation.

"You did very well, Ella," Harry said. "I'm proud of both of you girls. Er, ladies."

Draco smiled fondly at both of the young women. "I think this calls for a celebration."

"Bergamos?" Sera asked, naming the restaurant her family typically enjoyed on special occasions.

"Whatever you two want," Draco replied.

Ella's eyes glinted mischievously. "Anything at all?"

Draco chuckled her under the chin as if she were a little girl instead of a young woman of 18. "Why not? What's the point of having a family fortune if you don't spend it?"

"Hey!" Damien exclaimed. "Why doesn't that argument ever work when I use it?"

"Because I'm your father, Damien. I'm supposed to make you earn your own way so you'll appreciate what you have. At least that's what Harry keeps telling me."

"Don't you dare blame it on Harry, Dad. You know he'd spoil us all blind if you didn't stop him."

Ignoring her brother and father's good-natured bickering, Sera engaged in a whispered conversation with her best friend. "Dad," she said, interrupting the argument. "Bergamo's is fine. Can Ella invite her family?"

"My immediate family," Ella said with a grin. "Certainly not the whole motley crew."

Draco laughed. "If it's only your immediate family, then yes, of course you can invite them."

Ella bounced up from the arm of the sofa and squeezed Draco in a brief hug. "Thank you!"

"You can Floo them from the kitchen," Harry suggested.

"Oh, no. I'll have to go home to change, anyway. It wouldn't do to wear Muggle clothes." She turned and pressed a kiss to Adrian's cheek. "I'll see you tonight."

Adrian barely had time to nod before Ella disappeared with a crack.

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The Weasleys were already seated when Draco and his family arrived at the restaurant that evening. Fred was pinned in a corner, the younger of his two children - six-year-old George - seated on his lap. Beside him was an empty chair - presumably George's. On the other side sat his wife, Angelina. Ella was seated beside her step-mother, her eyes fastened on the door.

Adrian's face lit up, as it always did when he caught sight of Ella, and he greeted her with a warm hug before acknowledging the rest of her family. Harry and the Malfoys said their hellos and took their seats, exchanging small talk as they looked over the menus. Angelina, it seemed, knew Italian as well as Draco; she was kept busy translating the menu for her husband who only winked at Harry when he suggested a translation charm.

The orders were placed and a toast drunk to the two Hogwarts alumni. Sitting his goblet aside, Harry turned toward Ella. "So what are your plans now that you've left school?" he asked.

"I'm going to work for Dad," Ella began.

"Turned down an offer from the Harpies!" Fred exclaimed.

Angelina sighed in exasperation. "Oh, you're not still on about that, are you?"

"Do you think I would even consider playing professional Quidditch after Angelina's horror stories? I'd rather work for Wheezes, thanks."

"Five NEWTs and going into the family business," Fred said. "Mum's livid."

"You never seemed too interested in your dad's business before," Harry noted. "Why now?"

Ella bit her lip, looking rather sheepish. "I'm just not very ambitious, I guess. I don't care much about money or power, which Dad seems to think I should be ashamed to admit. I know he's secretly pleased that I want to work with him, though."

Fred beamed at his daughter. "I didn't think it was much of a secret, actually."

There were a few scattered laughs. George drew his parents attention for a moment by upsetting his pumpkin juice. Luckily, a quick spell took care of the mess and the server was quick to bring him another cup of juice.

Once things calmed again, Angelina turned Harry's question on Sera. "Have you decided what your plans are?"

"She's known for years," Damien said. "She's going to be a Healer." Anyone could see he was proud of his sister.

"Going to train at St. Mungo's?" Fred asked.

"Actually....well, I've applied for a special training program. It incorporates medical ideology and techniques from different wizarding cultures. I'd be learning at a number of different locations."

Harry carefully laid his fork aside and looked up at his step-daughter. "You're going away to school?"

"Erm...yes."

Draco looked stunned, but to his credit managed to keep his voice calm. "For how long?"

"Two years. I can come back to St. Mungo's for my third and fourth." She watched her father's expression turn momentarily stormy and then go blank. "Please don't be angry with me."

Taking a deep breath, Draco caressed his daughter's cheek. "I'm not angry, Sera. I'm....surprised, I guess. But I'm very proud of you. I know this programme is quite prestigious, and you've always felt the need to push yourself. If it's what you want, then I'm pleased for you."

"Liar," Sera said softly.

Draco laughed. "Am I that transparent? All right, I'm not pleased at all that you're leaving, but I'll get over it. I'm just not ready for my children to grow up and move away."

"You've still got me and Adrian, Dad."

"For a while at least," Adrian said.

Ella gave Adrian a sharp look. "I don't think now's a good time."

"Not a good time for what?" Draco asked.

All eyes were suddenly on Ella and Adrian, even little George's.

Adrian flashed everyone his brightest smile. "Eleanor has agreed to be my wife."

Congratulations rang out around the table, and Fred welcomed Adrian to his family with a hearty handshake. Draco, however, sat quietly, just staring at his son.

"Dad, this is the part where you say 'congratulations' and give us your blessing," Adrian said gently.

Draco opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again and shook his head.

Giving Adrian a reassuring smile, Harry scooted his chair closer to Draco's and began rubbing soothing circles on his back. "Breathe," he murmured. He turned slightly in his chair to face Damien. "Anything you'd like to drop on your Dad? One more shock might put him 'round the bend for good."

A slight smirk appeared on Draco's face. "I've been 'round the bend' for years, Harry. Why else would I have put up with you all this time?"

"I thought it was because I give sensational head," Harry deadpanned.

Angelina immediately dissolved into an undignified fit of giggles, a perfect counterpoint to Fred's deep chuckle. Draco's children all looked either disgusted or mortified, but Ella was trying valiantly to squash a few giggles of her own. George, who of course didn't get the joke, looked bewildered.

Forcing away a smile, Draco leaned over and pressed a kiss to Harry's lips. "You're horrid." Turning his attention away from Harry, Draco raised his goblet. "A toast then. To my son and future daughter-in-law. May you find as much happiness with one another as I have with Harry."

"And as I have with Angelina," Fred added.

"Hear, hear," Angelina cried heartily.

Damien smiled and raised his glass. "Yes, to the happy couple." He paused as everyone drank to the young lovers. "You'd best marry her quick, Adrian, before she comes to her senses."

"She has a year to change her mind. We're to be married next June," Adrian said.

Ella huffed. "I'm not going to change my mind. Not in a year, not in a hundred years."

"Poor girl," Damien said. "You've no idea what you're getting yourself into."

"Damien," Draco said levelly. "Do shut up."

Damien promptly stuck his tongue out at his father who couldn't help but grin back at him. It was good to know that at least one of his children wasn't in any rush to grow up.

Heartened, Draco allowed himself to relax. His time with his daughter and youngest son was limited. For now, he would enjoy each moment he had with them. There would be time for his sorrow after they had gone.