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Author Name: [Crikkita](#)

Owl the author: [here](#).

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Summary: Draco wants a rematch, Hermione wants some answers, Ron wants things back the way they were, and Harry just wants a good night's sleep. A coming-out tale in the life of a famous young wizard, complete with meddling professors, 'fowl' play, first love, and some truly excellent friends.

Prologue: A challenge, a rematch, and a reconsideration of enmity.

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Author's Notes: This fic is dedicated to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (U.S.A.), to the [Human Rights Campaign](#), to all the same-sex couples who have been married legally in my original home state since 17 May 2004, and to all the friends and family who supported them.

This chapter is dedicated with many smooches to my lovely betas (in alphabetical order), CopperBeech and Petunia. Many thanks to both for all their patience and many, many excellent suggestions! Petunia, you get first dibs at Draco's sausage.

Thanks must also go to JKR for making me love Harry, to [Cassie](#) for making me love Hermione, to Rupert Grint for making me love Ron, and to [Maya](#) for making me love Draco and slash.

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## Prologue: Metamorphosis

It started the Monday morning after the Slytherin-Griffindor Quidditch match, just after breakfast.

It started in the dungeons, outside the Potions classroom, when Ron and Hermione passed through the doorway a few steps ahead of Harry.

It started with a voice from the shadows, appearing suddenly in his ear: "This isn't over, Potter. I want a rematch, just you and me."

Harry didn't need to turn and look in order to identify the speaker, but he did. Even in the shadows of the torch-lit hallways, the white-blond hair glowed as if lit from within.

"What's the point, Malfoy? We won. I'll just win again."

"Your *side* beat my *side*, Potter. I'm talking about pure Seeker skill. Just you, me, and the Snitch. Who can spot it, and who can get there first." Despite his disadvantage in height, Draco Malfoy stepped closer to increase the pressure on his adversary.

"You're mad. I've beaten you in every match since Second Year -"

"- Except Fourth Year," interrupted the Slytherin, "when there was no Quidditch -"

Harry gave the other boy an exasperated look. "Well, it's Seventh Year now, and I've beaten you *again*. You can't change the name on the Quidditch Cup. Leave it." Harry turned to enter the classroom, but Malfoy's hand on his shoulder brought him back.

The Slytherin narrowed his eyes. His lips curled into the signature smirk that always tempted Harry to sacrifice a large number of House points. A perfectly nasty hex had come to mind just now...

"Scared, Potter?" sneered the World's Biggest Prat.

It was Harry's turn to try on the smirk: "You wish."

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"We'll need a referee, of course."

Malfoy turned away from some story Goyle was telling - sounded like something about a Surveillance Charm and a mirror in the sixth-year Hufflepuff girls' dormitory. Harry was met by a double wall of glares from the entire Slytherin table.

A faintly amused regard contrasted with the spiteful expressions that surrounded it. "Why Potter, I'm wounded," drawled the prefect extravagantly. "Are you saying you don't trust me to play fair?"

Malfoy slapped away Crabbe's hand, which had been trying to nick one of the sausages on his plate. Harry noticed that the two ogre-like bodyguards had learned something about stealth, and their very continued presence after O.W.L.s was a testament to brains that belied their brutish looks. Clearly, though, the minions were still no match for their master.

Harry let a sparkle of amusement touch his eyes. Coming from Malfoy, that response had almost been friendly. "We need a referee, Malfoy. Obviously, it can't be a Gryffindor or a Slytherin. And let's stick to students only. Come up with three names, and so will I, and we'll meet after lunch to see whether we can agree."

Pewter eyes examined Harry for a moment, considering the proposal. The blond head tilted lightly to one side, then moved fractionally, just once left and once right. Malfoy's economy of motion gave the impression that his opponent didn't merit any greater exertion.

"No, I don't think I'll jump to your command, little leader o'Gryffindor," teased the hated drawl. "We have a perfectly worthy Quidditch expert on staff, why not ask Madam Hooch?"

Harry sighed wearily. "Why should we bother Madam Hooch with your *little* challenge, Malfoy?" As much as he was trying not to let the other boy get to him, the 'little leader' comment rankled a bit.

Malfoy shrugged in mock-indifference. "*You* were the one who wanted a referee, Potter. *I* am merely the one who knows, all too well, whom the other two Houses support when the Lion meets the Snake." For effect, he drew out the sibilant consonant in the last word.

"And *you*," reminded Harry, "were the one who wanted this contest at all." He crossed his arms defiantly. "Make your list. No referee, no rematch." He turned to walk away.

As always, the drawl dragged him back. "Ah. So it *is* that you're scared." Malfoy's entire demeanor suggested a reclining Roman lord; the silver eyes, however, betrayed a hint of panic.

Harry huffed loudly. "I'm not *scared*, Malfoy. I simply already have my name on the Cup. *I* don't need to prove anything."

"Have it your way," said the Slytherin, in dismissive tones that fooled no one at the table. And for no reason at all, Harry found his heart contradicting his words: he *did* wish to prove himself against this spoiled brat, once and for all.

"Just make the list, Malfoy, okay?" Harry glared poison daggers at Malfoy. "Write your three names, and meet me after lunch."

"As I said, Potter," floated the obnoxiously unperturbed words, "have it your way. By which I *meant* -" He paused for effect. "I *meant* that I would make your silly list." He then turned back to Goyle without any further acknowledgment, leaving Harry with nothing to do but to return to his own table.

"How did it go?" inquired Hermione immediately upon Harry's return to the Gryffindor side of the Hall. Ron continued the silent scowl he had held since Harry had risen to go speak with his rival.

How indeed? Lacking the words to describe the wriggly feeling he always got around the junior Malfoy, Harry simply reported the final result of the conversation. "He's agreed." Looking between his two best friends, he continued, "Now who's a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff that we'd trust as a referee?"

As his friends' heads bent closer to his, Harry thought how grateful he was to have such strong allies. He was convinced there must be some hidden agenda in Malfoy's challenge, but with Hermione and Ron on his side, they would be sure to catch it in time.

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"Is this a joke, Malfoy?"

"Not at all, Potter. You said three names, I gave you three names."

Harry rounded on Malfoy, staring at him incredulously. "*Zacharias Smith*."

Malfoy sniffed imperiously. "Smith is an excellent judge of character."

"Smith *hates* me," Harry muttered miserably.

"As I said. Excellent judge. I suppose you'd prefer -" Malfoy consulted Harry's list. "*Padma Patil*? Really," he snorted aristocratically. "Twin sister in Gryffindor. How do I know you wouldn't just switch them?"

Harry stopped short. He hadn't even *thought* of doing that. Good idea, though. Leave it to Malfoy to think up something so completely, brilliantly underhanded. Harry had no love for his adversary, but he had to admit that the Slytherin was unequaled in the fine art of cheating.

The Gryffindor stifled his grin of appreciation, and read the next name on his opponent's list. "Michael Corner? Now, really. He's been rather evil toward Gryffindor ever since the end of Fifth Year." Harry grit his teeth, determined to maintain the civil tone of the conversation. If Malfoy could pretend to be somewhat less of a prat than usual, Harry wasn't going to be the one to start a fight.

"Yes, he has," replied Malfoy with a content smirk. "Delightful chap."

"And I suppose it doesn't besmirch his character that he was dumped by Ginny," Harry commented in a manner that he hoped was airy.

Silver eyes snapped up to their malachite counterparts. "The *Weasley* dumped *him*? I always assumed your little failed conquest - what's-her-name, the Seeker - snatched him out of Little Weasel's paws."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Malfoy's comment on his pitiful romantic life, but shook his head.

Malfoy whipped a quill out of his schoolbag, grabbing his list back with the other hand. "In that case," he said, crossing out the name with an obvious flourish, "forget him." Malfoy grimaced, muttering under his breath, "Dumped by a *Weasley*. Really, it's beneath contempt."

He returned his list to Harry, who scowled at the commentary on his adopted family, but held his tongue. Malfoy looked again at the parchment he'd been examining. "And Justin Finch-Fletchley? You *must* be joking. Really, Potter, a *Mu-*"

"Don't say it, Malfoy!" snapped Harry.

"-ggle-born?" finished the blond boy obligingly, rolling his eyes. "Not if my very *life* depended on it!"

Ah, yes. Somewhat less of a prat than usual, but still sticking to his Pure-Blood Supremacist upbringing. Harry supposed he shouldn't have expected any better.

"Well, *you* chose Smith, and he's Muggle-born, too," retorted the Gryffindor defiantly.

"He's never!" burst the Slytherin. A beat passed while Malfoy stared searchingly at his adversary. "Ugh! Give me that list back!" Malfoy reclaimed his parchment for more flamboyant scratching-out.

Harry was definitely not even a teensy-weensy bit amused. Malfoy's racism was no laughing matter. It was disappointing, in fact: The Slytherin had been so civil, for Malfoy, ever since making the challenge, that Harry had hoped Malfoy's character might have improved. If Malfoy started acting decently, wasn't that like admitting that Harry's set of values had been the right one all along? Perhaps not, but Harry never passed up an opportunity to feel as though he'd bested the other boy in some way.

Harry almost had to laugh at himself, though: a little bit of dramatic flair, and suddenly he was *enjoying* this meeting?

He shook his head slightly, attempting to clear it. He and Malfoy were *enemies*. They *hated* each other. No matter how *familiar* each other's ploys may have become, they still only felt *disdain* and *anger* toward each other. Harry gave himself another brief shake, and returned to reading the list in his hand.

"Hmm, Malfoy, dare I even ask what made you include Terry Boot?" He cocked a sardonic eyebrow at the other boy.

Malfoy's polished veneer showed its first crack. "Now, hold on. I know for a *fact* that Boot is a Pure-Blood, and he has never so much as *touched* a Weasley -"

His indignation swelled comically, and it was right about then that Harry caught himself feeling vaguely affectionate toward the insufferable Slytherin. *No, no! Hatred! Anger! Scorn!* This whole joviality thing was just not on. Only, Harry knew Malfoy well enough by now to know how he would react to almost any stimulus, which made it sort of fun to goad him this way.

"Hmm..." Harry drew out the suspense for a moment, watching the other boy look fit to burst, and then took pity. "No, I suppose not," he remarked, as though commenting on the weather. "It's just that he's such an insufferable bore. Right up your alley, I see."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "Well, I'm sure as hell not agreeing to Loony Lovegood! Barking mad, that's right up *your* alley, isn't it?" Really. Resorting to parroting Harry's jibes back at him. Harry had thought Malfoy had better material than *that*. "And anyway, she wore that big lion's head for our match in Fifth Year."

"Oh, she'd be completely nonpartisan," offered Harry with a smirk. "Absolutely, positively, objective in every way."

"I don't think," growled Malfoy.

The Slytherin eyed Harry for a moment longer, before he crumpled his parchment angrily into a ball, and turned to storm off toward the main doors.

"What -" stuttered Harry after him, too much in shock to keep from speaking. "Where are you going?"

"To see Hooch," replied Malfoy flatly over his shoulder. "We tried *your* way." His tone gave all the explanation necessary as to his opinion of Harry's plan. "Now we're doing *mine*."

Harry knew he was perfectly within his rights to stand still, to refuse to follow Malfoy or to bow to his wishes. But he was just so morbidly curious.

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Harry stormed after Malfoy as they left Madam Hooch's office. "Nicely done, I don't think!" he railed. "Now what are we going to do for a referee?"

Malfoy marched briskly back toward the castle, apparently trying to pretend that he didn't hear the appalled Gryffindor. Harry was having none of it, however. This rematch wasn't even his idea, and it had eaten up half his day already, and now Malfoy had all but ensured that it wouldn't take place. A few jogged paces allowed him to catch the elbow of the other boy, who whirled to meet him. Two spots of high color on the Slytherin's pale cheekbones warned of his wrath, but Harry pushed on.

"You wanted this rematch, Malfoy!" barked Harry. "Why did you have to go and do that?"

"Do *what*, exactly, Potter?" hissed the Slytherin. Silver fire danced dangerously in his eyes.

Harry gave an exasperated sigh. "You can't treat people like that! Especially staff! It's no wonder Hooch refused to referee -"

"Oh, yes, it's always the *Slytherin's* fault, isn't it?" sneered Malfoy, with a wounded air that seemed surprisingly genuine.

Harry had reached the end of his patience. "No, you're right!" he spluttered in the other boy's face. "Madam Hooch seemed *delighted* to have you call her a 'cretin'! And she was positively *blissful* that you wanted her to referee for a rematch without actually adhering to any of the rules of standard Quidditch! Clearly, she was just being *prejudiced* against your poor, persecuted House!!"

"Oh, that isn't even what I meant! She just *assumed* that I didn't want to follow the rules, just like she always assumes that Slytherin is going to cheat in the matches -"

"You *do* always cheat!"

Malfoy reined in his temper, with some visible difficulty. He gave Harry a superior look, sort of the way a cat might regard an annoyingly rambunctious puppy. "I told you, Potter. I want a match of pure Seeker *skill*." He spoke slowly, as though addressing a small child. "I'm not looking to knock you off your broom ... unless, of course, you're between me and the Snitch."

By the end of this speech, Malfoy's voice had become quiet and resigned. Harry watched him for a moment, curious about the slow change in character he had witnessed over the past two years since Lucius Malfoy's arrest.

The senior Malfoy and his fellow Death Eaters had escaped Azkaban nearly as quickly as they had been sentenced, despite the vigilance of the Aurors who had taken over watching the prison after the Dementors had defected. There had been a noticeable change in the criminal's son, though, when he had returned for their Sixth Year. His air of entitlement had dimmed slightly, and a hint of quiet introspection tinged even the most obnoxious of his actions. Harry had to admit that he'd been curious about the changes.

And then... Last summer, the moment had come. The destiny of which Harry had learned only one year previously had been fulfilled. The Dark Lord was dead. The wizarding world was a better place. It still had its dark places, and there were deaths to mourn, but it was better.

Only, the improvement wasn't felt by many members of Slytherin House. A little-known effect of the Dark Mark had bound the souls of those who wore it to He who had made it; when Voldemort died, every last Death Eater was left as an empty shell, just as surely as if they had been Kissed by Dementors. Lucius and Narcissa were worse than dead.

Draco Malfoy was now, like Harry, an orphan of the War.

Harry hadn't really thought about it this way before this moment, but it was only fair. Neither of them had chosen his parents, and neither had chosen his parents' demise. Malfoy hadn't asked to be born to Death Eaters. He had seemed proud of it, true, but then again, he was what he'd been made to be: a rich brat who liked to lord his advantages over others. Lucius's ties to Voldemort had given power to both the father and the son.

Since that power had been taken away, Malfoy had become much more tolerable. He hadn't lashed out, the way he had started to do at the end of Fifth Year. He hadn't acted vitriolic or vindictive. Mostly, except on days like today, he had started to fade away.

Harry had to recognize the possibility that he almost missed the prat. Maybe that was why he was expending so much energy on this whole rematch bollocks.

"Why do you want this rematch so badly, Malfoy?" asked Harry quietly.

Malfoy's unusual eyes darted toward Harry's, then away at the Lake. "I told you. I want to prove that I'm the better Seeker, when we eliminate the other players on each side."

Harry regarded the other boy appraisingly, sure there was a deeper reason, but not sure he cared enough to dig it out of him. "Well, I don't know how you're going to get your chance, now that you've alienated the last possible referee."

Malfoy sighed and squared his shoulders. He looked at Harry more steadily now. "No, there's one more possibility. Probably the only person who will be absolutely fair, no matter what."

"Who, Malfoy?" asked Harry tiredly. "Who is there *possibly* at this school who could honestly be impartial in this match?"

"I didn't say 'impartial,'" corrected the Slytherin quietly. "But I know someone who is guaranteed to be fair."

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Harry met his friends in the common room before afternoon classes. The first to arrive, he chose a favourite squooshy armchair near the fireplace, and spent a few peaceful moments gazing into the flames before he heard the portrait creak open.

"So, mate, who's the lucky referee?" Ron bounded over the back of the couch facing Harry's chair, and sprawled himself out luxuriously.

"It's not official yet." Harry played for time, hardly believing that Malfoy's suggestion of a referee was in good faith.

Could he really be serious? Was this part of some great plot, or did Harry have to reconsider his assumptions about his enemy? Were they even still enemies? Harry's head was starting to ache just from thinking about it.

"But whom did you choose?" Hermione tumbled over the back of the couch onto Ron, giggling slightly before righting herself into a more dignified pose next to him.

She wasn't fooling anyone. Harry knew Hermione was still giddy over their relationship, even after nearly eight months as a couple, and that Ron felt the same. He couldn't help grinning at their brief display of silliness.

Harry sighed. "Well, every name on Malfoy's list was right out. And he didn't like any of mine, either."

"I *told* you he wouldn't, didn't I?" Hermione grimaced slightly. "We should have chosen people who were more sympathetic to Slytherin."

Ron looked as though he'd just bitten into a lemon. "*Sympathetic to Slytherin?! Who could possibly be sympathetic toward that snake-pit?*"

"And anyway, Hermione," added Harry, ignoring his spluttering best mate, "anyone Malfoy would have wanted would have to be someone who's been openly hostile toward me." Harry rolled his eyes. "He chose Smith, Corner, and Boot."

"Ughh," Ron's face puckered, if possible, even further.

Hermione simply nodded sagely. "That does explain why you couldn't agree." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "So what did you do?"

Harry closed his eyes, letting his shoulders slump. "Only thing I *could* do, short of backing out. We went to Hooch."

"Well, that's alright, isn't it?" Ron brightened noticeably. "Hooch has always been fair."

"Fair, yes," conceded Harry. "But she didn't take well to Malfoy's verbal abuse."

"He didn't!" exclaimed Hermione, incensed. "What did he say?"

Harry waved his hand. "The usual type of thing. You can imagine. But she refused, naturally, after that."

Ron and Hermione exchanged confused glances. "Well, whom does that leave?" asked the redhead.

"Surprisingly enough, Malfoy had a pretty good idea," replied Harry, clearly capturing his friends' interest. They leaned forward as he continued, "He said there was only one person at this school he could imagine being truly fair - not impartial, no one is, but fair. And I had to agree, he was right."

Incredulous stares met this pronouncement, but Harry knew his friends' expressions were nothing to what they were about to be.

He leveled his gaze at the Head Girl. "So, Hermione, what do you say?"

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The match was set for Wednesday evening, after dinner. By the end of afternoon classes, Harry's nerves felt like steel spikes standing out from his body in every direction. He avoided his friends, sure he would cut anyone who came too close.

He should have known by now, of course, that avoiding *his* friends was impossible.

Climbing to Gryffindor Tower to drop off his books before the meal, Harry was startled by a hearty thump on his right shoulder. "Ready to clobber Malfoy again, Harry?" Ron's grin would have been contagious if Harry hadn't felt quite so nauseous.

*I have **got** to develop better reflexes if I'm going to make it as an Auror, Harry thought as he nearly jumped out of his skin, and get better at sensing a sneak attack. If **Ron** can catch me off-guard like that, I must really be off my game!*

"Yeah," coughed Harry, in a none-too-convincing manner. "Clobber him."

"Harry Potter!" Hermione blind-sided him now from the left, coming around in front of her friend and poking a scolding finger at his chest. "I don't even want to *imagine* that I'm hearing you doubt your ability to pound that git into a pulp!"

Harry and Ron both faltered in their steps, staring slack-jawed at Hermione. She had never been fond of Malfoy, had even slapped him solidly across the face in Third Year, but this was a bit - well, a bit more like something Ron would say.

"Um, Hermione?" ventured Harry. "You *are* still planning on being a fair referee, right? I wouldn't want anyone to think I'd won because of official bias!"

"As you said, Harry," she replied primly, "I can be fair while still having a favourite. And as your *friend*, I expect to see you knock Malfoy right out of the sky!" The glint in Hermione's eyes danced in the shadowy corridor. "Legally, of course," she added as an afterthought.

Her boyfriend's face rearranged itself into a very satisfied smile. "I think I'm having a good effect on her!"

All three friends burst out laughing as they reached the Fat Lady.

*I don't know why I'm worried, Harry comforted himself. I've always beaten him before, it's just another match.*

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Stepping out of the Quidditch changing rooms that evening, wearing his House scarlet robes and carrying his Firebolt, Harry had shed any last vestiges of nerves. The dying sunshine of the May

evening washed over him, polishing the world in a golden light that made the Seeker ache to soar into the air. He always experienced the same day-of-match nerves: waking early, low appetite, knots in his stomach. Once he set foot on the grass, however, there was only him, his Firebolt, and the Snitch.

Oh yes, and a certain viridian-clad Slytherin approaching from the opposite changing rooms.

Glaring daggers at each other, more out of habit and expectation than actual enmity, the two Seekers met their referee at the center of the pitch.

*"The agreed rules of engagement are as follows:"* Hermione had clearly cast an Amplification Charm on her voice. This was necessary for her voice to be heard in the stands, where approximately every last student was seated in electric anticipation.

Harry swept the crowds with his eyes, and noticed Malfoy doing the same. Harry spotted Ron in the front row opposite him, near the center line of the pitch. Ginny and Dean sat next to him, along with several other seventh-year Gryffindors.

Harry and Malfoy both returned their attention to the Head Girl as she began to read the rules which they had set, surprisingly easily, in a conference the previous evening:

*"1. This is a match of pure Seeker skill, challenged by Slytherin Seeker Draco Malfoy and accepted by Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter. The winner of this match will be the Seeker who successfully sights and catches the Snitch before his opponent.*

*"2. All regular Quidditch rules of conduct, including fouls, apply to this game. However, no players will participate other than the two Seekers, and no balls will be released other than the Snitch. Since there are no Chasers or Keepers and the Quaffle is not in use, a foul will result in the offending player being grounded for thirty seconds before being allowed to reengage. The referee has the discretion to impose longer groundings for especially egregious fouls."*

At the announcement of this rule, Harry smirked at Malfoy, and was rewarded with a dismissive glance. Malfoy seemed genuinely disinterested in the penalties for foul play. Harry began to believe that his opponent may have been truthful about his intention to establish his superiority through pure skill, rather than the trademark Slytherin dirty Quidditch.

Harry's shoulder-blades released the last bits of tension he hadn't realized he was holding. If Malfoy didn't intend to cheat, this match was going to be simple. All Harry had to do was fly his best, and he would win.

*"3. After the Seekers have shaken hands, I will release the Snitch. I will then wait two minutes before blowing the whistle. At that point, the Seekers may take to the air, and the match will begin. The match ends when the Snitch is caught."*

When she had finished reading the rules, Hermione tapped her wand to her throat and said, *"Quietus."* She directed her regard to each of the two seventh-years in turn, saying, "Step up and shake hands."

"Good match, Potter," Malfoy surprised Harry with an unusually unguarded expression.

"Same to you, Malfoy," Harry responded, then chose to add: "May the best Seeker win."

"Well, yes." The smirk had returned. "That was the general idea."

The two boys stepped back and their palms separated. At almost the same instant, the referee unleashed the Snitch. She tapped her wand to her larynx and again spoke the word *"Sonus."*

*"Two minutes to whistle, starting now."*

The crowd began to cheer. Harry felt impatient, impotent, frustrated. He wished to be in the air, and even two minutes was too long to wait. He saw Malfoy tensing next to him, similarly anxious.

"We never should have said two minutes," muttered Harry to himself. "The Snitch is already gone."

"Steady, Potter," came the unwelcome but not-unfriendly reply. "I want to be in the air just as much as you do. But these were the rules we set."

Harry stole a look at Malfoy, whose eyes were fixed on the sky. He nodded to no one in particular as his friend announced, *"Thirty seconds. Gentleman, you may mount your brooms. Do not kick off until my whistle."*

Hermione seemed to be enjoying her role a little too much, but Harry was grateful for her presence. He knew she would be fair. And obviously, Malfoy agreed.

Harry was still bewildered that Malfoy, with his recently confirmed prejudices, had suggested a referee who was Muggle-born. And one of Harry's closest friends, to boot! Malfoy's apparent lack of sneakiness in this whole affair was rather shocking, to be honest. Harry's instincts were telling him that it might be alright to start to trust the other Seeker, but how could he?

Having dueled against Malfoy during Second Year, Harry assumed the Slytherin would kick off early. He tensed his muscles as Hermione counted down from ten, ready to leave the ground the split second that his opponent did. He was therefore almost caught off-guard when the whistle sounded and Malfoy's feet were still on the ground.

Malfoy's feet were still on the ground for only a millisecond, though. He was in the air as soon as he could legally be, and Harry shot up immediately behind him.

Finally. They were flying.

As the two young wizards streaked upward into the evening sky, the roar of the crowd became deafening. Harry began to circle the pitch, looking everywhere for a glint of gold. For a change, Malfoy was not marking him, but was instead circling opposite, as if they were weights on either end of a giant fulcrum.

On his second pass, Harry again spotted Ron in the stands and Hermione on the pitch. Their smiles shone brightly in the golden light, and he was seized momentarily by an ecstatic love for his two best friends. They were here for him, of course, whether he won or lost, and they would be here for him through anything. They had already proven that to him countless times.

Harry glanced across at Malfoy, who wore a look of grim determination. He wondered again what had truly driven this challenge, this need to revisit the question of superiority between the two of them. Harry was realizing more and more that he knew very little about his Slytherin counterpart. Malfoy was a git, Ron would say, and that's all you need to know. But Harry wasn't so sure.

He snapped out of his thoughts to notice that the noise of the crowd had died down. Malfoy continued his circumferential route, exactly opposite Harry, and the Snitch was nowhere in sight. It amused the 'youngest Seeker in a century' to observe that a Quidditch match without Chasers, Keepers, a Quaffle, Beaters and Bludgers, became an extremely dull affair for those in the stands. He was content to follow his circuit, watching his opponent out of the corner of his eye and sweeping his gaze everywhere in search of a glint of gold; however, he could feel the spectators getting bored.

As that thought flitted across his mind, causing him to chuckle, he happened to lock eyes with his opponent. The Slytherin was also smiling - the first open, sparkling *smile* Harry had ever seen on the pale face - and clearly thinking the very same thought. Noticing Harry's attention, surprise and suspicion chased each other across the grey eyes (Harry could decipher these expressions even across the pitch), then disappeared. A genuinely pleased look remained in their wake.

Acting on impulse, Harry turned sharply and flew toward the centre of the pitch. Noticing his movement, Malfoy did the same. They met halfway, flickers of the old mistrust returning to their faces now that they were at such close quarters.

"All right, Malfoy?" Harry ventured.

Malfoy's expression relaxed almost undetectably. "All right, Potter." An appraising glance raked lightly over the Gryffindor, which Harry could almost feel on his skin. "Time one of us finds that thing, shall we?" Both boys turned to resume their path, now flying shoulder-to-shoulder.

Predictably, a low murmur rose up in the crowds. Harry smirked and glanced over at Malfoy, who shared his expression. He felt as though he could almost hear Ron's incredulity at the lack of animosity between the two competitors. The amiable manner which the two Seekers shared was, considering their mutual history, probably one of the biggest scandals Hogwarts had seen since Harry had uttered words of Parseltongue during the Dueling Club, Second Year. But now, the two young wizards had tacitly agreed to set aside their petty differences and to finish this contest in the most sportsmanlike manner possible.

They didn't have to wait long. Before they had completed one lap around the pitch, Harry spotted a glimmer of gold above one of the opposite stands. Malfoy was flying so close beside him that he felt the other boy's thigh muscles tense through his Quidditch robes as both Seekers swerved to follow the winged ball. As if sensing their approach, the Snitch rocketed downward. Intent on a common target, the boys flew even closer together. Shoulders bumping together, Harry and Malfoy arced into a tandem dive. They raced each other, Malfoy surprising Harry with a burst of speed that kept him right by the Gryffindor's side. The opponents were now so perfectly matched in skill, in fact, that they moved as one, fused together from elbow to knee.

As the pair overtook the Snitch, each reached out a hand to grasp the prize. Each trying to force his body between the other boy and the ball, they only succeeded in pressing more firmly against each other. They flew as if attached, wrist to wrist, arm to arm, shoulder to shoulder, ribcage to ribcage, hip to hip and thigh to thigh. Two hands simultaneously shot forward in a final attempt to edge out a victory.

Harry gasped as he felt the Snitch against his palm. He gasped at the thrill and relief of victory, but the sound quickly became one of dismay as he realized that it was not the Snitch over which his fingers had closed.

Harry's fingers were wrapped around the back of Malfoy's hand. And Malfoy's fingers were similarly wrapped around Harry's. The Snitch was trapped between their palms.

All pretense of cooperation vanished immediately.

"All right, Potter, you've had your fun, now give over!"

"Not a chance, Malfoy, I have my hand on the Snitch. *You* give over!"

"My hand is on the Snitch just as much as yours!"

A war of wriggling fingers broke out, in which each boy tried to manoeuvre his digits closer in to the tiny orb than his opponent. They only succeeded in interlacing their fingers.

Realizing the position in which he found himself - his entire body clinging to the side of Draco Malfoy's, their hands intertwined - Harry struggled to extricate himself. He didn't know how, though, without allowing Malfoy to take possession of the Snitch.

In all the confusion and frustration, Harry was suddenly appalled to feel something twitch in the vicinity of his broomstick. *No. My body is currently attached to Draco Malfoy's. I **can't** be feeling -*

But a piercing whistle brought him back from those disturbing thoughts. He turned his head to face Malfoy's, and the Slytherin did likewise. Two eyes as silver as Sickles caught his gaze and held it. Their faces were mere inches apart. Harry's breath hitched in his chest, and he tried to convince himself that it was only a result of the exertion of flying.

"Shall we see what she wants, Potter?"

*Rather that, than dwell on what I apparently want at the moment,* Harry tried to avoid hearing himself think. "By all means."

As neither Seeker quite trusted his counterpart enough to loosen his grip, the two boys descended from the skies each with one hand still locked around their common quarry.

A perplexed and uncomfortable silence developed in the stadium.

Upon seeing them arrive, Hermione cocked an eyebrow at the pair. "Where is the Snitch?"

Harry and Malfoy exchanged a questioning look. His body still prickling from the proximity of his former enemy, Harry felt grateful for the camouflage of his voluminous robes. The humiliation of his very observant friend noticing his current condition was simply unfathomable. He held his Firebolt across the front of his body, just to be safe.

Before Harry could speak, Malfoy raised their interlaced hands. "It's here. We both have it."

"Open your hands, please." Both boys hesitated, until the Head Girl placed her own hands around theirs and fixed both of them with the same look she'd been known to give Ron when he wanted to play chess rather than study.

Their hands separated - Harry pretending not to experience a vague sense of loss at the broken contact - to reveal the tiny, fluttering sphere.

The brunette witch stared for a few seconds, giving all three a chance to hear the crowd begin to mutter. At last she nodded her head slightly, obviously coming to a decision. Casting the Sonorus Charm once again, she spoke to the stadium as a whole.

*"Challenger Malfoy and respondent Potter have both caught the Snitch. This match is a draw."*

Hermione removed the charm from her voice, and turned to the stunned Seekers. Indignant exclamations began to erupt in the stands. "Congratulations Harry, Draco. You have both won this challenge." She offered a small, apologetic smile, and turned to walk off the pitch.

In her wake stood two very frustrated, very confused young wizards.

## Part I: Undo the Expectation

### Chapter 1: Grappling

*It started with the moment they sighted the Snitch.*

*It started when the two Seekers tensed as one being, and dived as one body.*

*It started in the moment that Harry felt Draco press against his side, and started to course with the first pricklings of desire. This time, their connected shoulders rolled back to bring their chests into contact. Their touching arms wound each around the other's body, and each boy moved his free arm across to grasp his opponent's broomstick, close up between a toned pair of inner thighs.*

*Harry's breath came in ragged gasps to feel Draco's thumb caressing so lightly, aching close to where he desperately needed it to touch him. Taking the cue, he responded in kind, and was rewarded with hot breath in his ear.*

*"Yes, Potter, **yes** -" and Harry felt the blond wizard's warm, wet mouth against his neck, tracing gentle bites down his throat to his chest. The two Seekers wheeled and circled in tight, steeply diving spirals. Some detached part of his mind barely had time to wonder how this was even possible on broomsticks when the velvet voice moaned, "**Oh, HARRY!**"*

*His arms began to tingle, his robes becoming both firmer and softer, until he realized that feathers had covered his body. Draco's shout of ecstasy modulated to a shrill rasp of raptor joy. The airborne lovers were transformed into a pair of red-tailed hawks coupling on the wing, grappling and clutching each other and tumbling curve-winged through the air in hundred-foot death dives before they uncoupled and sailed outward, narrowly avoiding being bashed to death in senseless passion.*

A choked cry from his own throat wrenched Harry out of his dream. Soaked in sweat, he fell back to his pillow, gulping for air. He felt briefly relieved at his foresight, which had caused him to cast a Silencing Charm inside his bed curtains before falling asleep; he also thanked Merlin for his aptitude at Cleansing Charms. Certainly it was normal for adolescent boys to have dreams that resulted in this sort of ... situation ... but that didn't make it any less embarrassing.

The condition of his sheets, however, was nowhere near as humiliating as its cause.

A week had passed since the Seeker Rematch, and Harry had not slept a single night without reliving the moment in increasingly erotic and bizarre detail. Not that it wasn't bizarre enough that the subject of his dreams was Draco Malfoy.

Harry once again clamped down on his mind before it could stray into exploring the reasons for this recurring fantasy.

After performing a quick *Scourgify*, Harry still felt the need for a bath. Fortunately, Ron had told him the password for the prefects' bathroom, and no one would be using it at this hour. Harry gathered a change of pyjamas and his Invisibility Cloak, and snuck out of the Tower.

Luck was on the sleepless boy's side, and he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered without having encountered Peeves, Mrs. Norris, or any other of the myriad hazards awaiting students who ventured out of bed after hours. Leaning close to the correct door, he muttered, "Chudley Cannons." Clearly, it had been Ron's turn to set the password this week.

The relieved young wizard slipped through the door, sliding the bolt home and removing his Cloak in a single motion. He pulled off his pyjama top and turned toward the white marble, swimming-pool-sized tub as he started to untie the drawstring of his pants.

Simultaneous yelps of horror ripped from the two boys who found themselves facing each other: one in a thoroughly indecent state under clouds of foam, the other bare-chested and staring transfixed from the edge of the water.

"Right. Sorry. I'll just be going, then..." stammered Harry, blushing ferociously to an extent that he'd only seen a Weasley do previously.

"Wait! That is, I'm finished here. Be out of your way in a moment," responded an equally flustered Slytherin prefect.

Harry, too mortified to argue further, turned to face the wall. He willed his mind to explore any topic - any at *all* - other than the sight he was missing as a quiet splashing reported the exit of so much exposed creamy white skin from the bath.

Any topic other than that, or the role the owner of that skin had just played in his dream.

*What is he **doing**, taking a bath at this hour?*

"I didn't think anyone else would be awake," Harry babbled to cover the intriguing lapping of the water, "and Ron had given me the password and I couldn't sleep -"

His speech was cut off by the sound of the door clicking shut. He turned to find he was not, however, alone.

"Ooo!" cooed a delighted Moaning Myrtle. "Looks like *your* bath had better be a cold one!"

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Breakfast the following morning was a torturous affair.

Harry stared resolutely at his plate to prevent his eyes from wandering across the hall to a silver-blond head. Curiously enough, only the top of the head was visible as its owner also kept his gaze fixed downward. The Gryffindor had noticed this because his resolve slipped periodically, his vision wandering on its own to return to the other participant in that horrible midnight encounter.

Why hadn't he simply sat on the other side of the table, facing *away* from the Slytherin students?

Harry told himself that he hadn't thought about it, and had sat in his usual seat out of habit. He then told himself to shut it before he explored his motivations any more thoroughly.

"...and then Parkinson mispronounced the Cheering Charm and gave herself yawping hiccups that lasted 'til after dinner!!" Seamus finished a story amid the guffaws of Dean, Ron and Neville.

"Serves that cow right, doesn't it Harry?" chuckled Ron.

Harry's intended grin came out as more of a sickly grimace, his laughter hollow and unconvincing.

Several pairs of Gryffindor eyes bored into the distracted seventh-year. "What's with you?" inquired his best mate.

Harry understood in that moment how an ant must feel under a magnifying glass. "Just feeling a bit off. It's nothing." He grasped for a plausible excuse. "I didn't sleep much last night, is all." That had the advantage of being true, if incomplete.

Ron gave him a long look, while Harry silently willed him to go back to his stories. They could talk later, they could talk *never* but please oh please they didn't need to talk about it now!

Whether or not he had received the unspoken communication, Ron apparently decided to leave Harry be. Harry didn't care what sort of enquiry might await him later, although he hoped his best friend would forget about the matter entirely. All Harry knew was that he was grateful to his friend for choosing not to discuss his current mood over breakfast.

While his dormmates returned to their tales of in-class mishaps, Harry caught himself staring across the Hall again. He tried to remind himself that this was the same prat who had made his first five years at Hogwarts so thoroughly less enjoyable than they could have been otherwise. He tried to remember every moment that Malfoy had insulted Ron's family, which was as good as being Harry's own. He tried to remember every time Malfoy had called Hermione, and even Harry's own mother, by that despicable slur he used for Muggle-borns.

All that came to Harry's mind, however, was the smile he'd seen across the Quidditch pitch a week earlier. And the hot, breathy voice in his dreams. And the steam of the bath as the lithe Seeker's body had slipped out of it and away...

Harry shook himself and focused his eyes on the first thing in front of him, which happened to be a face at the far side of the Hall. A pair of shining mercury pools reflected back at him, the Gryffindor falling into their molten silver depths before he could stop himself. Harry forgot everything, basking in the glow for the gloriously brief eternity until their owner noticed his attention and glared down at the Slytherin table.

Malfoy's alabaster cheeks were not *actually* blushing a violent crimson. Harry knew they *couldn't* be. It must be a trick of the light.

A shadow in Harry's peripheral vision alerted him that another Gryffindor was observing his expression.

"Seriously, Harry," Hermione spoke quietly enough that no one else could hear, "*are* you all right?"

"Fine," chirped Harry, succeeding only in sounding strangled.

He wondered how it might feel to be the kind of person who could hide his emotions. Even all his studies in Occlumency, which he did eventually master during Sixth Year, couldn't keep his cleverest friend from seeing right through him.

"Harry James Potter, I hope you don't think I am as gullible as all that!" she hissed.

Hermione's words shocked Harry into giving her his full attention. She didn't quite look furious, but her expression portrayed something very close.

"Sorry, Hermione," replied Harry, thoroughly abashed, and thoroughly panicked. How could he explain what was going on in his head? "I - I don't know whether I can tell you."

Her face turned sorrowful, and he hated to see it. "Harry, you can tell me *anything*." The gorgeous brown eyes engulfed him in concern.

Harry returned his dear friend's gaze, feeling the guilt dig at the insides of his ribs. If only she knew.

"I can't tell you this."

Hermione's face fell. She looked away from him, and Harry couldn't discern whether she were working out her next argument or holding back tears. The heart-shaped face turned back toward him, and Harry realised with shock that it was the latter.

"Alright, Harry," she murmured softly. "I suppose you must have your reasons." She moved as if to get up and leave.

"Wait, Hermione." Harry swallowed a painful lump, along with his pride. "I don't think I'm ready to talk about this, but when I am, I promise I'll talk to you."

She regarded him steadily, and spoke almost inaudibly. "Then let's not talk about *this*. But will you meet me this afternoon? I feel like we haven't talked about *anything* in a long time."

Harry drew a deep breath. Hermione was the steadiest friend he had. She had risked losing his friendship in order to ensure his safety when Sirius had sent him the Firebolt. She had risked her very *life* to stand by him in the Department of Mysteries. If she wanted to talk, he owed her that much, even if he hadn't the slightest idea what he would say.

"It *has* been a long time since we got to talk, just the two of us," Harry conceded. He was cheered slightly to see Hermione's gentle smile return. "I'll look for you in the library before dinner?"

"You know I'll be there." The Head Girl's smile widened, so that her friend couldn't help but respond in kind.

"Just, Hermione?" Harry ventured, glancing around cautiously. "Don't tell anyone else about this, please. Not even Ron."

"Harry, I don't even know what 'this' is!"

"Just promise, Hermione."

She eyed him seriously, obviously believing the urgency in his voice. "I promise. I won't say anything, not until you're ready. But you shouldn't keep secrets from your other friends for long, either."

"I know. It's just... well, you'll understand. And thanks." He offered her a bigger smile this time, and impulsively pecked a light kiss on her temple. He really was lucky to have Hermione for a friend, and needed to remember that. "See you then."

Harry gathered his books and left the Hall, feeling so close to relieved that he almost avoided sending one more searching glance toward the wizard of his dreams. Malfoy had gotten caught up in a joke that Crabbe was telling, and the mean-spirited sneer was back.

Harry relaxed a bit. What was he thinking? A few dreams didn't change who this Slytherin brat really was. And it didn't change how Harry felt about the brat, either.

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"... to half an ounce of dragon's blood? Anyone? How about *Mr. Potter*?"

Harry snapped to attention, suddenly aware that his field of view was engulfed by drapes of black robes. Angry black eyes shined above Harry's desk, framed by strings of greasy, black hair. The trapped Gryffindor racked his brain for any trace of the words that had come out of the Potions professor's mouth in the past five minutes, but it was completely blank.

"No? How surprising." Even Snape's *voice* smirked at him. "I suppose that will be ten points from Gryffindor, then.

The black robes swished away from Harry. From across the room, he heard Crabbe's distant voice give an answer that resulted in points being awarded to Slytherin.

Bloody Snape. Even after what Harry had done to help save his life, the Potions Master still detested the son of his former tormentor. Despite having turned against the Dark Lord, Snape had been unable to rid himself of the Dark Mark for years. As the conflict drew to a head, Voldemort had used Snape's Dark Mark to torture him so frequently that the professor had had trouble continuing to teach. Dumbledore had found a way to disable the Mark, but the spell required the participation of Voldemort's mortal enemy. If Harry had not assisted, Snape would have met the same fate as the elder Malfoys.

Now, Harry knew, being indebted to two Potters was almost as torturous to Snape as whatever the Dark Lord had been able to inflict. Harry was tempted to believe that he'd been allowed to study Potions at the N.E.W.T. level only so that Snape could alleviate his own torment by abusing the Gryffindor in front of the rest of the class.

Then again, he *had* managed an *E* on his Potions O.W.L., thanks to being able to sit the exam without the slimy git breathing down his neck. And Professor McGonagall, true to her word, had helped convince Snape to allow Harry and a few other *E* students into the class.

In fact, the N.E.W.T.-level Potions class was unusually large that year. Harry suspected that an increasing number of students were interested in entering Auror training, wanting to make sure that no new Dark wizards rose to fill the void left by Voldemort's death. He, Ron, and Hermione were all there for that reason, as were Dean Thomas, Ernie MacMillan, and he suspected, Zacharias Smith. Parvati Patil and her sister, Padma, were both in the class because they planned to study to be Healers.

Harry didn't know, and didn't care why the majority of the Slytherins from his year - all but Pansy Parkinson - had enrolled in Advanced Potions. Probably they *liked* learning from their Head of House. Snape certainly still favoured his own House far above any of the other students in the class.

And *naturally*, Snape still enjoyed his sadistic little stunts. Like placing all of the students in inter-House pairings for the rest of the term. And whom did Snape *always* choose to pair with his least-favorite Gryffindor? It had been one thing at the Dueling Club during Second Year, when Harry was only expected to beat the spoiled brat into a pulp and walk away. Now he was expected to work with him, *civilly*, for nearly six weeks!

How was Harry supposed to work with Malfoy, and concentrate on his studies, when he couldn't stop thinking about the night before?

Harry slumped lower in his seat, a miserable flush rising to his cheeks. He had been trying very hard to ignore the student sitting a breath away at the same desk, but even the slightest glimpse of white-gold hair in his peripheral vision sent his mind reeling. Each flick of the slender fingers as they moved the quill across a page of notes reminded Harry of how those fingers had felt against his thigh in his dream; the dusky light of the torches in the dungeon brought to mind the tantalising way the moonlight had played over the slick, foam-coated skin in the prefects' bathroom.

Harry's attempts to conjure up images of the Slytherin's worst moments were even less successful now than they had been over breakfast. Why couldn't he remember exactly how angry he'd felt when Malfoy had taunted him on the train at the end of Fourth Year? Where was his righteous indignation at every word that had ever exited Malfoy's lips?

Oops, shouldn't have thought about Malfoy's lips.

*Ignore him, just focus*, Harry told himself. And the more Harry told himself, *Ignore him, just focus, ignore him, just focus*, the farther he got from focusing on anything else at all.

The Gryffindor became dimly aware of the other students moving around the dungeon classroom, indicating that the practical segment of the class had begun. "Um, I'll get the ingredients, then," he muttered, spotting Hermione over by the supplies cupboard with half the rest of the class.

Malfoy, who had been unusually taciturn throughout the class, didn't respond, nor did Harry wait for him to do so. He ran to Hermione's side and caught her elbow. "Help!" he hissed. "I don't know what's wrong with me, but I couldn't follow anything Snape was saying! What are we supposed to be doing now?"

"We're brewing Dreaming Draughts, Harry," responded Hermione. Her concern had clearly overruled her tendency to scold, because she instructed him, "Follow me, and I'll help you gather everything you need." She led her friend through selecting the right roots, extracts, and powders, whispering instructions for each all the while. By the time he had gathered his ingredients, Harry felt reasonably confident that he could now complete the task, as long as Malfoy did his share.

*Malfoy*. The very thought of the Slytherin's name caused sickening little flip-flops in Harry's gut. Sickening, but thrilling. How in the world was he going to manage this Potions assignment, when he couldn't even look at his partner, nor force his voice to make any intelligible sounds in the other boy's direction?

Harry settled for carrying his collection of ingredients back to the shared desk, and stood mutely, waiting for Malfoy to be ready to begin.

The normally-caustic Slytherin neither said a word to Harry, nor looked at him. Malfoy simply stood, clearing a space on the desk for Harry to lay down his armload. As the Gryffindor placed each item on the tabletop, the Slytherin organised the various herbs and powders according to the order in which they would be needed. For a while, the two students worked in uncomfortable, but peaceful, silence.

Until the moment when it came time to add the powdered squid ink.

Harry realized seconds too late that this ingredient had ended up too far out of Malfoy's reach, on his own end of the desk, where the other boy had to lean across Harry to retrieve it. Instead of managing to hand the powder casually to his partner, the startled Gryffindor grabbed frantically for the packet, nearly clasping hands with his former enemy for the second time in a week. Their fumbling resulted in Harry pressing his abdomen against the entire length of the Slytherin's robed arm.

Harry jumped back violently, but not before the contact had caught the attention of certain excitable parts of his anatomy. *No. Not here. Not now. No!* He leaned forward slightly so his robes would be sure to obscure his state of ... mind ... only succeeding in brushing his shoulder against the other boy's.

Now thoroughly flustered, the Gryffindor instinctively glanced at his partner to gauge the reaction his bizarre conduct was receiving. He was bewildered to discover that the hot flush in his own cheeks was mirrored in the other student's, as two pairs of stunned eyes stared into each other. Heart racing, Harry wrenched his eyes away and dragged his mind back to the task at hand.

Snape's voice rang out through the classroom, breaking the tension between the partners. "When you have finished, pour a sample of your potion into each of the three vials I have provided you. Label all three with both of your names, and hand them in. After I have tested your potions to assure that you brewed them properly, you will have the option of retrieving a vial to use as part of an enrichment assignment. Only those who have produced a proper Dreaming Draught will be eligible."

The Potions professor grimaced as Hermione's hand flew into the air. He ignored the girl, continuing, "As you know, for those who were paying attention," - here he shot a nasty glare at Harry - "a Dreaming Draught will neither cause nor alter your dreams. Rather, it will aid you in discovering the proper interpretation of any recurring dream you may be experiencing.

"The assignment will be to take the potion one night just before going to sleep, and to write an essay of thirty inches in length on what you learned from your dream." Harry could almost feel himself turning ashen at the prospect of writing an essay for Snape about his recent dreams. But the teacher went on, "As dreams are a topic of a very personal nature, I cannot in good conscience require you all to perform this task. If you do choose to write the essay, however, rest assured that no eyes will see it other than mine."

Harry exhaled shakily, very relieved. No way would he drink this potion or write this essay. And he didn't have to do it. So it was alright.

Movement to his left brought Harry's attention back to the desk. Malfoy spoke his first words of the class, without looking at his partner. "I think our Draught is ready. Pass me the vials, please."

*'Please'?! Okay, who are you and what happened to Draco Malfoy, Git Extraordinaire?* But this was Double Potions, and Malfoy had been sitting next to Harry for the past hour and a half. Polyjuice Potion didn't last this long, the Gryffindor knew from personal experience.

Harry continued to stare for a few moments before he realized he hadn't reacted, flushed briefly, and picked up the vials. As he passed them to Malfoy, their eyes met, just as their hands were coming into contact. Harry felt an electric jolt pass through his body, and for a moment, saw the same charge light up the liquid silver of Malfoy's eyes.

*Hang on.*

Harry's mind replayed images from the past twenty-four hours at lightning speed. He had been too flustered all day to think about anything other than how to handle his own behaviour, but now it was the *Slytherin's* reactions that interested him.

The Gryffindor's appearance in the prefect's bathroom had provided his rival with a perfect opportunity to make some snarky remark and to send him away, humiliated, but instead Malfoy had beat a hasty retreat without so much as drying his hair.

Harry had been unable to control his gaze during breakfast, again serving himself up to Malfoy for ridicule, but the other boy had barely looked up from the table all of breakfast. And when he finally did look up, and locked eyes with Harry, the flush in his cheeks... had it been real?

During Potions class, at least, Harry should have had to endure endless scathing comments from his partner, but the boy had remained silent all through this class period. As for his reaction when they had collided just now over the squid ink, and the "please"...

A disturbing pattern was forming in Harry's mind. Because, come to think of it, Malfoy had been even more silent and withdrawn since the rematch than he was beforehand.

*Oh. Wow.*

If Malfoy had been acting much the same way as Harry had been for the past week, did that mean he'd been thinking the same way? *Feeling* the same way? A lead weight dropped into Harry's midsection, giving him sort of the opposite sensation than if he'd just touched a Portkey. He'd been concentrating so hard on trying to stop these unwelcome fantasies that it hadn't occurred to him to wonder whether Malfoy were having them as well.

A long-held, well-trained reflex kicked in: *Ugh*. Malfoy having fantasies about Harry? Well, that was almost worse than Harry having fantasies about Malfoy! And as for both boys experiencing the same madness at the same time... *Double ugh*.

Through all of these thoughts, Harry continued to stare at his partner in wonder. Although still nearly unflappable, Malfoy began to squirm imperceptibly under the Gryffindor's gaze.

"Finally gone completely stupid, have you, Potter?" drawled the hated voice, but the disdain in Malfoy's eyes was tempered something unfamiliar to Harry. His best guess of a name for that 'something' would be nervousness, or perhaps curiosity...

Harry overcame his moment of distraction, now conveniently reminded of what a prat his partner was. "I should think you could spot stupidity more accurately than that," he retorted, "living as you do with two living, breathing embodiments of the condition."

The unfamiliar glint morphed immediately into the more recognizable one of malice. "Not quite true, Potter. I don't *live* with you and Weasley. We only have three classes together."

Harry glared at Malfoy, wishing not for the first time that he had the Weasley twins' gift of wit. Or Hermione's. Or anyone's that had been honed by sparring with someone a little quicker than Dudley Dursley.

"Just fill these vials, Malfoy, so we can clean up and get out of here," Harry growled. "Class is almost over." And he began the chore of gathering the unused portions of their ingredients, turning his back on the source of so many of his problems.

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Harry grumbled as he finished cleaning his desk, angry at himself for having given Malfoy a little too much credit. Make that a *lot* too much. True, the Slytherin had become significantly less of a prat than he had been for their first five years at Hogwarts, but Harry had forgotten a very important fact: 'significantly less of a prat' was, for Malfoy, still rather unbearable.

The reminder Harry had needed had come as the class was beginning to clean up. After filling the vials, Malfoy had shown a surprising flicker of willingness to help with this menial chore, but only a flicker. Malfoy worked deliberately slowly, putting away only one or two leftover ingredients in the time it took both Crabbe and Goyle to finish up, then disappeared between the two thugs as soon as they were ready to go.

Ron had gotten caught up in retelling some great Cannons Quidditch moment to Dean and Dean's partner, Zacharias Smith, and had left the room without noticing that Harry had remained behind. Hermione stopped to offer help, but Harry sent her on, promising again to meet her in the library that afternoon. He was happy to gain a few moments of solitude to consider the events of the day, even if these moments were taking place in Snape's territory.

A sneaky part of Harry even wished he might catch Malfoy alone after class, but he knew that was impossible once the blond had left with his goons. The Gryffindor mentally kicked himself for even entertaining such thoughts. What would he even say if Malfoy agreed to talk to him? Perhaps: 'Say, Malfoy, have you been having strange dreams lately? The kind where you and I are having it off on broomsticks and then suddenly turn into mating birds of prey? Just wondering...'

Or perhaps not.

Finally leaving the classroom, Harry shook his head at his own stupidity. Overactive curiosity was one thing, but whatever bizarre misfires his brain was producing on the subject of one Draco Malfoy were best left...

Harry barely suppressed a shriek of alarm as an unseen hand closed around his bicep, dragging him into the shadows of a dungeon alcove.

"Malfoy!" for it was a pale, aristocratic face that greeted Harry's in the darkness. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

An amused regard raked across Harry's flustered appearance. "Hmm," responded the Slytherin.

Harry felt the other boy's eyes running over his body like a rough caress. In the cramped space, Malfoy's warm breath feathered onto Harry's face, bringing with it vivid images from the recurring dream.

Harry licked his lips, wondering for a few wild seconds whether Malfoy's mouth would feel as good on his neck in reality as it had in his subconscious. In the stillness of the moment, nothing moved except his rapidly pounding heart. Well, *almost* nothing, but Harry was trying not to think about that.

The Gryffindor knew his rival could read every emotion and impulse, knew they must be written across his face as if in the broad strokes the other boy had used to cross the names off his referee list. The familiar smirk returned, only suddenly Harry's urge to hex it away was superseded by another desire...

Harry grasped frantically for the last straws of his composure. This was Draco Malfoy, which meant this was probably a trick. Even if part of him were starting to hope otherwise.

"What are you playing at?" barked Harry in a whisper. "Leaving me to do all the washing up, then accosting me in a darkened corridor?"

Malfoy breathed out his next words in a low purr. "Would you have preferred that I wait with you after class? Just let every last Slytherin and Gryffindor see us together?" Mercury eyes glinted tauntingly from the shadows. "Perhaps your friends are too thick to notice something like that, but mine might think it a bit odd."

Malfoy's words were more than the Slytherin had said to Harry in the past week combined. The green-eyed boy paused to take it all in for a minute, collecting himself before he could respond. Harry hoped he hadn't imagined the husky tone of want in the other boy's voice. Or maybe he hoped he *had* imagined it. His head was spinning, and he wanted to lean against the wall for support, but refused to show any more weakness than he already had.

"But why wait for me at all? Shouldn't you be running along to the comfort of your stark, cold common room right now?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed a bit, prompting Harry to remember that he wasn't supposed to know anything about the appearance of the Slytherin Common Room. The blond appeared to shrug it off, though, and replied, "Let's just say I thought you and I might have some things to discuss."

Harry's lungs froze for a moment, finding no air whatsoever in the rapidly-warming space. All too aware of the dearth of blood in his brain, Harry took refuge in an inane comment: "But won't Crabbe and Goyle notice you gone, now? They seem -"

"Yes, they finally grew brains," Malfoy murmured dismissively, never breaking eye-contact. "It's rather impressive how crafty they are these days. But," he continued, now more intent, "they still won't

question where I am, as long as they know I was last in their company. As long as they don't think I'm with *you*."

"And why *would* they think you were with me?"

"They wouldn't," responded the blond, but his eyes skittered away from Harry's.

The Gryffindor's breath caught, again, in his chest. Was he right, then? Had Malfoy been thinking about *him*, this past week, as well? Had he *talked* about him to his friends?

"They wouldn't," repeated Harry distantly, the echo turning into a question.

"Unless we gave them reason to think so, of course," replied the Slytherin, still failing to look into Harry's eyes.

Harry took courage from the other boy's evaporating composure. "And what *would* give them a reason to think so?" he inquired.

"Being seen together, of course," stammered Malfoy evasively. Harry stared into the silvery eyes until they were drawn into his. He waited for the other boy to lose enough cool that he would tip his hand a bit more.

He did. "Or if I were to talk in my sleep," the Slytherin rambled on, "but I *don't*." Malfoy finished in a boastful expression, before appearing to realize what he had just revealed. Harry could actually see the words replaying in the other boy's head, as he turned a pale grayish shade of green.

It was too much for Harry: the close quarters, the jolt he'd felt at touching Malfoy in Potions class, this near-admission of *something* like what Harry was experiencing.

He felt heat rushing to his face and his breath growing quick and shallow. Inches away, the other boy's chest began to heave slightly, almost bringing it into contact with Harry's own. In the shadows, the energy built between the rivals as surely as it had done in Harry's dreams.

Looking back, Harry was sure he'd meant to leave at that instant. The whole situation between himself and Malfoy had become intolerable, and he needed to spend a great deal of time alone to think about it. He could see himself striding out to the Quidditch pitch, Summoning his Firebolt on the way.

But his feet wouldn't move. No part of him would move. His entire world had been reduced to half a square meter of space in a nearly-pitch-black, dank stone dungeon alcove. His entire world had been reduced to one pair of shining Sickle irises, one pair of flushed porcelain cheeks, one pair of moistened pink lips...

Time did that elastic thing where it stretched into eternity, then snapped in an instant. Harry felt he had stared at the rising flush on the Slytherin's face for hours or days, only to blink and find Malfoy's soft, moist lips gently massaging his own.

Harry closed his eyes and relaxed into Malfoy's mouth. The alabaster skin felt as cool and as hot as it had ever appeared, and more. Malfoy's lips rubbed lightly and forcefully across Harry's mouth, alternately gripping and releasing his lips in a rhythm that Harry could not discern or match, so that he was quickly led to the brink of madness, and back, and there again, until bright explosions of want seared across his brain.

The pleasure was so great, so unexpected, that a small noise forced its way out of his throat. The other boy took advantage of Harry's parted lips to introduce his tongue lightly into the mix. Despite being a couple of inches shorter, the Slytherin had established complete control, and Harry was all too

happy to concede it. Malfoy's tongue tasted of mint and honey and peaches and a thousand other unspeakable delicacies as it probed the depths of Harry's mouth, danced over his teeth, and drew echo after echo of the first groan of pleasure until the Gryffindor believed it was the only sound he might ever have made.

Harry placed a hand on Malfoy's jaw and pulled him gently upward, deepening their connection. Tentatively, for he was really quite new to the world of kissing, he allowed his own tongue to follow Malfoy's lead. The two powerful muscles grazed over each other, touching and reaching and exploring and battling. Malfoy's tongue flicked behind Harry's teeth, and Harry tried to mimic the action. He felt the Slytherin's lips curl into a smile in response, and Harry imitated that, as well.

Breathing, swallowing, thinking were all functions beyond Harry's ability to control. Malfoy felt so amazing against his body, between his lips, under his fingertips. Their ribcages bumped together, fusing the way their sides had during the rematch, only now the boys' common hunt was for a much more ephemeral and precious quarry. Harry realized that Malfoy must know exactly how he was affecting him - not even his robes could hide his reaction now - but didn't care as long as this brilliant, electric heat would never leave him.

Harry had never, in his entire life, experienced any sensation that even began to compare to this. *What is this? This can't be real. I can't be doing this.*

As suddenly as the bliss had arrived, it was torn away. Draco's sleepy smile had been wiped away by a stricken expression, eyes wide in disbelief. "Oh no, Potter, I didn't - I wouldn't -" The Slytherin turned and fled down the corridor.

Too late, Harry realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

**Author's Notes:** This chapter is dedicated to my friend Lee, who inspired something you'll see from Hermione.

My beautiful betas continue to be CopperBeech and Petunia. Despite the beginning of the school year and a recent return from a faraway land, these wonderful women keep bolstering my ego so I can shyly offer you all of this...

~~~~~

Chapter 2: Venture

Harry ran out the main doors and stopped short, his heart beating frantically. His breath rasped wildly in and out of his lungs. His lips, tongue, and fingers all buzzed from the friction they'd created against the skin of Draco Malfoy.

Harry forced his breathing into a steadier rhythm. He inhaled deeply and held on, finally letting the air out slowly. This was no time to panic.

He needed to get hold of his emotions. He needed to find Draco, and explain. No, he needed to go flying and think about what just happened. No, he needed to keep his feet on the ground and all of his bones intact. He needed to talk to someone. He needed to be alone.

He needed to sit down. Right. Now.

Harry dropped onto a small, smooth boulder just past the castle walls. A few minutes with his head hung between his knees helped his vision clear. The blazing fog was lifting. He no longer felt faint.

He felt wonderful.

A gentle breeze rippled the surface of the lake. The giant squid gave a few lazy rolls and continued its sunbathing.

Harry's heart surged with the beauty of the afternoon, of the sunlight, of the grounds, of life in general. He had just experienced the most incredible moment of his young life, and nothing in the world was less than perfect. He sighed, smiled, and closed his eyes, turning his face to the breeze. He couldn't remember a time in his life when he had been so excited to find out what would happen next.

It struck him as strange that he was so happy. His first reaction had been frantic. He'd kissed Draco Malfoy! Or Draco Malfoy had kissed him. Harry drew himself up, concerned that he wasn't sure which of them had initiated the contact.

But did it matter? They had both been full, willing participants in that unbelievable moment. Until Harry had allowed his disbelief to become audible.

It *did* seem odd to feel happy. Upon waking from his dreams this past week, he'd been exhausted, and terrified at the implications. But now that he had held Draco's jaw under his hand, and felt those exquisite lips curl against his, he couldn't feel anything but ecstatic. And why shouldn't he be? He'd never felt so alive as in those fleeting moments in that dungeon corridor. Only flying even came close.

Alright, he *would* have to think about what this meant. It was obvious, wasn't it? He had clearly just enjoyed, very much, kissing Draco Malfoy. Who was clearly, very much, a boy. So.

Well, it was obvious. Wasn't it?

Harry's mind skittered away from the train of his thoughts. There was something momentous he was in the process of realising, but he wasn't sure he was ready. He was ready to realise it, that was, especially if it meant more experiences like the one he'd just had with Draco.

But realising meant revealing. And revealing meant telling his friends. Telling *Ron*.

Harry's stomach twisted itself slowly. Hermione would understand, would accept him. Probably Ginny, too. But *Ron*?

The conflicted boy shook his head. Worrying about his friends' reaction wasn't going to solve anything right now. He had to worry about his own feelings first.

Harry forced himself to think the words: *I am gay*.

He had expected to feel ill when he finally admitted it, as he had when his subconscious had coughed up its bizarre images all week. Instead, he felt lighter, more free.

This is who I am: I. Am. Gay.

Harry inhaled deeply, straightening his spine as he stretched his neck upward. *I'm gay. Alright.* A slow smile spread across his features.

It all made sense now!

Harry had watched most of the other Gryffindor boys go through crushes and relationships almost monthly, and wondered why he could never muster much enthusiasm for the subject of what colour knickers Lavender Brown might be wearing today. He'd thought maybe he was too occupied with his struggle against Voldemort to take part in such frivolous discussions.

But he *had* noticed the way the rivulets of water had followed the contours of Oliver Wood's back muscles the first time they'd showered after Quidditch practice.

He'd only ever had one crush on a girl - Cho Chang - and once he'd actually had the chance to date her, had found himself mysteriously uninterested. Their one kiss, the only kiss of Harry's life until this afternoon, had been a disappointingly uninspiring event. The Gryffindor had naively assumed that he just didn't like kissing very much.

Now, however, he understood that he just didn't like kissing *Cho* very much.

It wasn't only Cho. He hadn't even tried to show Parvati a good time when she had accompanied him to the Yule Ball during Fourth Year. He had never thought of Hermione or Ginny as anything but a sister, even before they were going out with his friends, and even though they had both grown into beautiful young women.

He had racked his brain to understand why he wasn't head-over-heels for at least one of them, but hadn't had an answer until now.

As The Boy Who Lived, the famous Harry Potter had always been dimly aware that he'd had many more options than these. Literally dozens of young women - including some of the visiting Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students when Harry was only fourteen - would have given themselves to him simply for the chance to spend a few moments close to greatness. And Harry hadn't given them so much as a second thought.

Would any heterosexual adolescent boy have missed all of these opportunities? His supposedly "noble" character didn't come close to explaining it. Harry simply hadn't been interested.

Harry's thoughts drifted back to the appealing image of Oliver in the shower. How could he have failed to notice how attracted he had been to the older boy?

Oliver Wood had captured Harry's fancy from the first moment Professor McGonagall had pulled him out of Defence Against the Dark Arts to meet the new Seeker. The Captain and Keeper managed to temper his insane zeal for winning at Quidditch with a simultaneous patience for Harry's lack of experience at the game. When Harry had raced for the Snitch, it had always been with thoughts of Oliver's beaming approval in his head. He had hated himself for losing to Cedric Diggory in that match Third Year.

And Cedric. Who, despite his overbearing father, had always been gracious and sportsmanlike. The Hufflepuff Seeker had treated Harry kindly and fairly, even when Harry stole his thunder as the extra Hogwarts champion for the Triwizard Tournament. Cedric, who should have been the winner of the Tournament, and should have lived to enjoy the thousand-Galleon prize purse, which Harry had instead donated to Fred and George Weasley.

Harry consciously straightened his shoulders, which had started to stoop at thoughts of Cedric. When he'd killed Voldemort, Harry had promised himself that he would no longer blame himself for the deaths he had failed to prevent. He had done all he could, which was to avenge those lost souls, and that would have to be enough.

Anyway, he had to laugh to himself at the thought of the twins, whose irrepressible sense of humor never failed to lighten Harry's heart. Harry had to laugh *at* himself as he recognised their undeniable appeal. Their quick wits and Quidditch-toned bodies had always led Harry to vie for their attention. Harry may have been an honorary member of the Weasley family, but he had been fooling himself to believe that his feelings for Fred and George were purely fraternal. Fred *or* George, Harry amended to himself. The two were so inseparable that it was easy to think of them as one person, but Harry liked the twins even more for their subtle differences. For instance, in that post-match brawl with Malfoy during Fifth Year, Fred had been harder to restrain from thumping the snotty Seeker, but it was George who had ultimately joined Harry in the fray.

And of course, Draco Malfoy. Harry had really, truly hated the prat until last week. He remembered the fury which had led him to try to punch every inch of the boy's body in that altercation, but the memory came to him all fuzzy, as though recorded on old film. Since he'd started to see a more human side of the Slytherin, the nasty events of the past had faded away, and the face which had once seemed unattractively pointy had taken on a new appeal.

An unconscious smile twitched at the corners of Harry's mouth as he replayed again the events that had just taken place in the dungeons.

The buzz was fading from his lips and fingers, his heart was calming, and he was beginning to be able to think about the episode coherently. He knew he should be more concerned about the look he'd seen on Draco's face right after those awful words had slipped from Harry's mouth. But it was so clear: Harry had feelings for Draco, and Draco returned them. Sure, they'd had a minor misunderstanding, but with a bit of careful communication, Harry would be kissing that mouth again and again in the very near future.

Harry's grin spread across his face at that thought, and a quiet, gleeful chuckle escaped his lips.

"Well, it's nice to see you happy, at least."

Harry whirled to face the unexpected arrival. He really *shouldn't* have been surprised, actually. It was Hermione's nature to come looking for him when he forgot to meet her somewhere.

Good Merlin, thought the startled boy, *she is sneaky!*

"Hermione," Harry exhaled. "You are getting even stealthier! I'm impressed!"

Hermione looked baffled. "Harry, I just clumped across the grounds about as quietly as Fang could have." Hagrid's oversized boarhound was not known for his silence.

"Oh. Then, I must have forgotten how to sense a sneak attack." Harry's grin still refused to leave his mouth, so he directed it at his friend.

"I wasn't sneak- Harry, I would think you should be a bit more concerned about that! What about Auror Training?"

"Oh, Hermione, lighten up!" Harry's grin broadened in a way that he sensed might be quite Weasleyish, and this made him snicker a bit at his recent thoughts. "It's a beautiful day. I'll train my reflexes later."

Hermione eyed him suspiciously. Almost *too* suspiciously. Was he really acting *that* unusually?

She stepped forward challengingly. "First Year, when you and Ron knocked out the troll in the bathroom, what particularly disgusting thing happened to you?"

Harry gaped. "My wand got stuck up its nose. Why?"

Hermione relaxed visibly. "Sorry. For a moment there, I was suspecting Polyjuice."

Harry was starting to understand why Ron had always called her 'mental.'

She smiled. "Well, you're not what I expected to find, are you? I came out here looking for the Harry Potter I just left behind in the Potions dungeon. You know, the one with the hunched-over shoulders and permanent brooding expression? And then I come out here and find a Harry Potter looking about ready to jump for joy, with a happy sparkle in his striking green eyes..."

Harry blushed and looked away, trying to hide his grin.

Hermione continued, "The Harry Potter *I* know was supposed to meet me in the library after class, but I thought I saw him come out here -"

Harry's smile turned gentle. "I know, Hermione. Sorry I didn't come find you. I just had some thinking to do on my own."

Hermione mirrored his expression. "That's alright, Harry, I understand."

Harry's euphoria was faltering quickly. "Anyway, I thought you'd be pleased to see me in a good mood!"

As happy as he was to have Hermione with him, her presence meant the time had come for the first revelation. Well, the sooner he said it, the sooner he could deal with it.

So. *Say it.*

But Hermione was already responding to Harry's accusation. "Of *course* I'm pleased, Harry! I was so worried about you this morning at breakfast, and then in Potions..."

"Yes, about that."

Hermione fell quiet to let him speak. Which he didn't.

Her eyebrows traveled slowly upward.

Finally, Hermione's curiosity won out. "*What* about that, Harry?"

Just tell her!

Blink.

"Harry?"

Right. Anytime now.

"Hermione, I..."

Hermione stood looking expectant, then patient, then impatient, then worried.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Hermione."

She was starting to look nervous.

Great, she's going to think I'm in love with her or something.

Harry squared his shoulders and inhaled slowly. *No time like the present.*

"... come on, let's go for a walk."

Wimp.

Hermione exhaled her impatience away. "Sure, Harry," she replied with a smile, linking her arm through his as they turned to follow the path he'd been meandering.

And to her credit, she walked silently by Harry's side for nearly ten minutes. As both friends drank in the glory of the afternoon sunlight, the clever witch allowed her friend to take all the time he needed to find his words. For that, he was extremely grateful.

Harry's mind, meanwhile, was reeling.

Saying the words to himself in his mind had felt so right. As he tried to speak them aloud, however, all he could think was, *Once I say it, I can't take it back. Once I say it, everything changes. What will she think? She'll make me tell Ron. What will **he** think?*

As easy as it had been to bring himself to the truth of his orientation, Harry was surprised by the difficulty of telling Hermione. Because once he told someone, it would be *real*.

*Right, then. There's nothing for it but the old Gryffindor spirit. I'll just, you know, **go for it**.*

Harry stopped walking, and turned toward Hermione, dropping her arm. She looked at him questioningly, but summoned up an encouraging smile, obviously sensing that the moment had come for him to tell her what was on his mind.

Faced with the challenge of explaining the process of his realisation to his friend, Harry fell back on doing what Harry did best: Harry babbled incoherently.

"Hermione, there's something I wanted to tell you, and really I just figured it out myself, I mean I suppose I had suspected it for a while, and then I started having these dreams, but you wouldn't want to hear about that. The point is something happened today, I think it's something good, I don't know just yet, but the thing that was definitely good is it helped me realise, well I had suspected for a while, oh I said that already. I didn't *know* I suspected it, that is, but, I mean, that must be where the dreams came from, but you don't want to hear that part, but the point is."

Harry drew a deep breath. Maybe babbling wasn't the solution, after all.

Hermione continued to listen silently and attentively, actually appearing to have followed all that had just flowed from her friend's mouth.

Hermione really was terrific.

Hermione was dependable.

Hermione could be counted on to take the news calmly, and to support Harry completely.

"Hermione, I think - no, I *know* - that ... I'm gay."

Hermione's reaction was nothing like what Harry had expected.

Hermione let out a joyous shriek and bounced forward, engulfing Harry in an enthusiastic hug.

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful!"

Um?

"It is?"

"Of course it is! Why wouldn't it be?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Aren't *you* happy about it, Harry?"

Harry stopped to consider the question. Yes, now that it was out in the open, he *was* happy.

Harry smiled and nodded.

"But ... you're not surprised?"

Hermione failed to choke back her giggle.

"Harry, you and I have been best friends since we were eleven."

"Yes..."

"And, not to sound conceited, but you never once gave me the impression that you were thinking about me *that way*."

"Okay..."

She gave him a superior look, the type she always wore when about to quote from *Hogwarts, A History*.

"It's psychologically impossible for straight, adolescent boys and girls to spend as much time growing up together as we have, and not at least *consider* it."

Harry bristled. "How do you know I wasn't just staying out of Ron's way?"

Her expression turned warm. "You're a good friend, Harry, but you're also human. Your friendship with Ron wouldn't have stopped you from thinking about it, at least for a moment."

She had a point. "And you're sure I would have?"

"Ouch."

They shared a laugh. "No, I didn't mean it that way! I just meant... Hang on. Did *you* think of *me* - ?"

"Well, of course I did," she replied briskly. "It would have been psychologically impossible not to have."

Harry noticed Hermione blushing slightly. She so rarely blushed that Harry was almost shocked.

She smiled at him softly. "But it was only very briefly. I could tell that *you* weren't interested in *me*."

"Could you."

"In fact, I think that was when I began to suspect that you might have been *uninterested* in me, *categorically*."

Harry blinked. "*Categorically*."

"As in the category of female -"

"Yes, I know what you meant!" he snapped impatiently, but with a sparkle of amusement in his eyes.

The sparkle turned to resignation. "When?"

Hermione blushed again. It was actually a very good look for her. He hoped Ron got to see it more often.

"End of third year. After I put that time-turner chain around both of our necks. We were so close together, and you were so full of all this energy. But even though you put everything on the line to save me that night, I could tell you were acting out of friendship, and nothing else."

Harry absorbed this.

"So you thought about me *that way* for a grand total of three hours?"

"I think it was actually a little less..."

"Oh, thanks."

"Well, what did you expect? It was obvious I wasn't going to get anywhere. Why waste my time?"

Hermione was nothing if not practical.

"So you knew I was gay *four years ago* and didn't bother letting me in on it?" Harry didn't need Hermione's glare to know that was a ridiculous statement, so he abandoned it. "But, so, this isn't weird for you?"

"Weird?" Hermione looked at him as if he'd gone barmy. "What would be weird? My two best friends have turned into my boyfriend and my hot gay friend! I'm the luckiest witch at Hogwarts!"

Harry let this sink in for a minute. Hermione grinned at him, and gave him time.

She had a point: this certainly did clear up any possible tension between the three of them. Harry had often worried about what would have happened to their friendship if he and Ron had both fallen in love with Hermione. But now Hermione and Ron were in love with each other, and Harry's orientation erased any possibility of jealousy between the boys. And as much as Harry loved Ron, the boy was so obviously straight that Harry didn't even consider him romantically.

Perhaps their situation was now ideal.

Then Harry twigged to what Hermione had *really* just said.

"You think I'm ... hot ... do you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry, and linked an arm back through his, as they continued walking along the lakeshore.

"What matters, Harry, is not what *I* think." She shot a look at him from the corner of her eyes. "But I'm guessing you've already figured that out."

Harry faltered slightly in his steps, little enough that his friend wouldn't have noticed were it not for his arm around hers.

Hermione was treading dangerously close to territory Harry wasn't ready to discuss yet. It felt wonderful to be open and honest with his friend, but he knew it would be quite another thing to tell her what had just happened in the dungeons...

"So, is Malfoy a good kisser?"

...Or not.

Harry halted completely, unable to do anything but stare at his entirely-too-observant best friend.

He tried to think up an intelligent denial, but the time stretched out and his jaw stayed slack. Intelligence was not exactly the quality he was exuding at the moment.

Hermione, however, looked as clever as always, and twice as smug. "Honestly, Harry! The way you two were eyeing each other this morning at breakfast, and the electricity between you throughout Potions! How could I have missed it?"

"Wait - *he* was eyeing *me*, too?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"I mean I wasn't, I mean what makes you think, I -"

"It's okay, Harry, I promised I wouldn't tell."

Harry took a deep breath.

"But why would you think anything happened?" he challenged, playing for time.

Hermione executed another flawless eye-roll. It was such a trademark expression for her, Harry thought she should patent it. "Harry," she spoke as though he were trying her patience, "when I found you, you were practically skipping. I've only ever seen you this happy before when you'd beaten him at Quidditch."

Harry blushed at the images that 'Quidditch' and 'Draco Malfoy' together currently brought to mind. He opened his mouth to protest, but knew the game was up.

A bashful smile crept over the face of the very private wizard.

"Um, yeah," he murmured softly, then spoke more loudly as he gained confidence: "Actually, no. I mean, he's a bloody *brilliant* kisser."

The insuppressable grin had returned. Hermione rolled her eyes at her friend and shook her head, laughing along with him.

"Ew, I didn't actually want to know that." Her face was so cute when she scrunched it up that way.

"Hey, you asked."

After a minute or two of shared giggles, Hermione grew serious.

"Just be careful, okay, Harry?"

"Careful? The danger is *gone*, Hermione. Voldemort is dead, and Draco is no longer the son of prominent Death Eaters. This isn't some Dark plot. He's just another orphaned wizard, paying the price for his parents' choices. Just like me. Our parents chose different sides, and my parents died to save me while his lost their souls when the Dark Lord died, but the result is the same."

The Muggle-born Head Girl looked at him for a long moment.

"You've thought about this a lot, haven't you Harry?"

Harry shrugged and looked away. "Not really. Maybe. I suppose I started to think this way the day he challenged me for the rematch."

"And since then?"

Harry's neck began to prickle. He was *not* telling his friend about the dreams.

"I still think it's true. About what he and I have in common, I mean." Harry turned to face his sceptical friend. "He didn't even try to cheat in the match. And he didn't become a Death Eater, did he, or he wouldn't be alive."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not talking about threats of Dark and Light, Harry. I'm talking about being careful of your *heart*."

"Being ... what?"

"You've heard the expression 'Love is Blind'?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"Well," continued Hermione, "if love is blind, then chemistry is blind, deaf, and stupid. When the sparks start flying, your brain goes right out the window."

She looked out into the lake, a darkness passing over her regard that couldn't be brightened by the late-afternoon sun.

"Hermione?" ventured Harry. "Is everything alright with you and Ron?"

As quickly as it had faded, the light returned to Hermione's eyes. "Everything is *wonderful* between Ron and me."

"Oh. So did something happen back in Fourth Year, with Krum - ?"

"Oh, goodness, no!" Hermione looked simultaneously amused and appalled. "There was never any chemistry between Viktor and me. There couldn't have been, of course."

She looked at Harry in a significant manner that made him feel as though he were missing an important point. Hermione was probably already in love with Ron during Fourth Year, at least on some level. Was that what she meant?

"Then who -?"

Watching the sadness return to his friend's face, Harry immediately regretted asking the question. Except that he knew her well enough to be sure she'd wanted him to ask.

"His name is Daniel. He's a Muggle who grew up down the street from my parents' house; we were in school together when we were younger. I went home after fifth year, and he was there. And he was so handsome and fun, but more importantly, so *normal*. I mean *Muggle* normal. What used to be normal for you and me, back before we knew about all of this." She made a vague, sweeping gesture at the castle and its grounds. "He didn't know anything about wizards or Voldemort or - or Sirius."

Harry's heart constricted to hear the name of his dead godfather, but he didn't interrupt.

"It only lasted a couple of weeks, and then I had to come back to work with the Order."

"Hermione, I'm so sorry," spoke Harry, taking a step closer to his friend. "I'm sorry he hurt you."

"No, Harry, that's not it." Hermione drew her arms around herself. "He didn't do anything wrong, we were just ill-suited. He played football, for goodness sakes! And me, a bookworm witch. He never would have understood about our world. But for that short time, all I could think about was living in his."

She hugged herself a little more tightly. "He was crushed when I left him, and I'll never forgive myself for how selfish I was. I was only thinking about what I needed, and never considered how it would affect him."

Hot tears had started to slide down her face, and Harry turned to take her in his arms.

"Hermione, you can't blame yourself. Those were very dark days. Sometimes you have to watch out for yourself first." He was relieved to feel her nodding against his shoulder.

Hermione pushed gently back from Harry, wiping away her tears. "Thank you, Harry."

"What are friends for?" He smiled at her softly, and received a red-eyed smile in return.

They had turned back toward the castle, and they strolled in companionable silence for a while. After a minute or two, Harry broke the silence. "So did you ever see him again?"

Hermione shook her head. "Even though I spent most of last summer with my parents, I avoided Daniel's house." A melancholy smile crossed her face. "I just didn't want to be reminded of my mistakes."

"Does Ron know about him?"

Hermione let out a sad little sigh. "No, but he will."

Harry stared at her, a bit taken aback. "You don't think *I* would tell him?"

"No, Harry," she replied softly. "*I* will."

Hermione clearly saw the confusion on Harry's face, clearly knew it would be there, so she explained. "When Ron and I take our relationship to the next level," Harry noticed that she had said *when* and not *if*, "Ron will want to hear that he's the first. And I can't tell him that."

At these words, Harry understood the reason for the darkness in her eyes, and the reason for Hermione's sureness that she'd hurt this other boy.

Harry also understood what enormous courage it had taken for Hermione to tell him this, and he was grateful for her trust. Ron was their best friend, and it would have been easy for Harry to feel that he would have to report what he had learned, but Hermione knew he would keep her confidence.

Of course Harry was surprised: he had assumed that Hermione was about as inexperienced as he was, or at least had been before she'd started dating Ron. But he also knew that, despite the way she was currently berating herself, Hermione never did anything without some sort of good reason.

"Hermione, you love Ron, and he loves you. That's all that will ever matter, in the long run. He'll understand."

Perhaps it was the utter conviction in his words that made his beautiful friend smile and squeeze his arm more tightly. He felt good saying them, felt good offering any encouragement he could to someone who had always stood by him.

Harry pulled Hermione closer and pressed his lips affectionately to her forehead, leaving her smiling. That felt good, too. He'd never been demonstrative before, but now that he was being honest with himself, it was easier to show his friends how he felt.

The sun shone warm on the faces of the pair. Harry felt completely at peace, inside and out.

"You know, Harry," Hermione spoke up suddenly, "I should be saying the same words to you."

He couldn't understand what she meant at first, but realization dawned just as she spoke again.

"When you tell Ron, about being gay. It'll be fine. He'll be just as happy for you as I am. He'll hate it about Malfoy, but he'll be happy for you."

Harry's smile twitched away. He watched the sunlight play on the lake surface for a minute before responding.

"There may be not be anything to tell about Draco."

Hermione looked perplexed. "But you kissed! And you looked so happy! I thought for sure you were together."

"Nothing's sure," corrected Harry. "He's still Malfoy, remember?"

"I remember," she replied, fixing him with a pointed look. "And I'm glad to hear *you* do, too."

Harry sighed. "How could I forget?" He paused to search her expression. "But you don't mind?"

Hermione was quiet for a moment. "I can't stand the prat, Harry," she finally said. "But I *did* notice something different about him when we were setting the rules for the rematch. Maybe he *has* changed."

She turned to look at him. "But, Harry," she continued, "do you think he's changed *enough*?"

Harry's heart sank a bit to hear Hermione echo his fear.

"I don't know, Hermione. I think I'd better figure that out next."

Snores echoed through the seventh-years' bedchamber. How physically-fit seventeen-year-old boys could snore more boomerily than neckless Uncle Vernon, Harry had no idea. Nevertheless, it was true of *three* of the Gryffindors in that dormitory. Only Harry and Dean were relatively quiet sleepers. Except, of course, when Harry woke screaming from a nightmare, but those were mercifully infrequent now that Voldemort was dead and Harry's parents avenged.

Harry was glad that Ron still slept in the same room. As Head Boy, the second-youngest Weasley had the right - and in fact was expected - to sleep in a private bedchamber. He would still have been in Gryffindor Tower, but surrounded by a different set of four walls. There wouldn't have been the same late-night chats that continued until both boys had lapsed into slumber. Ron wouldn't have been there to shake Harry awake from his few lingering Voldemort nightmares, or Harry to talk Ron calmly back to sleep when he jerked, gasping, out of dreams plagued by spiders. They would have been apart.

Naturally, Ron had declined the privilege. Harry knew he'd planned on accepting, of course, but also that he couldn't do it in the end. The two boys had been so nearly inseparable since their very first day at Hogwarts that it just wouldn't feel right any other way.

Harry tapped the point of his quill against the parchment, leaving dots of black ink. He stopped every few minutes to *Scourgify* the marks away. He wouldn't want the recipient of his letter to know how long he'd agonised over each word.

Finally, an idea occurred to the sleepless Gryffindor, and his quill began to flow across the page in a few brief, inconspicuous phrases.

To D. Malfoy,

You left our conversation this afternoon before I could explain. I am afraid I may have led you to believe that I disagreed with you. But I agreed completely. I hope you will be willing to meet me this evening, so we can talk some more. Tonight, at the hour I surprised you two nights ago, at the location where we proved ourselves equals. Please confirm by return owl.

H. Potter

Harry rolled up the parchment tightly, thankful for the instant-drying properties of wizards' ink.

He was quite pleased with himself for making his intentions quite clear, while disguising his words in case the letter should fall into the wrong hands. The location of their rendezvous might be too easy to guess, but he didn't see a way around that. It was a necessary risk. And no one but the two boys and Moaning Myrtle knew the hour to which he referred.

Harry realized that *any* amicable correspondence between himself and the Slytherin would raise some eyebrows, but not nearly to the extent that the truth would do.

He tied a thin, silver ribbon around his letter and hid it in a fold of his curtains. He would awake before breakfast and go to the Owlery to find Hedwig.

Harry slept, and dreamed of hawks.

Chapter 3: Challenge

The sound of beating wings merged so perfectly with Harry's dream that it took him several moments to notice he was no longer sleeping.

As he drifted out of slumber, Harry struggled to catch the threads that were slipping through his fingers. Something about his dream had been different this time, but he couldn't quite remember *what*.

All Harry could retain from his hours of sleep was a single scene, only a few seconds long. He saw the hawks, yes, the same pair as always. But they weren't flying anymore.

Harry floated up another level toward consciousness, moving into his body where it lay warm and heavy under the covers.

Warm and heavy, and relaxed ... *just* relaxed.

Oh. So *that* was the difference.

Harry exhaled a sigh a relief that there would be no need for furtive Cleansing Charms or trips to the bath tonight. He didn't think he could take another experience like the one from the night before. Not after everything that had followed it.

Harry reached for more details of the dream, squeezing his eyes shut to try and trap the images. Why did the hawks remain, when the dreams had lost their erotic edge? Why had they appeared in the first place? He knew he hadn't seen anything tonight about broomsticks or what had been happening on them during the past week. Instead, the image of a contented, smiling Draco appeared inside his eyelids.

Harry smiled with it, allowing himself to wish he could see the smile on the pillow next to him. The corners of his mouth tilted upward yet a little more. But as the picture solidified, he shook himself awake. Things hadn't changed enough yet; it would be much too weird to have the actual Draco there in his bed.

Resigned to full consciousness, Harry finally opened his eyes.

"Aaahhhh!!◆"

There *was* a face there in front of Harry's, mere inches away. It was so close that Harry could see every feature clearly without his glasses.

The eyes were not silver, though. They were yellow, and enormous, and very definitely not human.

The eyes blinked affectionately at the startled boy.

"Hedwig?" croaked his sleepy voice as he reached for the spectacles on the bedside table. The snowy owl ruffled her neck feathers contentedly in greeting.

Now able to see properly, Harry blinked back at his pet. "What are you doing here, at this hour?"

The beautiful creature shone luminescent in the darkness. Harry pushed open his bed curtains to see the window he'd left open in the warm evening, and the soft blackness outside. The fat crescent of moon, halfway from last-quarter to new, grinned its enormous, orange grin as it rose above the trees of the Forbidden Forest. It must be hours until dawn.

Hedwig somehow managed to convey that she would be rolling her eyes at him, if that were anatomically possible for an owl. *Stupid human*, her glare implied, *why do you **think** I'm here?*

She stuck her leg out, on which Harry finally noticed a small roll of parchment. He untied it gently, and read:

Potter,

I have never had any reason to suspect that you are capable of discretion, but if you are, please try and exercise it. I mean about what happened yesterday in the dungeons. Obviously, I was not myself. One of your Gryffindor friends probably hexed me for a laugh. For all I know, you had something to do with it, but I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Please just forget the entire business, and never to speak of it to anyone. I think it's for the best, don't you?

D. Malfoy

Harry very literally felt his heart fall very literally into his stomach. All the air went out of his lungs. Nausea gripped him in a wave.

*No! That's never -! You **couldn't** have been -!*

But as Harry's brain cleared itself more fully from sleep, his stomach unclenched itself and his breathing calmed. Harry's heart floated back up into its proper place, perhaps even a little higher.

A slow grin spread across Harry's face, chasing away the furrow in his brow.

Harry hadn't sent his letter yet. Draco was still reacting to Harry's accidental whisper in the dungeons. He hadn't read Harry's invitation. He didn't know how Harry really felt.

Harry read the words again, and let out a quiet chuckle. If Draco were so sure that he'd been hexed, why did he need to write midnight missives to convince himself of it? He had to know he wouldn't be convincing Harry.

Despite these positive thoughts, of course, a niggling thread of doubt wove its way into Harry's mind. *Was* it possible that Draco had been acting under some impulse that was out of his own control? Who would do such a thing? And for what purpose?

A shift in the weight on his shoulder alerted Harry that Hedwig was about to take flight again.

"Wait, Hedwig," he whispered, while his fingers searched the curtains for the roll of parchment that he'd hid there before sleeping. If he hesitated any longer, he would never send the letter, and maybe never get his answer. "Take this back to him, okay?"

Harry felt so strangely about sending this letter that he imagined Hedwig to be eyeing him suspiciously. He found a few owl treats in the drawer of his bedside table and gave them to her, along with a gentle stroke to the smooth feathers on top of her head.

Hedwig waited patiently while Harry tied the letter to her leg. The moment the knot was secure, she took off in silence and faded quickly into the night outside the window.

She hadn't been gone but a few seconds before Harry's first misgivings set in.

Harry let the curtains fall and dropped back onto his pillow. Now surrounded by complete blackness, he stared toward the distant ceiling. Could he have been mistaken? Was there a possibility that the happiness he'd experienced in the dungeon hallway had all been a lie?

He had been so caught up in the strangeness, the surprising power and pleasure of the moment, that he hadn't even considered wondering whether the other boy had been acting out of his own volition. Maybe he had missed some sign, ignored some evidence that Draco was not himself?

But Draco had *seemed* like himself, the way the smug bastard had pinned Harry to the wall with his stare, had seized the upper hand just as Malfoy always tried to do. Harry had had no reason to believe that anyone but Draco was controlling the moment. Harry certainly hadn't had any control, himself.

And it couldn't have been Polyjuice. If the boy who had kissed Harry had been an impostor, the real Draco would never have known it had happened.

Harry started and sat up halfway. What if it hadn't been Draco who had written the note? Could the impostor have written it to cover his tracks? To keep Harry from talking to the real Draco about the kiss?

Harry laughed at himself quietly as he relaxed. If the person who had kissed him had recently drunk Polyjuice, Harry would have tasted it. Even after five years, there was no way he would forget that foul flavour. Draco's mouth, on the other hand, had tasted delicate and musky and sweet.

A wicked half-smile wound itself into Harry's mouth at the memory of Draco's breath in his own throat. Alright then. Polyjuice was out.

Or had Harry unwittingly forced Draco into doing something he hadn't wanted? Was there any chance that Draco had been trying to get away?

Harry's memory flashed back to the darkness of the alcove. He could smell the dust and mould of the stones, the heat and sweat of the boy pressed against him. He felt - *yes*. Harry felt the imprint across his back of an arm that ran around his waist and up the contours of his shoulder blades, while the other hand threaded painfully tightly into the roots of his hair.

Good. So there *hadn't* been any hesitation at all in the way Draco had pulled Harry close, in the way that enticing tongue had advanced between his lips. Harry was *sure*. He *had* to be sure. Because if he wasn't...

Oh, Merlin, what have I done?

Harry shook his head emphatically in an attempt to break away from his doubts. He had to convince himself: The shock Draco's face had worn in the last moments of their encounter was *not* that of someone just waking from a curse. It was the shock of someone who had given in to a forbidden and long-awaited pleasure, only to believe that his actions were not welcome.

It couldn't be more clear: Draco *had* wanted to kiss Harry. And he *would* want to do it again.

Right?

Thud.

"Oi! Get out of bed!"

Harry squinched his eyes shut against the daylight that flooded his bed when the curtains were yanked open. His eyeballs felt coated in sand after his abbreviated rest. He rolled over to bury his face in his pillow, wishing he could sleep for a day.

Another light thud landed on the back of his head, and another, again and again until Harry gave up hope that they might ever cease.

"Mmph. Ow! Gerroff."

"No. Get up."

Harry pushed himself up on his forearms and reached for his glasses and wand.

"Go away."

"Not a chance."

Thud!

Harry shifted his weight and sat halfway up in annoyance. Although not yet fully awake, he sensed that he was being assaulted by a hulking something with red hair, wearing an evil grin and wielding a pillow.

Harry glared at his best mate, menacingly brandishing what he hoped was the correct end of his wand. "You've got five seconds to leave me the hell alone before I hex you into next week."

Ron came into focus as he proclaimed, "No, *you*'ve got ten minutes to get to Defence Against the Dark Arts before Dumbledore charms your ears to let off pink bubbles! Remember that time Seamus was late?"

"Sodding apple-polishing Head Boy."

"Lazy arse! Get *up!*"

THUD!!

Harry muttered a few words that would have confirmed the Dursleys' worst suspicions about his character, and proceeded to dump himself off the other side of his bed, which inspired a longer, more colourful string of expletives. His ever-helpful best friend threw a set of robes at his face, threatening to leave him if he wasn't dressed in two minutes.

Harry groaned and threw off his pyjama top, prompting Ron to turn away so Harry could change into his robes. He was so groggy he could barely see, even *with* his glasses. The last thing he remembered -

A jolt of nerves hit Harry like a shot of black coffee.

The last thing I remember, I was trying to convince myself that I'd been right to have Hedwig take that letter to Draco. I missed seeing his reaction at breakfast! Did he get it yet? What does he think? Will he meet me?

Oh Merlin, what in the world was I thinking??

Harry grabbed his book bag and raced for the door, not knowing exactly where he might run to ease his mind. The taller boy easily caught up to him.

Ron looked at Harry quizzically, clearly wondering as to the source of his friend's sudden surge of energy. Harry knew from Ron's expression that he'd probably gone white as Nearly-Headless Nick.

It wasn't as though they didn't enjoy studying Defence, now that Dumbledore was teaching it. The elderly Headmaster had exhausted himself readying Harry and the Order for the final showdown with Voldemort, and now that it was over, had chosen to retire. He couldn't, however, bring himself to leave the school entirely before his favourite student had. As the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was, once again, open, Albus Dumbledore had agreed to stay on in that capacity for one final year.

The former Deputy Headmistress, Professor McGonagall, had stepped up to fill the position Dumbledore had vacated. She had turned over the job of Head of Gryffindor House to the former Headmaster - who had been a Gryffindor, himself - and Nymphadora Tonks had taken a leave from the Aurors to teach Transfiguration. Rumour had it that the first- and second-year classes were becoming very practiced at *Reparo* charms, but not much else. Being a Metamorphmagus, Professor Tonks hadn't had to work very hard in her Transfigurations studies at school, so she didn't really have any idea how to teach it to wizarding students who lacked her genetic gifts.

Luckily, Professor McGonagall was still teaching the seventh-year class to ensure that her students would have a fighting chance at passing their Transfiguration N.E.W.T. Hermione had told Harry that she suspected McGonagall had wanted to keep the fifth- and sixth-year classes, as well, but was simply too busy with her new duties as Headmistress.

As they ran from Gryffindor Tower, Harry caught Ron looking at him again. Harry understood why - they *did* enjoy studying Defence this year, but neither was ever quite this eager to get to *any* lesson.

"Something wrong, mate?" inquired Ron.

Harry evaded the question. "Late," he panted. "We'd better move!"

The two Gryffindors sprinted toward the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Midmorning sunlight filtered in the windows of the Defence classroom. The room was packed to capacity with nearly every seventh-year student from all four Houses. Only the students studying Ancient Runes - Hermione, the Patil sisters, a handful of Hufflepuffs, Morag MacDougal, and surprisingly, Goyle - were missing.

This same sunlight, which cast dancing shadows of breeze-blown leaves across the sleepy faces of Harry and his classmates, was also providing the Ancient Runes class with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: Their professor had discovered a rare text which could only be read when struck at a particular angle by solar rays of a particular intensity, which happened to occur at this day and hour for the latitude of Hogwarts. Dumbledore had obligingly granted his permission for these students to miss his lesson that morning to see the text. Hermione, naturally, had been beside herself with anticipation the night before.

The ancient wizard stood from his chair, moving more slowly and stiffly than Harry remembered. It was true, the final confrontation had sapped a lot of strength even from this powerful wizard.

Dumbledore's mouth curved upward beneath his long, crooked nose.

"*To sleep, perchance to dream* -" he quoted, then waved his right hand toward an object hanging in the shadows.

A sunbeam broke through the glass at just that moment, perfectly illuminating a thin willow ring, about ten inches in diameter, inside which was woven an intricate pattern of threads of sinew, like a large spider-web.

"Not spiders," moaned Ron in a whisper, "not again! The Boggart gave me nightmares for weeks!"

Harry glanced at the other boy in a way he hoped was reassuring. Even after four years and all they'd survived, Harry still remembered the particular plague of nightmares Ron had suffered after the day he'd turned a Boggart into a giant spider. Harry had had his own spate of bad dreams that year, but had spent far more nights soothing a terrified Weasley back to sleep.

Luckily, Harry knew that Ron's fears about this class topic were unfounded.

"Ay," Dumbledore continued with a wicked grin. "*There's the rub.*"

Harry half-choked. Did Dumbledore know what he'd been doing to Malfoy in his dreams?

"As we have learned during our Occlumency unit over the past few weeks, there are several techniques a Legilimens may use in order to penetrate another's mind. One of the most insidious, and most difficult to block, is by invading the target's subconscious mind. Dreams."

Oh, bugger, thought Harry. *What is it with my professors and their obsession with dreams? Are Dumbledore and Snape conspiring to ruin my life now?*

Professor Dumbledore's cornflower-blue eyes twinkled in Harry's direction, as he seemed to confirm the student's fears. "I have asked Professor Snape to cover Dreaming Draughts in Potions. Those of you who have continued to study with the Potions Master will benefit from the experience of viewing Dream Investigation from both angles. A Dreamcatcher has a similar function to the Dreaming Draught, although this artifact is both more and less sensitive than the potion.

"The potion will allow you to interpret an entire dream, by causing the dream to take place slowly and in an orderly narrative, by helping the dreamer to understand the symbols that appear in the dream, and by causing the dreamer to remember all that happened upon waking. This is useful when you suspect someone has tampered with your dreams, but cannot remember the content.

"A Dreamcatcher, however, can only help you understand one aspect of your dream at a time, and cannot reveal any aspect that the dreamer does not remember consciously. It is therefore only useful when you are sure you have experienced a dream with a perplexing or mysterious component.

"The Dreamcatcher's advantage lies in being able to project this image so that others may view it -"

Harry thanked his luck for not having eaten breakfast, because he would probably be bidding it farewell at this moment.

"- and in allowing your conscious mind to control which image is projected, so that you needn't share any portions of your dream that might be too personal for others' eyes."

Harry nearly passed out from relief.

Harry had actually heard of Dreamcatchers before. He had studied the indigenous peoples of several former British colonies in primary school, and remembered watching Dudley and his goon friends

snapping one of the delicate rings for a laugh. They had, naturally, blamed it all on Harry, who had thus won the honour of spending the next three afternoons writing lines until his arm hurt, then scrubbing the floors all evening once he got home to the Dursleys'.

Harry was sure Hermione had studied a similar topic in her own Muggle education. If she had been in class this morning, her hand would be high in the air, wanting to know how the Native American use for this object corresponded with its magical function.

Dumbledore's sparkling eyes focused on him. "Yes, Harry?"

To his great bafflement, Harry discovered that his own hand hovered above his head. He smiled to himself, thinking that perhaps he was channelling Hermione's academic mind that morning.

Now that everyone's attention was on him, he might as well ask the question that was on his mind.

"Professor, I thought Dreamcatchers were used by the Navajo in America to trap and filter their dreams, so that they could avoid nightmares. What do they have to do with Dream Investigation?"

"Five points to Gryffindor, although you're only partly correct. Dreamcatchers actually originated in the Ojibwe, or Chippewa, Nation."

Oh, well. Perhaps he wasn't channelling Hermione, after all. *She* would have known the correct Nation and won *twenty* points for their House.

"The purpose you described is essentially correct, although I believe it to be somewhat more complex. I would not presume to explain the significance of this object within that culture." Professor Dumbledore offered Harry an encouraging smile before directing his remaining comments to the class as a whole.

"It was only about two centuries ago that a small group of wizard Diviners travelled to the American state of Minnesota, where a few Ojibwe elders helped them develop the use for the Dreamcatcher which I will be teaching you today. It wasn't long after wizards were introduced to this object that its application in Occlumency was discovered.

"Harry, perhaps you would be willing to help me demonstrate?"

Harry's fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, hard, with emphasis on the latter. No matter what Dumbledore claimed, there were way too many images buried in Harry's subconscious that he wished to keep there. What if Draco saw himself in Harry's dream? What if the rest of the class saw? Would Ron ever speak to him again?

"It's alright, Harry. I promise, the Dreamcatcher will not be able to read anything that you don't choose to show it. Any shocking bits of your dreams will stay safely hidden in your own mind."

A titter of laughter swept through the class. Ron flashed him a good-naturedly mocking grin. Harry flushed, but rose to his feet. He trusted Dumbledore, and furthermore, wasn't about to appear to be afraid of a few bits of wood and sinew.

As he walked forward, Harry looked out at his classmates. Ron continued to smirk at him. Most of the rest of the students stared at Harry with unguarded curiosity, much the way they had when his name had been announced at his own Sorting, nearly seven years ago.

Beyond all the others, in the very back corner of the classroom where the dappled sunlight failed to reach, hair like strands of pale, spun gold seemed to create its own soft glow. The same face held the only pair of eyes in the room that was not fixed on Harry.

Professor Dumbledore directed Harry to sit in a large, soft armchair that he had conjured at the front of the room, facing at right angles to the desks

"I want you to choose a single image from any dream. It is not necessary that the dream be a recent one, but I would prefer if you would choose one that is somewhat mysterious to you. One whose origin is unclear."

He gave Harry a piercing look that made the boy understand: none of the dreams that had been projected into his mind by Voldemort. But the Dark Lord was dead, and Harry had no interest in revisiting those visions.

Dumbledore continued, "Concentrate on that image, then look through the Dreamcatcher, focusing your gaze at the wall. This is very important! If you try to look *at* the Dreamcatcher, your image will not form properly."

The professor looked inquiringly at Harry, who nodded his comprehension.

"Have you decided on an image?"

Harry hesitated, but surmised that the hawks from last night's dream - the ones that were repairing a nest together, rather than mating mid-flight as they had done all the previous nights - should be safe enough.

He didn't really believe this exercise would explain anything about the past week, in fact he was reminded of Professor Trelawney's tea leaves and crystal balls, but he was curious enough about this aspect of his dreams to give it an honest chance. He offered up one last silent plea that what was about to happen would not complicate things further between himself and a certain Slytherin.

Harry nodded in response to the professor's question, concentrated on nesting hawks, and stared at the far wall. Professor Dumbledore reached out and set the Dreamcatcher twirling about its string. The ring formed a ghostly sphere as it rotated.

Not even seconds passed before shadowy figures began to appear in the heart of the apparent sphere. Harry recognized them immediately as the pair that frequented his dreams.

A hushed, reverent gasp from the class let him know that the image was visible from any angle. For at least a minute, not one person made a single noise while the birds swooped in and out of view.

"Excellent, Harry, excellent!" exclaimed Professor Dumbledore finally, and Harry glanced up sharply in surprise.

Sounds of protest from the class let him know that his broken eye-contact had ended the show. The professor was beaming at him, however. The student in the spotlight felt distinctly perplexed.

"You have chosen a very good image for this exercise," continued the bemused teacher. "Images of birds are often used by the more stealthy Legilimens to symbolise actions that they wish their victims to take."

Harry blanched. Had someone else been trying to influence him into having fantasies about Malfoy? Had he been so easily manipulated? If so, it would lend credence to his pre-dawn fears that Draco had told the truth about acting against his own wishes in the dungeon corridor. But he still couldn't imagine who would want to do such a thing.

Harry glanced again at Draco, who was now staring at him incredulously. The moment their gazes met, the grey eyes flicked away.

"But," continued the professor, "red-tailed hawks are a special case. It is impossible, by any means, for any mind but the dreamer's own to conjure these birds. According to traditional dream interpretation, these animals have only one possible meaning."

Alright. Another indication that there was no hidden party manipulating events. Another reason why Malfoy's excuse had to be a lie. Harry allowed a relieved smile to creep onto his face.

"Harry," spoke Dumbledore, and the smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Harry no longer felt any relief at all. Quite the contrary, he knew he was in for a nasty shock. The mischievous twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes was brighter than ever.

"You," the elderly wizard pronounced with glee, "have a Destined Love!"

Harry groaned. Noises of adolescent amusement bubbled up all around the room.

Harry felt intensely disappointed. He had been hoping the image would represent some profound message that his subconscious was trying to convey, not this romance-novel fancy.

Dumbledore turned to address the class as a whole.

"Did you all get a sufficient chance to view Harry's image?" The majority of the students nodded, so the professor continued, "The birds you have just observed are red-tailed hawks, which are widely believed to mate for life."

He fixed his sights on the trapped student, who still sat at the front of the room. "Harry, I don't wish to ask for any overly personal information, but did you have the impression in your dream that one of the hawks represented you?"

Harry considered lying, but didn't see any danger in confessing this much, so he nodded cautiously. His eyes cut to the back of the room, but Draco's gaze was fixed on his desk.

"And you have dreamt of these hawks recently? Say, almost nightly, starting about a week ago?"

Now this was spooky. How could he know that? Except Dumbledore always seemed to know everything. Harry nodded again, stunned.

"Of course you have," stated the professor with an avuncular smile. "Dreams about red-tailed hawks often make their first appearance at the first waning moon after Beltane, which is the First of May. They usually last only a week or two, although they are likely to appear again in later years if the Destined Love has not yet been found or if the dreamer has tried to resist this destiny."

Harry squirmed and tried once more to reach his classmate. He found Ron instead, who smiled and rolled his eyes, obviously thinking this would be a great joke to rehash over lunch.

Dumbledore's voice filled the room again. "Now, the common error in interpreting such a dream is to assume to know the identity of one's partner. Hawks will often appear in a dream for the first time as if the dreamer and another person had transformed into the birds."

Harry felt grateful for the dim light in the room, which hid the flush rising in his cheeks. He kept his gaze to himself this time, wondering whether the silver eyes were burning into him as he imagined.

The professor went on, "Novice dream interpreters will often assume that the person who appeared in the earlier part of the dream is the dreamer's Destined Love, but that is not always the case. The only

way to identify the dreamer's partner for sure is to compare their dreams. If both parties experienced parallel dreams on the same night, then those two people are destined to be lovers for life.

"So," Dumbledore addressed the class with a mischievous grin. "Did anyone else here dream about these hawks last night?"

A sea of smirks and grins answered the professor in silence. Harry saw Draco, alone, not looking amused, but scowling instead into a shadowy corner.

"Sorry, Harry," teased the professor. "It appears that you will have to look further than this room. You may return to your seat."

Harry slunk back to the seat through the laughter of his classmates. He collapsed into the seat next to Ron and slumped down as low as possible. Relief flooded him at being out of the spotlight, and to be honest, at knowing that his supposed "Destined Love" was still unidentified.

Of course, the idea of kissing Draco again, and of doing much more than that, still appealed greatly to Harry. It was just that he wanted to believe he could make his own choice in the matter.

Harry was far too young to start thinking about a long-term romantic relationship. He had no desire to choose his life partner at the age of seventeen.

Harry ached to turn for one more look toward the back of the room, but he simply didn't dare.

"Maybe it's someone really horrible, like Millicent Bulstrode!"

"Leave it, Ron. It isn't Bulstrode," groaned Harry, already thoroughly sick of his best friend's new favourite pastime. "Although she's really not so bad, once you get to know her."

"Aha!" Several faces turned to stare as Ron's exclamation echoed off the walls of the Gryffindor Common Room. Only a few minutes remained before dinner, and Ron had been at this all day.

Harry's patience was wearing very thin, exacerbated by the fact that he still didn't have a response from Draco. They hadn't had Potions today, so he hadn't seen the Slytherin since Defence Against the Dark Arts that morning.

Had Draco understood the significance of the dreams? Did he worry that Harry might think they were Destined for each other?

He wouldn't, would he?

Harry felt his face grow hot, which obviously did not escape the notice of his best mate. Ron waggled his eyebrows suggestively, clearly believing he had hit his mark.

"No, Ron," explained Harry, "I said it *isn't* Bulstrode. I just don't think you should judge her so harshly merely for being big-boned and in Slytherin."

"And for putting my girlfriend in a headlock!" The redhead protested.

"That was *five years ago*," Harry reminded him impatiently. "Almost *four* years before you and Hermione started going out. I don't see Parkinson still blaming Hermione for slapping Malfoy, and they were together for a long time!"

"They're not still?"

Harry shook his head, avoiding his friend's eyes. At least Harry *hoped* Malfoy didn't have a girlfriend anymore. They didn't need to deal with any more complications than they already had.

"How can you even tell?" pursued Ron.

A memory popped into Harry's head, saving the moment.

"Saw her snogging Justin Finch-Fletchley after the Valentine Feast." He shuddered. "Please don't remind me!"

"A Slytherin and a Muggle-born, eh?" Ron mused. "Too rich!"

"I'm sure it's happened before," replied Harry absently, having long since lost all interest in this conversation. "Can we *please* change the subject?"

As if on cue, Hermione appeared behind Ron. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders from behind, planting a kiss firmly on his cheek. Before she could back away, Ron caught her with one arm. He pulled her to into his lap, where he could kiss her properly, and thoroughly, on the lips.

Harry smiled at his friends, at how deeply in love they were. He noticed that Ron seemed much more expert at kissing than he had been back in September. When they had first started dating, Hermione had sworn Harry to absolute secrecy before confessing that their first several kisses had been major disappointments in the technique department. Now, however, Ron held his girlfriend securely in his hands, convincing her to release all control of the kiss to him.

As Harry watched, Ron cupped the back of Hermione's neck with a gentle but unyielding left hand, supporting the small of her back with his right, while he covered her open mouth perfectly with his own. Hermione's eyes were closed, her head relaxed into her boyfriend's hands, her own fingers threading into the short hairs at the nape of his neck. Ron's lips drew back and brushed across Hermione's, eliciting a quietly urgent moan, before he captured her mouth again with even greater intensity.

Realising he was watching far too intently, the unattached member of the trio diverted his gaze out the open window. Harry tried very hard not to think about the one decent kiss he had received, nor about his current confusion on the subject.

As though he had thought about anything else since it had happened.

After about five minutes, Harry stopped waiting for his friends to come up for air, and cleared his throat loudly. The couple froze, but stayed connected at the lips for a moment longer, until their smiles drew their mouths apart.

Ron tried to act the part of the cool, unflustered boyfriend, but ruined the effect by blushing furiously. Hermione shifted to the chair next to Ron and smiled sheepishly at Harry.

"Sorry, about that," she offered.

"Not to worry, there's nothing in my stomach to bring up, so no harm done."

"Oh, stop it," she retorted. "I happen to know that you think we're very good together!"

Ron, still blushing, just smiled happily at both of them.

"True," sighed Harry, "but that doesn't mean I need to watch you two clean each other's molars."

Hermione made that adorable scrinchy face again. "Ugh, Harry! ♦Clean each other's -' You know perfectly well that my parents are dentists! I think I'm scarred for life!"

"Ignore him," assured her boyfriend, stroking the backs of his fingers along her cheekbone. "He's just in a foul mood because Dumbledore made a public scene of his love life in Defence Against the Dark Arts this morning."

Brown eyes flashed at green ones, and Harry shook his head just enough to let Hermione know that no great secrets had been revealed.

"Apparently, my dreams have been trying to tell me that I have a Destined Love. And our friend here," he tilted his head to indicate their third companion, "won't rest until he can figure out who it is."

"Destined Love? Dreams?" repeated Hermione, clearly confused. "Aren't those things more in the realm of Divination?"

"It was part of the Occlumency unit," Ron replied. "Something about figuring out which dreams are yours, or whether there's a Legilimens after you..." He looked upwards, clearly wracking his brain. "Anyway, he used a Dreamcatcher."

Hermione harrumphed with frustration. "I knew I shouldn't have missed that lesson!" She fixed her boyfriend with an accusing glare. "I can't *ever* trust you to take notes!"

"You can borrow mine, Hermione," offered Harry.

He had been careful to write down every detail about the lesson, hoping he might learn more about the hawks. He didn't want this Destined Love business to be true, but he was fascinated by the birds of prey that haunted his dreams.

"Can I?" asked Ron.

"No." Harry glared at him. "You should have taken your own, instead of being so busy trying to guess my Destined Love."

Harry immediately regretted having mentioned this topic again, as Ron's eyes lit up with mischief.

"So, what did you see in your dreams?" asked Hermione. Harry thanked her silently for speaking before Ron could.

"Red-tailed hawks," interjected Ron before he could be interrupted again. "They mate for life, so that means Harry will, too."

"Merlin, Ron, that's *not* what he said."

Ron ignored Harry's outburst, and continued. "We just don't know who's the lucky witch."

"Well, wasn't it made obvious in the lesson?" asked Hermione carefully as Harry flinched at Ron's assumption.

"No, love," replied her boyfriend. "Dumbledore says that even if you were dreaming of a person before you saw the hawks, it doesn't mean that person is your destiny."

"So how do you know?" Hermione, ever the academic, was immediately drawn into the discussion, even though she was sceptical of anything sounding so much like Divination.

"You have to find someone else who was dreaming the same thing on the same night," explained Harry.

Ron suddenly sat up straight. He stared at Harry as if seeing him for the first time.

"Hang on," he exclaimed. "Harry, you never said whether or not you were dreaming of someone! Who was it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged nervous glances. Even though Harry hadn't told her anything about his dreams, she could obviously guess who had starred in them.

"Uh, never mind, Ron," stuttered Harry. "Like Dumbledore said, that's probably not even who it is."

"No," their friend became even more insistent, "he said it wasn't *necessarily* your life partner. But he certainly made it sound like the best bet."

Harry looked to Hermione again for help. She responded with an encouraging smile and a nod, then turned to give her boyfriend's lips one more soft kiss. "I still haven't got all the soil out from under my nails after Herbology this afternoon. Think I'll give it another try before dinner."

Tell him, her expression said, as she pecked Harry on the temple and trotted off to the girls' dormitories.

Ron was eyeing his best friend suspiciously. Harry could tell that the other boy had caught some of the glances between himself and Hermione. So he really wasn't surprised by the next thing Ron said. Anyone could have drawn the same conclusion. He shouldn't feel betrayed that Ron held so little faith in his loyalty.

"Harry," Ron's voice had taken on a threatening edge. "Tell me it wasn't Hermione in your dream."

If Harry hadn't been a little hurt at Ron's accusation, he would have had to swallow a chuckle at its absurdity. It was a good job he didn't feel like laughing. Harry knew full well that Ron would hardly appreciate laughter at a time like this.

"No, Ron, it's wasn't Hermione."

"Swear it!"

"I *swear*, Ron. It *wasn't*."

The larger boy didn't look convinced. "Harry, you're my best friend, but so help me, if you think you're supposed to be some destined mate for my girlfriend -"

"Ron!" burst Harry. "For Merlin's sake, I didn't dream of Hermione!" Several heads turned their way from all parts of the room.

"But she could still be the one, like Dumbledore said -"

"No, Ron! Will you just leave it be!" Harry was so exasperated, he could scream. Luckily, it was time for dinner, and the common room was quickly emptying. The other students seemed to be sensing the argument in the corner, and clearly wanted no part of it.

"Well, how can you be so sure?" demanded the irate Weasley. "You don't know who it is, but yet you're *positive* it isn't Ginny, it isn't Cho, it isn't Parvati or Lavender, or Angelina or Alicia or Katie, or Padma or Luna, or Hannah or Susan, or Bulstrode or Parkinson or MacDougal... I've guessed nearly every witch in the entire school, including some who aren't even here anymore, and you just somehow *know* it's not any of them! What makes you so certain? Maybe it *is* Hermione, and you just don't want to tell me because you know I'll thump you into unconsciousness!"

Harry had never been so grateful to be gay. No matter how many years of friendship had built the bond between them, Ron was clearly completely serious about his threat.

"Ron," Harry spoke softly but with unmistakable clarity. He would have preferred not to have had to make his revelation when the other boy was so riled up, but knew the moment had come. "I know that even if I really do have some Destined Love, it can't be any of those people. I know this because there is *one* quality I'm sure my life partner would have to have, and none of those people has it."

Harry watched his best friend's eyes rise to meet his, clearly not understanding, so he tried a stronger hint.

"Ron, what's the one thing all your guesses had in common?"

"Nothing! They're all different Houses, different years - the only thing they all are is *witches* -"

Harry fixed his eyes on Ron's. "Exactly."

Harry watched painfully as realisation dawned on his friend's face. He hoped earnestly that Hermione had been right about her boyfriend's reaction.

"So it's a Muggle you want, then?" Ron looked perplexed. "How could you? I mean, I suppose that's alright, but you told me you were never happy before Hogwarts -"

Harry shook his head, dropping his shoulders in defeat. It was a lot harder getting through that skull than he'd expected.

"No, I don't want a Muggle, Ron. Well, I don't know. I mean it *could* be. Either way, really."

"But you said you didn't want a witch. So you meant you want a Muggle woman, right?"

A long-suffering sigh escaped Harry's lungs. He was going to have to say it.

"I don't know whether my life partner will be magical or Muggle," he began. "Probably not Muggle, like you said. But I know for sure it won't be a witch."

Ron's face contorted in confusion.

Harry continued, speaking faster before he lost his nerve: "I know it won't be a *witch*, because witches are female and I -"

His words stopped short as he watched the change in Ron's eyes. Harry begged silently for understanding, for acceptance, for any sort of reaction that would let him know everything was going to be okay.

His hopes were dashed. Ron's shoulders slumped, his mouth fell open, and his eyes bugged out.

"*Bloody hell. You're gay.*"

Harry felt nauseous, and betrayed. He had put so much trust in his best friend, and now Ron sounded absolutely *gutted*.

Before Ron could say another word, Harry ran for the portrait hole and escaped into the halls.

Chapter 4: Reckoning

Harry burst from the portrait hole, biting back angry tears. He ignored the outraged scolding of the Fat Lady, as her frame slammed roughly into the wall.

Still trying to decide which direction to run, Harry set off blindly down the corridor toward the Entrance Hall. He had nearly reached a dead sprint when he collided solidly with another person. She let out an indignant yelp, falling hard to the ground.

"Merlin, Harry, I think you broke my wrist!" scolded the youngest Weasley, cradling her right arm gingerly.

Harry stared mutely. When he didn't respond, Ginny looked up accusingly.

"Are you just going to stand there? What's *wrong* with you?"

She was clearly in a great deal of pain, and squinting to stave off tears. Harry thought he saw a bruise forming on the side of her face, where he had knocked her books into her.

Had he really just done that? What *was* wrong with him?

"Sorry, Gin," murmured Harry, while lifting her carefully to her feet. "I just - Oh, Merlin, I'm so *sorry*."

The last of his energy spent, the exhausted Gryffindor collapsed against the wall, sliding down to the floor.

Harry sensed Ginny watching him in confused horror as his knees drew up to his chest and his hands covered his face. A hot dampness threatened to leak from his eyes into his fingers, which he fought with all his might to prevent.

"Harry?" Ginny sounded alarmed. "What's wrong? Oh, Harry, look, I'm alright!"

He felt the warmth of her proximity as she crouched in front of him. When he didn't look up or respond in any way, she sank down next to him, leaning lightly into his side. Harry pressed back against her comforting weight.

Only Ginny was allowed this close to Harry. He could give Hermione quick hugs or peck kisses on her cheek, but he couldn't relax next to her the way he could with Ginny. In the past few years, Ginny had grown from the little girl with a crush into a young woman who was truly his friend. In many ways, she was even more of a sister to him now than Hermione was.

He didn't know why, exactly, except that she had a gift for being there for him without making any demands. Ron always wanted to know why Harry was acting the way he was, and Hermione always wanted to help spur him into action to fix his problems, but Ginny was different. She understood how it had felt to have Voldemort in his head for so long, and had an instinct for when to prod Harry out of his thoughts and when to let him be.

He was so grateful to her for these small moments, sometimes he was almost jealous of Dean. For reasons that had just become clear, however, Harry's feelings toward Ginny had never quite been anything other than fraternal.

He glanced up at her now, to see her holding her injured limb forward like an exhibit.

"Madam Pomfrey can sort me out," she said. "I didn't mean to shout!"

"It was my fault," Harry whispered. "I can't get *anything* right."

She blinked at his despondent tone. "Harry? What's going on?"

Bless Ginny. Harry *did* need to talk about what had just happened with Ron. Only he didn't know where to begin.

He leaned his head back against the wall, not able to say anything to describe his feelings. He was so frustrated with Ron for not accepting him, so angry at himself for trusting that he would. Ginny encircled Harry's shoulders with her good arm, and toyed affectionately with his impossible hair. In response, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to enjoy her touch.

Maybe he should let people get this close to him more often. It felt nice.

"Can I help?" she ventured at last.

Harry shook his head against her hand and exhaled sadly.

"Are you sure?"

Harry smiled at Ginny, grateful once again that she was reading his mood just right.

"Yeah, I'm sure, Gin. I really don't think you can fix what's happened." His gaze dropped to his twisting fingers.

She waited a moment for him to elaborate, and when he didn't, Harry knew she would ask.

"What *is* it that's happened, Harry?"

"It's Ron." Harry took a deep breath, still determined not to cry. "I think our friendship is over. He's disgusted with me."

Ginny sat quietly by Harry's side, letting the words sink in. Harry could hear her breathing softly as her fingers continued to wander through his ink-black strands.

He knew just what she would say when she finally spoke, and needed to hear it, even though he knew it wasn't true this time. As much as he would like to believe something hopeful, Harry had seen the look on Ron's face when he'd learned the reality about his best mate.

"Harry, look at me." Ginny spoke at last, and he did. "There is nothing you could do that would make Ron want to stop being your friend."

Harry closed his eyes against the earnestness in hers. "Gin," he explained, "it's not anything I *did*. It's what I *am*."

Her warm brown eyes darkened in disbelief. She searched his face for understanding. "What could you possibly *be* that he couldn't accept?"

Harry took a deep breath, releasing it in a sigh.

Might as well tell her and get it over with.

"I'm gay, Ginny."

The young witch stared at Harry for a second or two, her mouth frozen in an *O* of surprise.

A moment later, the corridor echoed with her musical laughter.

*Blast it, can't I count on **any** of my friends for a predictable reaction??*

"Ginny," Harry spoke darkly, "what, exactly, is so funny?"

One freckled white hand covered her eyes, while the injured arm dropped to her lap, fingertips supporting her ribcage as though it might burst.

"Ginny..." Harry warned again.

The hand on her face moved away, revealing tears of mirth. She swept her hair back from her face and tried to compose herself.

"I'm sorry Harry!" she wheezed. "I'm sorry." Ginny gained control of herself quickly. "It's just that you've got it so wrong, and, oh I can just see his *face* -!" Her voice dissolved into another fit of giggles.

Harry stared at his friend, openmouthed. Her laughter felt almost as much like betrayal as Ron's dismay. All the times she known the right thing to do seemed to evaporate in this instant.

How could you laugh at me, Gin?

When he spoke, Harry's voice had dropped several degrees colder. "I would appreciate being let in on the joke."

Ginny sobered up quickly at hearing the icy tone.

"Harry, there's *no way* Ron is disgusted with you," she assured him hastily. "He doesn't have any kind of problem with anyone being gay. He was totally fine with it when Charlie came out to us all."

"Charlie." Harry echoed the name as though he'd never heard it before. He knew her words should be making sense to him, but his brain was all a blur.

Ginny looked at Harry as though he'd gone stupid. "Yes, Charlie. My brother. Stocky chap, works with dragons, lives with the Bulgarian Seeker. Remember him?"

"Lives with..." Harry's chest felt tight. Ginny's words were threatening to send relief washing over him, but he was afraid to listen, in case he was mistaken.

Her impatience was turning to concern, but slowly. "Are you actually hearing me, Harry? Or have you been incompletely transfigured into a parrot?"

Harry blinked. "Hearing you," he responded distantly. "So Charlie ... and Krum ... and Ron's okay with that?"

"*Okay?* Harry, he's *thrilled!* We have a world-famous Quidditch player as a kind of brother-in-law! Ron couldn't be more proud. I thought he'd told you."

She paused, thinking for a moment. "In fact, I *know* he did. I was there."

Memories flooded back to Harry of Ron and Ginny returning from the Burrow after Christmas during Sixth Year, telling their friends the surprising news about their brother and Viktor Krum.

He remembered his own shock - he never known a gay wizard, but his mental image of one hadn't been like anyone as tough as Charlie, with his bulky muscles and big, shiny burn. Harry had been surprised about Krum, too, since everyone knew how intently the Durmstrang champion had pursued Hermione during the Tournament.

Hermione herself hadn't seemed at all surprised about Krum, though. Harry and Ron both suspected, on seeing her reaction, that Krum had already told Hermione of his own orientation. They agreed that it had probably been the reason Krum and Hermione had parted on such good terms after Fourth Year.

Come to think of it, that must be what she had meant about the lack of chemistry between her and Krum. Why hadn't Harry remembered that when she'd mentioned it by the Lake?

Harry must have been even more overwhelmed than he'd realised by recent events, if he could have forgotten so completely about Charlie and Krum. He'd simply been so worried about what everyone would say about his revelation that every rational thought had left him. All he'd had on his mind, for the past two days, had been about the huge change in the way he saw himself, and about worrying how his friends might see him, once they knew. Everything else, even this relevant information, seemed to have left him as a result.

"Yeah..." murmured Harry. "Yeah, Ron *did* tell me. I suppose I forgot."

It was true - Ron *hadn't* seemed upset at all about his brother's revelation - only sort of curious, since Charlie was the first gay wizard he'd known personally. Actually, Ron had seemed rather pleased at his brother's happiness, and as Ginny had said, excited to be related to the world-famous Seeker.

Of *course* Ron shouldn't have been disgusted with Harry being gay. What had Harry been thinking?

So what *was* going on, then?

Ginny had clearly read the question on her friend's face. "Harry, Ron wasn't *disgusted*. I promise you that."

"Gin, you didn't see the look on his face. It was awful."

She nodded gently. "I promise you, Harry: Ron was probably very surprised, but he would never have been disgusted."

"This wasn't surprise, Ginny. You're not *listening*."

"I'm listening, Harry. Are you?"

What did she mean by that? "Yes. Why?"

"Did you listen to Ron?"

Harry exhaled angrily. "Yeah, I listened. I listened when he said, '*Bloody hell. You're gay,*' and looked at me like I'd just kicked his grandmother -"

"And what did he say after that?"

Harry stopped dead. Ginny was looking at him a bit more sharply, because she clearly knew the answer: that Harry hadn't stayed to hear any more.

"I, uh..."

"Yeah, I know you, uh. If you hadn't run off, you might have heard the reason he said that. But since you had to go bolting down the corridors and slamming into people, you didn't give Ron a chance to explain. So now *I* have to do it."

Harry remained silent, thoroughly chastened, waiting for her to continue.

"When Ron heard your news, he would have been terribly disappointed -"

"Disappointed that I'm gay?" This wasn't getting any better.

"No," answered Ginny quickly, then amended, "Well, not exactly."

Harry looked at her desperately, but Ginny held up a hand to stall another interruption, "It's not that you shattered some image you think he had of you. It's that he would be so disappointed in *himself*, Harry."

He could only look at her in complete confusion.

"Ron takes great pride in being your best mate, in knowing you better than anyone."

"He *does* know me better than anyone. So what's the problem?"

Ginny was starting to smirk. "Not in this case," she corrected. "As it happens, Ron just found out that he didn't know some things about you that his brother apparently did."

"What? Ginny, that doesn't make *sense*. Which brother?"

Her smirk was turning dangerous. "Charlie, of course."

"And what did Charlie know ... what, that I'm gay?"

The smirk had grown positively impish. "Right. But Ron didn't. And it's going to cost him twenty Galleons."

"*Twenty -!*"

"It wasn't *your* fault," she assured him, "I *told* Ron not to make that bet with Charlie."

Harry absorbed all of this, with Ginny watching in amusement. He was more than a little annoyed about the level of entertainment she seemed to be deriving from the conversation, but at least she was helping him feel better about the whole thing.

"Hang on," he spoke at last. "Are you telling me that Ron bet Charlie that I'm not gay?"

"Pretty much, yes, that's what happened," she confirmed.

"Ron bet Charlie *twenty Galleons* that I'm not gay?"

Ginny nodded, no longer able to contain her giggles.

Harry's face broke into a shining grin. He was so relieved to learn the reason for Ron's disappointment that he didn't even care how wrong Ron had been in his suppositions about Harry. Harry, after all, was only one step ahead on that count, himself.

He mulled all this over for a moment before he twigged.

"Ginny, when *was* this?"

Ginny's giggles faded into suspicion. Harry's voice had betrayed a lilt of amusement that must have made her nervous.

"Just after Charlie came out," she spoke slowly. "Why?"

Harry nodded, now smiling broadly. "And why, exactly, were your brothers making bets about my ..."
He faltered slightly. "... you know?"

Ginny arched an eyebrow. "Sexuality?"

Harry blushed deeply. "Um, yeah, that."

She smiled indulgently. "Ron was curious about how Charlie and Krum had got together, how Charlie had known that Krum was gay, too. Charlie explained that gay men could sometimes recognise each other by certain signs, although he couldn't put it into words. Ron wasn't satisfied, so he asked Charlie to demonstrate by naming someone else he could tell was gay. And, well, it was all downhill from there."

Harry let out a tiny burst of laughter, imagining the look that must have been on Ron's face when he'd heard Charlie's prediction. His amusement was enhanced by the fact that Ginny had just confirmed his suspicion.

"Was anyone else there when Ron agreed to this ill-fated flutter?" he asked.

"Well, *I* was, and like I said, I *told* Ron not to do it."

He gave her a reassuring smile, to let her know she was not to blame. "Does Hermione know?"

Ginny grimaced. "No. And she's going to flay him alive."

Harry's laughter came a little more freely now. Despite his anger at her initial reaction, Ginny had once again succeeded in making him feel a lot better.

"Wow," chuckled Harry, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I know," agreed Ginny. "Ron's one dead Weasley, isn't he?"

"No," replied Harry. "I mean, yes, but that's not it. You see, Ron could have saved himself a lot of money by checking with Hermione before he made that wager!"

Harry pushed himself upright, then gingerly assisted his friend to her feet.

"What? Harry, d'you mean -"

He shook his head to cut her off. It wasn't important. Hermione's reaction at dinner would explain everything.

"C'mon, Gin," he said. "Let's see how quickly Madam Pomfrey can heal that arm."

"Ronald Weasley!" exclaimed Hermione, setting her flagon of pumpkin juice down so roughly that a bit sloshed over the side. "How *could* you have been so foolish?"

The Head Girl looked unable to decide between scolding her boyfriend and mocking him senseless.

Ron had turned the trademark shade that always gave away his emotions, whether embarrassment, anger, confusion, or happiness. Harry could see that it was the first of these, in this case. He grinned at his best friend in a moderately taunting way, because really he had immediately forgiven Ron for making the ridiculous bet.

In fact, Harry was secretly considering helping Ron pay it off, but wasn't sure he wanted to encourage any sort of repeat performance.

"For goodness sake," continued Hermione in a hushed tone, "you've been best friends with the boy for almost seven years, and *still* thought he was straight?"

"Hey, whose side are you on?" burst from Harry's lips before he could stop it. His face flushed to match Ron's, but he was enjoying the good humour that surrounded the table.

"Who thought who was straight?" enquired Dean Thomas, who was just arriving to sit next to Ginny.

A shocked silence fell on their section of the Gryffindor table, like the slamming of a door. Hermione turned the colour of parchment, stricken at having been so careless with her friend's secret. Ron and Ginny wore matching openmouthed stares. Unable to cover for Hermione's gaff, all three friends looked apologetically to Harry for guidance.

Harry jumped in to save Hermione before she could judge herself too harshly. At this point, he preferred to tell as many of his friends as possible, and get the whole thing out of the way. The hardest revelations, to the people whose opinions mattered the most, had been made. Now, Harry just wanted everyone to know so he wouldn't have to hide anymore.

"Ron thought I was," explained Harry. "And he was foolish enough to put money on it with his brother, so now he's in a bit of a tight spot."

Ron ducked his head, as if to hide it inside his jumper. He looked miserable as the two witches, relieved, began smirking at him again.

Dean stared at Harry momentarily while he parsed the boy's statement. "So... then you mean you're gay?"

"Yep," confirmed Harry, biting into a leg of chicken in mock-nonchalance as he watched for Dean's reaction.

"Alright," shrugged Dean, offering a reassuring smile, then helped himself to some green beans.

"When did that happen?" asked Seamus, who had clearly been listening. He quickly found himself overshadowed by a towering, irate Weasley.

"When did that happen?" repeated a flabbergasted Ron, "When do you think it happened? Since always, you dunce! You don't *become* gay, you just *are*."

Harry grabbed Ron's sleeve and flashed Seamus an apologetic look before fisticuffs could erupt at the dinner table.

"It's alright, Ron," he placated the smouldering boy, dragging him back down to his seat. He had decided it was best to tolerate any questions from his friends, no matter how inane, at least for now.

"I just figured it out, actually," Harry told Seamus. "You lot are among the first to know."

A tentative voice piped up from the other side of Hermione. "So do you have, you know, a boyfriend?" Neville had joined them just in time to catch the gist of the conversation.

"Interested in the job, Neville?" teased Seamus. Neville blushed bright red in the midst of biting into a slice of bread, and shook his head.

Harry smiled warmly at the shy Gryffindor. "No, I don't yet," he told him.

The word 'yet' earned Harry curious looks from nearly all of his companions. Only Hermione kept quiet.

Oops.

"So!" Ginny jumped in with the zeal of a practiced gossip. As dependable as she was when she and Harry were alone, Ginny could be such a *girl* around other people. "Who's the wizard lucky enough to have caught the eye of the most eligible bachelor in our generation?"

Harry sighed. He should have known to expect such questions. It was probably just as well that the first round was coming from his best friends. After all, he'd heard about the speculation in the gossip columns of *Witch Weekly* over who might be the next girl to capture the heart of The Boy Who Lived. Once word got out about his orientation, the attention would be even more fierce, only with different gender pronouns.

"Never said there *was* one, but you know, hopefully someday..." evaded Harry, while his gaze wandered across the Hall of its own accord. He reined it in before anyone but Hermione could notice.

A couple more minutes of refusing to talk about his potential love interests, and conversation eventually floated off to other topics. Harry munched the last of his potatoes, staring dreamily at the shining blond head at the Slytherin table.

Draco's face lit up with laughter at a joke from one of his housemates. Harry watched, basking in the glow.

"Careful," came a hiss in his ear. Harry straightened up to realise Hermione was watching him. "They may be talking about other things now, but everyone's still trying to guess who the 'lucky wizard' is."

Harry pretended not to have heard, or to have acted in any way unusually. He helped himself to strawberry tart while redirecting his attention to another Slytherin-bashing story from Seamus. Apparently, this time, Morag MacDougal had had an unexpected allergic reaction during Care of Magical Creatures, and was currently in the Hospital Wing undergoing treatment for rat-sized boils all over her face and arms.

The beating of wings above his head alerted Harry that Hedwig had arrived with a special delivery. As his head snapped up, he saw a handful of owls swooping around the Great Hall with bits of post that hadn't arrived in the morning. Luckily, most of the Gryffindors were laughing hard enough at Seamus's story that they didn't take much notice the snowy creature. Due to his celebrity, Harry still received the occasional unexpected letter; his friends had got used to seeing them, and to ignoring them. They knew Harry was still embarrassed by the extra attention he got due to his fame, and were kind enough not to compound his annoyance by saying anything about them.

This was no letter from an unknown admirer, though. Harry's heart leapt: finally, a response from Draco about tonight!

Fingers shaking, he barely succeeded in untying the tiny roll of parchment from his owl's leg. She helped herself to his pudding, as he read:

Potter,

Can you or can you not read? I asked for your discretion, not a post-midnight meeting on the Quidditch pitch! As if I can't see through your ruse to get me another detention. I thought we had all outgrown such childish pranks. I will not be there, and don't try to convince me otherwise! I'm starting to suspect that it was you who hexed me. What game are you playing, anyway?

D. Malfoy

Harry's heart sank. So, that was that.

He was so sure that he was right about Malfoy - about his orientation, about his role in the kiss, about his potential to be someone who was more important in Harry's life. That was worth nothing, though, if Malfoy insisted on hiding behind his flimsy story of what had really happened in the dungeons.

Harry felt his stomach clench. His disappointment was so intense that he found himself blinking his stinging eyes. He hadn't realised how much he'd wanted a chance with Malfoy until this moment.

Involuntarily, Harry's eyes swept across to the farthest table. As his gaze locked on Malfoy, Harry became aware that the other boy was looking back.

Malfoy wore an expression that was obviously intended to be haughty, or disdainful, or even angry. Harry knew the proud tilt of the chin and the distrustful narrowing of the eyes so well he could have drawn them from memory.

There was something else behind the gaze this time.

Harry was sure he was going mad, even hallucinating. He had never thought he'd ever live to see Malfoy appearing wistful, much less vaguely apologetic.

By the time Harry's eyes had blinked in surprise, Malfoy had broken the eye-contact and returned his attention to his friends. Harry continued to stare, struggling to understand whether Malfoy had been trying to communicate with him just now, or had simply wished to compound the injury by watching Harry's reaction.

As he stared, Harry fell into a trance. Malfoy really was exquisite, physically speaking. Harry found himself infatuated with the porcelain perfection of Malfoy's complexion, his fingertips itching to trace the chiseled jaw line. Harry's mouth watered to close on those feather-soft lips again.

Hermione's elbow jarred Harry back to reality. He snapped his face toward hers, which was giving him another warning glare.

Harry scowled at Hermione. She had been great yesterday, and some part of him knew she was right now to be curtailing his staring before others noticed, but he was getting *annoyed*. Who was she to decide when and at whom Harry could and couldn't stare? Just because she was in a relationship that was respected and endorsed by everyone who knew them, didn't mean that Harry's choice was any less valid.

"Bugger off, Hermione," he hissed.

Hermione looked a bit shocked, but somehow also obnoxiously patient.

"Okay, Harry," she responded softly. "Go ahead and stare. Just don't blame me when Ron blows a gasket."

Harry's shoulders softened. He hated it when Hermione was right. It wasn't her fault, though.

"Yeah," he murmured. "Sorry."

Hermione's slight nod made it obvious that she had accepted his apology. A moment later, she and Ron got up from the table, leaving Harry alone.

Harry surreptitiously reached a hand across to massage his bruised ribcage, still sore where Hermione had poked him. Now that his friends were disbursing, Harry thought it might be safe to chance one more glance across the Hall.

When Harry flicked his eyes back to the Slytherin table, Malfoy was gone.

Harry bit at the end of his quill. He was taking a giant gamble that he was right about Malfoy's true feelings. If he were wrong, he'd be opening himself up to endless ridicule.

If he were right, though, he might be paving the path toward something amazing. He felt all buzzy and bubbly inside, just thinking about the possibilities.

He'd lived through five years of endless ridicule and scorn at the hands of the Slytherins from his year. The potential benefits of the risk he was taking far outweighed any negative consequences.

Harry let out a slow breath and read over the letter he'd just written.

To D. Malfoy,

It's too bad you don't want to meet me tonight, but I suppose I understand. There's a long history of mistrust between us. I wasn't trying to trick you, you know. I hope someday you'll believe that.

There's something I wanted to tell you: After the other day in the dungeons, I realised it hadn't been an accident for me. I didn't know before, but I thought for a while after it happened, and it turns out I really am gay. I've told all my friends now, and they've been great, so I'm starting to feel pretty good about it.

I know it doesn't make sense, after everything, but I'd like to be able to count you among my friends, too. That's why I've told you what I just did. Is it even possible? Think about it, will you?

Look, I know you weren't under any hex. I know why you want to believe you were. We're kind of going through the same thing here, so I thought maybe we could help each other. Even if you don't

want to talk about that, though, we're working together in Potions, so ... it would be nice if we got along.

See you in Potions on Monday.

H. Potter

As soon as his eyes had skimmed over his signature, Harry rolled up the parchment. If he read it again, he might lose his nerve, or simply come unhinged. He wished he could pretend he didn't actually care that much about the situation between himself and Malfoy, but the tight feeling in his chest belied any such claims.

He *had* to figure out what was going on in Malfoy's head. He hadn't needed anything so badly since he had avenged his parents. He couldn't begin to explain why Malfoy was having such a powerful affect on him, but when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the look on Malfoy's face when their hands had locked around the Snitch.

If he could just break through the first of Malfoy's walls, Harry could sleep a little better. He knew not to hope for too much, considering the advanced state of Malfoy's denial.

Harry hoped that a friendship with Malfoy wouldn't be too much to ask, nor too little to accept.

There must be some school rule forbidding students to pad around the hallways barefoot; Harry was quite sure of it. However, since he knew for a *fact* that he was violating several other rules by being out of Gryffindor Tower so late, he didn't care. The Invisibility Cloak that had belonged to his father hid his unshod feet just as effectively as it hid the rest of him, anyway.

The uneven stones of the hallways felt smooth and clean under Harry's soles. He was always amazed at how little dirt seemed to accumulate along the paths that were trod by so many students each day. His feet stung a little from the cold - the castle never warmed up properly until late June - but Harry enjoyed the sense of connection that he could never quite attain when shoes separated him from these stones.

Walking barefoot was the only way Harry allowed himself to remember Sirius. It had been nearly two years since Harry's godfather had died, but the loss still ached inside his bones. He still couldn't quite breathe when he remembered the hopes he'd cherished of going to live with Sirius, of having a family who cared for him at last, so he kept the memories locked away, untouched.

At night, though, from time to time, Harry crept around the castle, imagining the bottoms of his feet to be as tough as the pads of a dog's paws. He remembered the time Sirius had snuck into the castle looking for Scabbers, presumably disguised in his Animagus form for at least part of the venture. His bare paws would have touched the very same stones that now chilled Harry's feet. With every step, Harry wished to allow himself forgiveness, and each time he lifted his foot from the stones, he feared forgetting and losing connection with his godfather forever.

Harry swiped impatiently at the tickle on his cheek. He didn't cry. It was too late for that. He concentrated on the other reason for his foray, instead.

After the events of the day, Harry knew a good night's sleep tonight was unlikely, so he had decided to send his letter before he could reconsider.

Speaking of reconsidering, Harry stopped short at the threshold of the Owlery. With all due respect to the many majestic creatures who resided here, he suddenly wished very much for a pair of shoes. The floor was littered with feathers and droppings.

It was a good job he had become so expert at Summoning Charms.

"*Accio shoes!*" the young wizard spoke quietly, picturing a pair of blue trainers he'd left on the floor of his dormitory. Half a minute later, he was slipping them on.

Harry considered his delivery options. Of course, Hedwig was always dependable, as were many of the school owls. And he recognized Draco's handsome eagle owl preening in a corner, a bit separate from all the others.

All the others, but one. The fawn-colored bird was sharing its roost with a beautiful, snowy -

"Hedwig?" Harry spluttered.

Two pairs of yellow eyes fixed at him with a distinctly superior expression.

"That is, I mean... hi, Hedwig. And, um, Malfoy's owl. Together. Right."

Oh, this is so weird - my owl is getting more action from a Malfoy than I am!

Harry approached the pair quietly, not sure how to deal with this new information. From his pocket, he offered owl treats to both birds, then stroked Hedwig's breast feathers gently. She nipped his finger affectionately.

The Malfoy owl watched the entire exchange warily, but accepted the treats, and seemed relatively calm in Harry's presence.

"I have a favour to ask of your mate, Hedwig." The snowy owl blinked and ruffled her feathers.

Harry directed his attention now to the eagle owl. "Will you take a letter to Draco for me?"

The owl eyed him a moment, then stretched out his leg for Harry to tie the parchment on.

Something about bearing of the proud, handsome bird made Harry feel he needed to speak to it in very formal tones. "Thank you. Please deliver that to him at breakfast, if you would."

He distributed a few more treats between the two owls, then exited the lofty chamber.

Harry knew he should return to bed and not push his luck. He hadn't been caught yet, but knew that Filch would not hesitate to give detention this late in the year, even to a student on the verge of finishing.

Especially if that student were one of the Indomitable Trio.

Still, he felt more awake than ever. There was no way he would sleep. He reeled slightly from the weirdness of seeing his owl snuggled up to Draco's. What were the odds? True, they were the most handsome two owls at the school, but Harry couldn't help searching for hidden meaning. Owls and red-tailed hawks were both birds of prey, weren't they?

Harry scolded himself silently. Owls were animals, and animals mated. Hedwig was one of the proudest, most beautiful owls Harry had ever seen. Of *course* she would choose and be chosen by the finest male in the Owlery. It didn't have to mean anything.

The letter he had just sent replayed itself in Harry's head. Why did he have to tell Draco he was gay? It felt better, and got easier, then more people he told, but Draco? *Malfoy*? He had just ensured that all of Slytherin house would know before lunch. He had just guaranteed himself merciless teasing for his final weeks at Hogwarts.

Maybe not. Maybe he had misjudged all the Slytherins, maybe they had all changed since the events of last summer. Maybe he was right to extend this olive branch to Draco, even at this late point in their school days.

Harry's head began to reel with all of these questions. Instead of keeping him awake, they were making him impossibly sleepy. It was time to head back to the Tower.

Moving silently on his bare feet, and mercifully distracted from his reasons for choosing to walk without shoes, Harry padded down the stairs to a hallway high up on the front of the castle. He paused at the nearest window, staring out at the darkened quiet of the grounds. A slim crescent of moon presided over the night sky, low in the west, almost ready to set. Harry eased the window open so he could inhale the cool night air.

Looking at the moon reminded Harry of Defence class that morning. His dreams had started the night of the rematch, which had coincidentally been the first night after the full moon. So, which was the cause - his sudden attraction to Draco during the match, or the season and his supposed destiny? Did it matter, in the end?

*Could **Draco** be my Destined Love?* mused Harry. *If I even really have one, that is.* Dumbledore had been known to have a twisted sense of humour. This could all be some elaborate joke, or perhaps a final lesson he wanted Harry to learn. What that lesson would be, Harry couldn't fathom.

Harry tried to imagine being with Draco after Hogwarts. Would they live in the Manor? No, the Ministry had seized all of the Malfoy family assets, other than a relatively small sum that belonged expressly to Draco in name, so the Manor no longer belonged to the heir of the Malfoy line.

Some flat in London, then? Perhaps a house in the country with a picket fence, two children and a dog?

Harry had a momentary vision of himself in one of Aunt Petunia's frilly aprons, pecking Draco chastely on the cheek and handing him his briefcase as he climbed into his car and drove off to the office.

The sleepless wizard shook his head to clear the vision. *Now **that's** just silly.*

Maybe he and Draco *would* be together for life. Maybe they would become friends, and nothing else. Maybe they would enjoy a few more passionate snogs and go their separate ways after school.

Maybe Draco would reject Harry's offer of friendship, and they would never be more than a diluted version of the enemies they'd been in earlier years.

No matter what, though, Harry and Draco would always have to be equals. Harry knew neither of them would want it any other way.

By the time Harry finally pushed his way back into the Gryffindor Common Room, he was exhausted to the point of collapse. The adrenaline that had caused his earlier restlessness had now spent itself completely, leaving him utterly sapped of energy. No thought crossed his mind other than the single purpose of climbing the stairs to the dormitory and sinking into peaceful oblivion.

The common room wasn't empty.

"Harry," called Ron softly, from one of the best chairs by the hearth. It was clear that he'd been waiting up, alone, in hopes of talking to Harry. Ron had probably been seen his best friend slipping out of bed, had probably been sitting in that very spot since Harry had left the Tower for the Owlery.

Harry smiled at his friend, and ambled sleepily over to join him.

"Harry, I'm sorry," began Ron.

Harry rumbled his forehead. The day was such a blur, he couldn't even sort out why he was supposed to be angry with his friend.

Ron clearly read the confusion on Harry's face. "About making that stupid wager," he explained. "About having all the wrong assumptions about you." Ron looked away, clearly having spent the entire evening berating himself until he had reached a new level of self-reproach.

Harry shook his head, smiling. "Don't be sorry, mate. It's not like I gave you any great clues, I mean, I only ever told you about Cho ... well, I mean, that's all there really was before ... that I realized, anyway" He trailed off into the awkward silence.

"Yeah." Ron looked Harry directly in the eye. "You could have, though."

"If I'd *known*, I could have. No harm done, though."

Ron snorted. "Easy for you to say."

"Yes, well." Harry smiled gently. "Just remember to check with your girlfriend next time before you make any bets about people."

Ron covered his eyes in surrender. "She wasn't my girlfriend, then."

Harry laughed softly at his friend's embarrassment.

"But she *did* already know." Harry faltered nervously as he spoke the words. He still wasn't used to saying them out loud. "About me, I mean."

The blue eyes looked up sharply. "You told Hermione over a year before you told me?" Ron's voice turned bitter as his gaze moved to the flames. "Well, I can't say I blame you..." His tone belied his words.

"No!" Harry interrupted. "I told Hermione *yesterday*. I only figured it out for myself just before I told her, remember? I said so at dinner."

"Yeah," agreed Ron with a shrug. "Then how -?"

Harry shot his friend a look, causing Ron to break into a smile before he was done.

"She's several steps ahead of us both, once again, isn't she?"

Harry nodded, smiling at a myriad of memories from the past seven years. "As always."

The boys shared a chuckle over their own inability to see, and over Hermione knowing the truth so long before either of them had.

After a moment, Ron's mirth faded out. His expression grew sincere.

"It's great, though, Harry. I mean, I'm glad for you."

"Thanks, Ron."

Ron let out a shaky laugh. "And I'm glad you weren't dreaming about Hermione."

Harry echoed the sound. "Me, too."

Ron regarded Harry very seriously. "Harry, I had no right to accuse you. I know you wouldn't have tried to get between Hermione and me."

"Forget it, Ron. I understand."

A glimmer of a grateful smile crossed the other boy's face. Harry returned it, making it clear that no apology was necessary.

Harry had been annoyed with Ron's insistence in the afternoon, but there was no point in drawing out that argument now. Harry knew how besotted Ron was with Hermione, and how unconvinced he was of his own worth. If Ron could only see himself the way his two best friends did, he would never have needed to suspect that Hermione had been in Harry's dreams.

Harry knew Ron better, though. He hadn't really meant his accusations, but had simply been powerless not to put a voice to his deepest fears.

The fire crackled softly, sending shifting shadows across the boys' faces as they sat in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"So, are you going to tell me?"

Harry snapped out of his reverie. "Tell you what?"

"Who *was* in your dreams?"

The eyebrow waggle had returned. Harry let out a long, slow breath. He wasn't any more amused than he had been hours earlier.

"Who says *anyone* was?"

Ron scoffed. "Your guilty face, for one. For another, how about the way you reacted when I asked you about your dream? Remember? You didn't say 'I wasn't dreaming about anyone.' You said, 'that's probably not even who it is.'"

Harry summoned a chuckle that came out more nervous than nonchalant. "Just because my subconscious is coughing up random wizards doesn't mean that I actually *fancy* anyone."

Ron met Harry's argument with silence. When Harry looked over, he found the blue irises narrowed in bitterness.

"You *could* tell me, you know. I'd understand." The tone of Ron's voice was as dark as the sky outside.

All the air went out of Harry's lungs. He hated to see Ron disappointed, but there was no way he knew what he was asking.

"I'd tell you, Ron," he muttered, unable to look his best mate in the eyes.

Both boys were silent for a very long moment. The lack of words between them started to ring in Harry's ears. He wanted desperately to be able to be honest with his best mate, but couldn't begin to imagine telling Ron that he apparently fancied the one student who had been the nastiest, the most cruel, out of any student in all of Hogwarts, toward Ron, Ron's girlfriend, and the rest of the Weasley family.

Harry became aware that Ron had inhaled deeply, as if steeling himself.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Ron remained silent, looking at Harry as though holding back a mouthful of water.

"What is it, Ron?"

Harry searched his best friend's gaze, trying to understand the reason for his sudden discomfort. Was it possible that he knew?

Ron dropped his eyes to the rug. "Look, I just wanted to say ... Harry, it's okay if it's me. I mean, that's not how I feel, but it wouldn't be weird or anything."

Harry looked up into his best friend's blue eyes, and in that one moment, wished for all the world that it were.

"Thanks, Ron," he said sincerely, then added as gently as possible: "but it's not you."

Another silence fell. Harry could hear his own heartbeat, and Ron's quietly agitated breathing.

"Okay." The blue eyes stayed fixed to the floor. "So, what's the problem then?"

The outburst in response surprised both of them: "I never said there was one!"

Ron recoiled a bit at the exasperation in Harry's voice, then regrouped quickly for a counterattack.

"But you won't tell me?"

"I *can't*, okay?"

Harry relaxed his shoulders a bit. He really *didn't* want to fight with Ron.

"Alright, maybe there *is* someone," he continued. "But I'm not ready to talk about it yet."

Harry had expected the silence this time, but it wasn't any easier. He was relieved that Ron was so supportive of his orientation, but why did he have to be so insistent about knowing who was in Harry's dreams?

"Fine," came the barely audible reply.

Harry had never heard his best friend sound so bitter, at least not since the horrible weeks before the First Task, over three years ago. He also noticed that Ron hadn't looked at him in several minutes.

"Ron... you're not... *jealous*?"

"No!" Ron let out a single snort of cynical laughter. "Maybe. Sort of." He finally raised his eyes to meet Harry's. "I mean, I'm your best mate, right? But there's some other bloke you care about more?"

Harry was impressed. Hermione's jab about Ron having the 'emotional range of a teaspoon' didn't seem to hold true anymore. He still didn't express his emotions very often, other than anger and outrage, but they were obviously there, and obviously real.

Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. It never ceased to astonish him, even after all they'd endured together, how true and constant a friend Ron really was. Harry had no idea how he could even deserve such a friendship, but he was deeply grateful to have it.

"I still care about you the most, Ron. You, and Hermione, and Ginny. You're my family. And you know that means more to me than *anything*."

Ron sat silently for a moment, a quiet smile settling onto his face. Finally, he nodded and pushed himself up from the bed. "Well, I'd better get to sleep. See you in the morning."

"Cheers, Ron," replied Harry. "Goodnight."

Ron strode over to the staircase, and started to climb, his long legs easily managing two steps at a time. He paused a moment on the landing and looked back to where Harry sat watching him ascend.

"You *could* tell me, Harry," Ron said quietly, before turning the corner and disappearing from view.

Chapter 5: Clarity

Saturday dawned bright, clear and stunning.

Harry blinked at the early morning, surprised to find he had left his curtains open, which now allowed the sun to stream across his face. The air from the open window smelled moist and cool, meaning it must have rained hard after Harry had fallen asleep. Any trace of cloud was gone, however; the entire sky shone a pale robin's-egg shade. Harry inhaled deeply, more alert and refreshed than he had felt in a long time. It had been at least a week since he had slept this well.

A week.

Harry hadn't felt terribly rested any morning since the dreams had begun, but today ...

Today, he felt as though he had slept soundly all night long.

The dreams are gone.

After his conversation with Ron the night before, Harry had fallen into a deep and *dreamless* sleep.

Harry was shocked to find himself oddly bereft. Had he *wanted* the 'Destined Love' bollocks to be true?

He lay back again on the bed, his head spinning. If the dreams had stopped, did that mean that he *wasn't* destined to be with Draco? Wouldn't that be for the best, anyway? Did one kiss really mean that much? Did Harry *want* Draco to be his destiny?

Was he mad to be *missing* the dreams, just a little?

These thoughts were starting to make him dizzy, so Harry decided to find himself a distraction. And what better distraction than revenge?

He sat up slowly and silently, allowing the blood to return to his head. He picked up his pillow and, tiptoeing stealthily over to one of the other beds in the room ...

"Mmph. Ow! Gerroff, Harry!"

Harry snickered, thwopping his best friend again with his pillow. Ron's pained expression when his curtains were ripped open had been priceless, absolutely worth whatever consequences Harry was about to face. Even that, however, hadn't been nearly as satisfying as Ron's current state of gibbering helplessness as he tried to fend off his crazed attacker.

"Get up, Ron! It's a beautiful day, and you're missing it!"

Ron responded by sitting halfway up, grasping his curtains firmly in both hands, and yanking them closed.

"Alright then," called Harry tauntingly, "I'll go and wake up your lovely girlfriend so I can spend lots of time alone with her."

A rumpled red head appeared at the part in the hangings. "Empty threats, mate, given your recent revelations."

"Funny, all I have to do is think of Hermione, and I don't feel so gay anymore." Harry didn't mean a word of it, of course, but it was such fun to watch his friend rise to the bait.

Ron's eyes went as wide as saucers. "Why *you* - !" He launched himself onto his unsuspecting assailant, knocking both of them to the floor, where an enthusiastic wrestling match broke out.

Harry laughed and shifted his weight suddenly, knocking Ron off-balance, so he could claim the dominant position and land another blow with his pillow. The bigger boy stretched his mouth into something a bit like a grin and a bit like a grimace, and began tickling Harry's ribs mercilessly. Harry collapsed, giggling, on top of his best mate, never sparing a moment's thought for their dormmates until -

"*Ahem.*"

Harry and Ron both sat up, short of breath from laughing, to find Dean, Neville and Seamus all observing them sardonically.

Seamus snickered at the ruffled boys on the floor. "Well, I suppose we know who the 'lucky wizard' is now, eh, Ron?"

THWAP!

"Wow, Ron," said Harry admiringly, "I've never seen a pillow fly that accurately! Shouldn't you have been a Chaser?"

"I'll give you something to chase!" snarled Seamus, launching the pillow back at a nearly equal velocity, then jumping into the fray. Harry parried with his own pillow, knocking Seamus's attack off-course so that he and Ron could gang up on their new opponent.

Dean, sensing that his own best mate was outnumbered, quickly joined in so as to even out the contest. Neville sat to the side, laughing nervously but merrily at his friends, until Ron seized his ankle and dragged him into the melee.

Five pillows, ten arms and ten legs flew with abandon as each of the boys tried to gain dominance in the spontaneous contest, changing alliances without warning until they were all breathless with exertion and hilarity.

Finally, Harry stood up, brushing off his pyjamas. "If you gentlemen don't mind, we're missing a lovely bit of sunshine. *I* am not going to stay inside and participate in these juvenile antics any longer." Dean's pillow hit him squarely in the face. "... Last one to breakfast has to kiss the Squid!"

Five Gryffindors scampered to the bathrooms to prepare themselves for the day.

Harry lay in a sea of grass such a spectacular shade of green that even his eyes couldn't compete. He gazed into a sky of deep sapphire, unmarred by even a wisp of cloud. The air was so sparkingly clean that he could see each leaf on the trees at the edge of the Forest, and discern each individual ripple that the light breeze created on the surface of the Lake. Everything was simply too beautiful to be real.

He forced himself to breathe deeply. He was so overcome that he had nearly forgotten how.

How could any day be more perfect? Not only the weather cooperated, but life itself seemed perfectly in balance. He knew who he was, and in the past two days he had confirmed that he knew who his friends were.

The other seventh-year Gryffindors were splayed out on the grass around him: Ron had even convinced Hermione to leave the library, although she had insisted on bringing her books outside, what with N.E.W.T.s only a month away. She sat cross-legged with her back against a large oak, while Ron snoozed happily with his head on one of her knees. Seamus and Neville were engaged in a spirited game of Exploding Snap, while Parvati and Lavender played Gobstones near them.

Dean had brought some paints and an easel, and was working quietly off to one side of the group. Harry realised the artistic student kept glancing his way.

Harry sat halfway up and turned toward his solitary dormmate. "What are you painting, Dean?"

"Wait, Harry, don't move yet! Lie back down for five more minutes, then I'll show you."

"Dean..." Harry wasn't sure he liked the direction this was heading.

"Please, Harry," begged Dean. "I really think it's coming out well."

Harry complied, letting his thoughts wander to keep his mind off whatever might be taking shape on the easel.

Draco hadn't been at breakfast this morning, at least not while the Gryffindors were eating. Breakfast was served over a few hours on weekend mornings, so the crowds tended to be sparse. Harry wasn't surprised at the possibility that Draco might have had a lie-in, since he always seemed especially grumpy in the mornings.

Harry needed to see Draco today, though. He had got his mind off the absent dreams for a little while that morning, but now that he was calm, the questions came flooding back. What did it mean that the dreams had ended? and What had they meant in the first place? and What did Harry *want* them to mean? and Did it really matter, if Draco wouldn't admit to being attracted to him? and *Was* Draco really attracted to him? and *Was Harry* really attracted to *Draco*, after all? and ...

With so many uncertainties in his mind, Harry was starting to feel a bit queasy. He had to close his eyes, slightly nauseated at feeling the Earth spin beneath him.

Still, Harry longed to see the other boy's reaction to his latest letter. He could understand why Draco was so untrusting, so unwilling to open up to his former enemy. If only Harry could break through those defenses and start a line of communication, then maybe they could sort things out. Harry was sure that there was more between himself and Draco than frustrated sexual energy.

There *had* to be more, didn't there? Harry wasn't the type for an empty, hormonal attraction. He had always placed more value on friendship and loyalty and emotions, even when he hadn't ever experienced enough about romance to know how it was really supposed to feel.

There had to be *something* significant between himself and Draco, no matter how difficult it was to find it. Otherwise, Harry was sure he would never have become interested, even after the kiss. Although Harry would never admit it in so many words, he considered himself to be a person whose intentions were generally noble; therefore, if he wanted something from Draco, it had to be more than simply a few further snogs in dusty dungeon corridors.

Didn't it?

He couldn't deny, though, that the very thought of the snog sent his heart racing. The very memory washed him in a wave of contentment. He allowed himself to enjoy the sensation, mind wiped of all attempts to analyse.

"Ready, Harry!"

Green eyes unfocused in confusion, it took Harry a moment to realise who was calling him, and why. He hauled himself up from the grassy bed and walked around behind Dean to observe his work.

Dean looked at Harry nervously as he approached. "It's still sort of rough," he explained. "I'm only doing this as an exercise, so it isn't very good -" but Harry interrupted him.

"Wow, Dean, that's ... wow."

The tall, quiet Gryffindor looked anxious. "I hope that meant something good," he prompted.

"Much too good for a painting of me," confirmed Harry with a smile.

Dean responded with a relieved grin, and stepped back to allow Harry to look more closely. Harry leaned in slightly to examine the product of Dean's afternoon activity.

The canvas, about two feet square, showed the head and shoulders of a boy lying on his back in the grass, head toward the lower left corner and body angled up to the right, exactly as Harry would have appeared from this vantage point. The unwitting model observed a faithful depiction of half-closed green eyes, large, round spectacles, a hint of silver scar, wild black hair and gently smiling pink lips.

Dean had perfectly captured Harry's posture, the way his arms folded behind his head and his shoulders relaxed away from his ears. But most of all, Harry was struck by how happy his painted self looked. He didn't think he'd ever looked so free of worries in his entire life.

Of course, he'd never *been* so nearly free of worries, until now.

As he examined the painting, Harry's face relaxed into a very pleased smile. He liked to be depicted this way; it was much better than photos of the battle-scarred hero which had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* after last summer.

Dean's eyes lit up at seeing Harry's expression. "So, you like it, then?"

"It's brilliant, Dean. But - why?"

A cheerful glimmer danced in the painter's eyes. "Well, the day, of course. The colours are so brilliant, they were begging for it. But that's only why I brought the paint and easel down."

Harry maintained an interested silence, causing Dean to blush slightly as he went on.

"I guess I painted you because ... because you're so *alive* today. Ever since supper last night, really. I've never seen you this happy, not in all the seven years we've been at school together."

He broke off, looking shyly at his friend, as if for permission to continue.

"Go on," prompted Harry.

Dean's face broke into a grin. "The thing is, I'm really glad for you, Harry. And glad you told us all. That you trusted us. We've been dormmates since First Year, but now I feel like we're really *friends*, you know?"

This speech was more than Dean usually said all at once, and Harry was truly touched at his words. "Thanks, Dean. And thanks for showing me this. You're really talented."

Dean shrugged, and looked away shyly. "I only paint what I see."

Harry took his time returning to Gryffindor Tower after dinner that evening. He was in no hurry to be anywhere in particular, because Ron and Hermione had gone off alone somewhere, and Harry never quite felt right without them. He had looked for Ginny, to see whether she might fancy a game of chess, but she was working on a group project for Herbology with other sixth-years, and had left dinner early so that she could spend all evening in the greenhouses with her classmates.

For someone who had once sought solitude so intently, Harry now found himself rather unhappy at being alone.

The common room was about half-full, with groups of younger students huddled around tables, either studying or avoiding their work. Harry smiled vaguely at the faces that looked up on his arrival, but didn't see anyone he knew well, anywhere in the room.

Discouraged, he climbed the stairs to the seventh-years' dormitory, planning to collect his Firebolt for an after-dinner flying session. Now that the Cup tournament was over, the pitch was frequently vacant. If Harry couldn't find the company of his friends, he would seek solitude and think.

He still hadn't seen Draco since he'd sent the letter. He still had no idea how it might have been received. It only seemed logical that Draco *would* be interested in being friends with Harry, but then, Harry had never observed Draco to act in a way that could precisely be termed *logical*.

Mired in circular thoughts, Harry rounded the corner into the dormitory to find himself staring at ... himself.

Dean was seated with his back to the door, studying his canvas. Hearing the approaching footsteps, he glanced back over his shoulder, then turned around completely when he saw who had arrived.

"You're still working on it," commented Harry, but it was more of a question. Dean had said the painting was only an exercise.

Dean looked at the canvas again. "I am," he agreed. "It was going to be a quick study, like I told you, only it's turning out better than I expected. I thought I'd keep at it a bit, see what happens."

Harry reflected on the fact that Ginny was busy doing schoolwork that evening, and Seamus didn't seem to be around anywhere. Dean must be feeling about as lonely as Harry was.

Harry took a seat near where Dean was working.

"Where *is* everyone tonight? I know Ron and Hermione decided to spend some time alone, and Neville went to help Ginny and her friends in the greenhouses, but I haven't seen Seamus since this afternoon, either."

Dean remained strangely silent. Harry felt stupid for having said anything - Dean and Seamus had been sort of quiet around each other all afternoon. It finally dawned on Harry that his friends might have had a disagreement, which would be why they were spending the evening apart.

"Sorry," spoke Harry before the silence could become too awkward, but Dean only shrugged.

"Dean?" Harry spoke barely above a whisper, as though he knew he probably shouldn't be asking. "Is everything, well, are you okay?"

A tense silence followed. Harry could feel his shoulder-blades drawing in toward his neck. He felt angry at himself for having spoken, and guilty for not having built the kind of friendship with his dormmates, other than Ron, where they could talk to each other when something was clearly wrong.

Harry's thoughts reminded him of something Dean had said, earlier in the day.

"Look, it's only, you said we're really friends now, and that means, if you needed, you could talk to me."

Dean sat up straight, pressing his hands into his thighs. He inhaled, as if about to speak, then looked very directly at Harry.

"Did you know that your hair isn't really black?"

"Wha -?"

Harry was completely wrong-footed by his friend's non-sequitur, but Dean continued without acknowledging his interjection.

"It's been driving me mad all afternoon. I've had to use a dozen different colours to get all the shades and highlights that show the depth in what most people only see as jet black."

Harry blinked, bringing his fingers unconsciously to tug at the tips of the strands that stuck out over his right ear. He looked at the painting for a long moment, his eyes drawn to the spiky mass in the lower left corner.

"My hair isn't black?" he asked stupidly, having no idea how else to respond to Dean's torrent of words.

"But it *is* black, isn't it? Only you can't just paint *black*, because then it would only be paint, it wouldn't be *hair*, do you see?"

Harry nodded mutely, wondering whether he really did. His mind was swimming with the details he'd never considered about the work that could go into a few square inches of canvas.

Dean clearly wasn't going to talk to him about what was happening with Seamus, although it was now becoming clearer to Harry that something *was*. At least Dean was talking to him, though.

Harry reflected that Ron had often been good at this part of being a friend. When Harry didn't want to talk about Voldemort or Cedric or Cho or Sirius, Ron's approach was usually to take him flying, or to challenge him to a game of chess. Sometimes, it would relax Harry enough to make him want to talk about other things than why his knights never obeyed his commands.

Maybe art was Dean's chess.

"How long have you been painting?"

"Since I got back from dinner. A few minutes, maybe."

"No, I mean - how long has painting been something you *do*? In life?"

"Oh, that," murmured Dean. He squinted and leaned back, eyes never leaving his work.

"Since I can remember," he answered. "I think my mum gave me my first set of paints before I could properly write."

"You really seem to like it."

Dean nodded quietly, with a contented smile. He continued to make miniscule additions whose purpose Harry couldn't discern, but the painting was becoming ever more lifelike with each dab from the brush.

Harry cocked his head to one side. "You're really good, aren't you? I mean, I don't know much about it, but I can see that your painting really *looks* like something."

Dean shrugged and ducked his head slightly, in a manner that suggested he might be a bit embarrassed at the compliment.

"I hope so," he replied simply. Harry could see the tension melting away from his features already.

A peaceful silence settled between them, as Harry watched Dean work. Harry relaxed back in his seat, observing over Dean's shoulder as the scene emerged more vibrantly from the canvas with each touch.

Harry looked at his own face, struck again by the strangeness of seeing himself looking so content. It was a face he'd never even seen in the mirror, much less in the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. He'd looked happy enough in the photos taken on Ron's birthday in March, but there had still been a jittery undercurrent to the expression.

What *had* it taken to allow Harry to relax, finally? Was it knowing he was gay, and that his friends accepted him?

Or was it Draco?

Harry looked away from the painting, to the mirror on the wall. The face he saw there was tense, full of worries about friends who might be fighting with other friends, and friends who might not be willing to be friends at all.

So maybe it wasn't Draco.

But, as he thought the name, Harry saw the face that went with it, appearing over and over in his head like a slideshow.

Draco at dinner, watching Harry receive his rejection.

Draco in Defence Against the Dark Arts, scowling from the shadows in the back of the room.

Draco in the dungeon corridor, self-assured and then panicked.

Draco with his fingers around the Snitch, and around Harry's.

Draco meeting Harry's eyes across the pitch, and *smiling*.

The Harry in the mirror was starting to look a bit more like the Harry in the painting. The corners of his mouth had that same, gentle upward tilt.

Thinking about the rematch reminded Harry why he'd come upstairs in the first place. His feet were aching to leave the ground.

"Dean?"

"Mmm?" He was fully absorbed in his work.

"I'm going to go flying, but I just wanted to say thanks."

"Hmm?" His attention was starting to turn toward Harry. "Thanks for what?"

Harry gestured at the painting, with an awkward smile. "I don't think I've ever looked so good."

Dean's eyes crinkled at the corners. He had such an open, friendly face. Harry could see why Ginny was so taken with him.

He really, really hoped everything would be alright between Dean and Seamus.

Harry strode out onto the Quidditch pitch, his robes billowing around his ankles in the breeze. Being alone inside the castle had felt stiflingly lonely - being alone out here felt *good*.

He kicked off hard, hearing the wind sing past his ears and feeling it draw caressing fingers through his hair as he accelerated toward the dimming sky. Although dinner was over, the sun was only beginning its descent toward the western horizon, and Harry estimated he had at least an hour more of daylight to enjoy.

He circled the pitch, first inside and then outside the stands, revelling in the freedom of flight. He couldn't remember how it had felt *not* to do this, in the first eleven years of his life, before Malfoy had stolen Neville's Remembrall and his life had begun.

Harry mused on that thought. Most would assume Harry's real life had begun on the night when Hagrid had tracked Harry and the Dursleys to that rock in the sea to deliver his Hogwarts letter. Or, perhaps, that his life had begun when he had defeated Voldemort willingly for the first time, or for the last.

The truth, though, was that Harry wasn't born to kill Voldemort. He may have been destined to do so, and he may have succeeded, and that destiny may have been the shadow that had hung over and shaped Harry's entire young life ... but Harry had been born to *fly*. He had never truly been alive, until the first time his feet had left the ground.

Harry smiled at the memory of his first flying lesson, and of the days that had followed it. There was something he'd said First Year, meaning it only as a taunt: "It's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it." Now, however, that statement no longer applied only to the long-destroyed Nimbus 2000. The seven-year Seeker had his rival to thank for the very central presence of Quidditch in his life, and he *did* feel grateful to Draco for goading him onto his broomstick that day.

Imagine if Professor McGonagall *hadn't* seen him fly, hadn't recruited him for the team. Would his life have been as blessed if he had seen his first Gryffindor Quidditch match from the stands, instead of from the air? If it hadn't been for Draco, would he have all of this? Would he ever have *lived*?

The beating of wings at his side interrupted Harry's reverie. He looked to see the eagle owl flying next to him. Something about the sleek shape of the bird's face and the point of its beak, and its persistence in staying so close beside him, reminded Harry of a certain human who had flown against him, not so long ago.

Harry grinned at the bird and kicked up his speed, executing a vertical loop into a sharp dive, pulling up just in time to land lightly.

Malfoy's owl matched him every inch of the way, with an attitude that seemed to say, *Please. You may have had a broomstick for a few years, but that's no reason to think you're anything special.*

As Harry dismounted his broom, the owl found a convenient perch on a nearby barrier. Harry doubted it was an accident that the bird had managed to situate itself slightly *above* his eye-level.

"Hello, there," greeted Harry jovially. "I hope you're treating my Hedwig well."

The majestic creature regarded the human in a manner that it had clearly learnt from its mate.

Harry looked at it thoughtfully. "I wish I knew your name."

The owl held its leg out to Harry, who expected to find a roll of parchment tied there. Instead, he found a tiny silver band, engraved with the name *Salazar*.

"Awfully predictable, that, don't you think?"

Salazar gave Harry a superior look, then stepped back and offered its other leg. The one it was now extending did, indeed, carry a letter. Harry untied it nervously.

"Brought me good news, have you?" he asked hopefully.

Salazar merely stared, so Harry was forced to read:

Potter,

It mystifies me that you would want to be friends. There is not the slightest shred of evidence in our history that suggests it might be possible. I must admit, however, that you've made me curious. What could the Famous Harry Potter possibly expect to get out of a friendship with the son of two prominent Death Eaters?

Perhaps I'm not being fair. I know that a lot of things about me have changed in the past year. I must allow for the same to be true of you.

I want to make one thing absolutely clear, before we proceed: It's fine for you to be so happy after the recent developments in your personal life, but you cannot assume that I am in the same situation. You may be telling everyone around you that you're gay, but you are not entitled to

Some words were crossed out here, but Harry thought it might say 'drag me out of the closet with you'

draw conclusions about me, based on one moment that I never even intended to happen. Please stay out of my personal business.

As long as you can agree to this, then I suppose we can try being friends. I don't know how you plan to go about it, but I'll let you work it out.

Enjoy the rest of your weekend.

*Cordially yours,
D. Malfoy*

"I don't know how you plan to go about it, but I'll let you work it out," repeated Harry aloud. "Well, how do you ever 'go about' being friends with someone? You just *do*, don't you?"

Salazar eyed Harry as one might a small and particularly dim child. It reminded Harry very much of the way Draco had regarded him during their negotiations about referees, before the Seeker Rematch.

Harry thought back to his strained attempt at talking to Dean in the dormitory. Maybe it *wasn't* so simple. The owl had a point.

Harry absently stroked the top of the eagle owl's head, as he had done so frequently to Hedwig. The great bird started slightly, then preened under the attention. Seeing its reaction, Harry reflected that the Malfoys might not have treated their pets in the same manner that he treated his own.

"Thanks," he told the owl. "There are some owl treats by my bed. You'd better ask Hedwig to get them for you. I don't think the other Gryffindors would take well to seeing you in our dormitory."

Salazar blinked once in what Harry could only hope was an understanding manner, then took off for the castle.

Harry mounted his broom again, and soared back into the air. Beams of golden sunlight still slanted through the evening sky as he climbed higher and higher. The darkness was beginning to thicken in the upper reaches of the altitudes where it was possible to fly a broom, but Harry flew on, inhaling deeply into the night, as though he could breathe in the very possibilities in the air.

From high above the pitch, Harry looked back towards Hogwarts. Each of the hundreds of windows glowed warmly with its own point of torch light. He could occasionally glimpse a speck of silhouette as a figure passed before one of those openings. The castle was so distant below as to appear tiny, like a child's plaything, a model built lovingly into the green felt mounds of the hills, by a mirror of lake. He felt he could have reached down his hand and scooped the lot into his pocket.

Harry gazed downward at the toy-sized building that contained almost all of the most important people in his life. He let out a quiet sigh. Even having received the letter, he wasn't sure how he would approach Draco when they saw each other again. He *was* pretty sure, on the other hand, how his Gryffindor friends would react when they learnt of the new friendship.

From this vantage point, though, all those worries looked shrunk to a manageable size.

Harry smiled, exhaled, and began his descent. He'd thought enough for one day. It was time for another night of dreamless sleep.

Sunday afternoon found Harry in the library, surrounded by piles of books and notes, and by his two best friends.

Hermione had finally harassed both Ron and Harry into conceding that N.E.W.T.s were not, in fact, so far in the inconceivably distant future, and that it was time they began their preparations.

Once he'd arrived in the library, however, Harry had found himself incapable of studying. The sleepy warmth of the room robbed him of alertness. Specks of dust danced in sunbeams, distracting him with the elegance of all the minutiae he'd taken for granted all these years. It was finally occurring to Harry that his time at this place, the only true home he could remember, was coming to an end.

Harry looked over at Ron and Hermione. Ron was staring raptly at the top of Hermione's head while she was engrossed in revising.

Ron had got in late the night before. Despite his size, Ron had learnt to move very quietly, but Harry hadn't yet lost the habit of snapping awake at the slightest noise. Harry had, therefore, heard Ron tiptoe into the room long after everyone else had gone to sleep.

Ron and Hermione both looked so content. It gave Harry's heart a little squeeze to see it, partly from love for both of them, but partly from less positive sentiments. He felt a bit jealous of what they had, wishing he could find that bond with someone; he felt a bit guilty, knowing how thoroughly their world would be knocked off-balance by his nascent friendship with Draco; and he felt a bit nostalgic, already, for the role in their life he was about to lose.

Of course, when they left school, all three of them would still be the best of friends, but it would never again be the same. It wouldn't be living all of every day in and around the same building with Ron and Hermione and the rest. It wouldn't be sharing all the same worries about homework and joys over Quidditch victories. Harry had the feeling that Ron and Hermione's near future contained some joys which would be theirs alone; Harry would only be on the periphery of their lives as a couple, no matter how dearly they all cherished each others' friendship.

He sighed sadly, and let his eyes wander beyond their table. Closer to the middle of the room, Dean, Seamus and Ginny were sharing a similar space. Harry was relieved to see that his worries about Dean and Seamus falling out seemed to be unfounded. Seamus was smiling at Dean and Ginny, who were sitting close together, the backs of their fingers brushing where they lay on the table. The smile had a wistful quality which Harry recognised from his own expression of a moment before. He knew just how Seamus felt.

Harry noticed that Seamus kept glancing into a corner, where a group of Slytherins were huddled together against the rest of the world. Harry mused that Seamus must be researching material for his next Slytherin story to tell at dinner, but he couldn't see any horrible misfortunes befalling Nott or Bulstrode or Zabini. Seamus must be disappointed.

Nott, Bulstrode and Zabini were not the only three Slytherins in that corner. Another was sitting slightly apart, scowling quietly at a heavy text. Harry couldn't allow his eyes to venture that direction, though; if he allowed himself to gaze, he would never get anything done.

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Seven, lay open on the desk in front of Harry. He forced his eyes back to the text and across the words on the page. For a brief while, he was able to concentrate on his studies.

After a few minutes, though, Harry found himself rereading the page on the Mobilicorpus spell for the fourth time. He was tired of studying, and felt claustrophobic in the library. He had seen the charm in action four years ago, anyway, and was confident he could reproduce it. Why should he keep reading the theory?

Harry lifted his sore eyes from the book, and found his attention immediately drawn to the far end of the room.

Sunlight reflected brilliantly from a dark corner, as if emanating from the fair figure who studied there. Draco glanced up and noticed Harry staring. He began to sneer, but seemed to catch himself. Instead, he offered a cautious smile, then looked away nervously.

Harry let out a long sigh. It really wasn't going to be easy to establish a friendship with Draco, even now that they had both decided they were willing to try. He realised he really didn't know anything about the other boy, including how he would react if Harry were to cross the room right now to greet him.

He knew exactly how the rest of the students in the room would react, though; it simply wasn't worth trying.

Draco glanced up again to catch Harry still staring. An ironic grin took over his face, as though he knew every last one of Harry's thoughts at that moment - from worries about the opinions of their friends to fantasies about which spot on Draco's aristocratically fair throat he'd like to nibble first - and was amused by all of them. Harry ducked his head, embarrassed, as Draco's eyes returned to his text.

The corners of Harry's mouth turned upwards of their own accord. He might not be happy about leaving Hogwarts, but at least he knew how to seize the moment of his last weeks there.

He was going to need some outside help. Luckily, outside help had been making itself available for a couple of summers now. Harry had only just realised *why*.

Taking a quill in hand, Harry shuffled around on the desk until he found a fresh sheet of parchment. He glanced around to make sure his friends wouldn't take interest, but Hermione was still reading *Moste Potente Potions* - with permission, this time - and her boyfriend was still staring besottedly at her, oblivious to the rest of the world.

Harry wrote:

Dear Charlie,

Did you hear Gryffindor have won the Quidditch cup again? Ron is dead chuffed. I think it meant a lot, winning two Cups in a row as Captain, after he had such a hard time of it his first year on the team.

How is everything in Romania? Thanks for showing me your photos last summer. I'm not sure I want to get too close to dragons ever again, after the First Task, but it was interesting to see more about what you do over there.

Thanks also for making me feel that I could talk to you. I suppose you already knew that I might have some things I needed to tell someone, someday - someone who'd been through the same thing already. You were right, anyway.

I feel funny coming out and saying this in a letter (oh, ha ha, 'coming out,' didn't mean to say that), but I kissed someone a few days ago. Or got kissed, maybe, I'm not sure. Anyway, that 'someone' wasn't exactly a girl. In other words, Ron is trying to work out how to pay off that bet of yours. (I forgive you, and him, by the way, for having a flutter about my personal business. I don't think Ron has forgiven either of you, though, yet.)

Anyway, Ron knows, and Hermione, and Ginny, and Dean, Seamus, Neville ... well, pretty much everyone will, soon. I don't see any point of keeping it secret. There is one part that's secret, though. Hermione's the only one who knows who it was. I think I might have got myself into a pretty big

mess. I'd forget all about it, only I can't. Nothing's ever made me feel like I did when Draco Malfoy kissed me.

Charlie, Draco isn't Lucius. You have to believe me. He's not the old Draco, either. Please believe me, because I don't think Ron ever will. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't even know what Draco's thinking, because he's trying to pretend he was under a hex or something, and isn't really gay. He says he's willing to be my friend, at least, but I can't imagine how that's going to go, with all of my other friends hating him.

I could really do with your help. Any advice?

Hi to Viktor. Watch out for the Horntails.

Harry

Harry reread the letter. It felt good to get all these words out of his head and onto parchment. He was really lucky to be able to write to someone like Charlie about all this. He hadn't even noticed when Charlie had made a point of talking to him, when they were both at the Burrow the last two summers, because all the Weasleys had always made Harry feel like part of the family. Fourth Year, when Bill and Molly had taken the role of Harry's 'family' on visiting day, Harry had been so happy he could have cried. He'd spent enough time with Charlie now that the second-eldest Weasley son, especially, had become like the older brother Harry had never had. It hadn't occurred to him until today that Charlie had nurtured their brotherly relationship on purpose.

Checking the letter over one last time, Harry rolled it neatly and placed it in his bag. He would go and see Hedwig before dinner.

Harry returned to his reading, still getting no further than the passage about *Mobilicorpus*. He could almost feel invisible strings tugging at his forehead as he strained to keep his gaze on the book and not on the corner where Draco still sat, as focused on his revisions as ever.

Harry scowled. It wasn't fair. Why was *he* the only one who couldn't work around here? He looked around at his friends and other classmates again, becoming irrationally angry and jealous of their contentment.

Right.

Stretching out his stiffened limbs, Harry stood and collected his books. He wouldn't be getting any more work done this afternoon, so he might as well go send his letter. It would be nice to visit Hedwig, and even Salazar.

Hermione glanced up with a question on her face. Ron's eyes followed closely behind them.

"Got a letter to take to Hedwig," he responded to their unspoken queries, and walked away before either could put voice to any objections. Harry knew he had been acting strangely, and that he really did need to keep revising, but he also knew there would be no concentrating until this letter was in the air.

He hoped he would be able to calm down soon, without having to wait for Charlie's response, which was likely to take several days.

He turned the second corner out of the library, which took him into a particularly dark and deserted stretch of corridor. He had only taken a few steps into the shadows when a noise from behind caused him to whip around, startled, wand at the ready. Logically, he knew he was in almost no danger anymore, but six years of vigilance had not yet worn off.

Despite recent developments, Harry's reflexes at hearing that voice still told him to expect an attack.

Silver eyes widened in shock, glimmering in the shadows. Draco held up his hands defensively. "Hey, Potter, I thought we were going to be friends, now!"

Harry let out his breath in a *whoosh*. "It's not a good idea to startle me. Still haven't got used to being safe."

Draco only stared at Harry for a long moment. His pale skin and hair glowed richly in the semidarkness as Harry waited for him to break the silence. Although unflappable as always, Draco seemed momentarily caught without a snappy response.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said finally. "Only I wanted to talk to you alone. Away from" - he gestured vaguely back toward the library - "everything."

Harry's heart leapt, but he forced himself to nod understandingly. He leaned against a wall, trying to look nonchalant, but really finding a way to pin his arms down so he wouldn't ruin the moment by trying to touch the other boy.

"Alright, then. Let's talk."

Draco stared a moment longer. Harry wondered at seeing him look a bit awkward, precisely the way Harry himself had felt around Draco ever since he had first proposed the rematch.

"Were you serious about being friends?" ventured Draco at last.

"I was," replied Harry, "and you?"

Draco eyed him for a minute, then nodded slowly. His eyes were still narrowed in a combination of mistrust and confusion.

"Potter, I don't understand. Why would you want this?"

Harry wasn't sure how to respond to Draco's question. There were too many answers, and not enough words for any of them.

And it was so hard to *think* when Draco kept calling him 'Potter,' like he had when they were enemies. The Draco in his dreams had called him 'Harry.'

Harry sighed. "It's hard to explain," he started. "I have a favour to ask, though."

Draco looked suspicious. "What kind of favour?"

At his expression, Harry let out a little laugh. "A simple one, I hope. It's only ... can you call me 'Harry'?"

Draco stood sort of stiffly for a minute, not seeming to know how to respond. "Harry," he repeated softly. "Don't know if I can get used to that." He offered a small smile. "But I can try, can't I?"

Harry relaxed and returned the smile. "That sounds good," he murmured. "When you call me 'Potter,' all I hear is you leading your House in that song Peeves made up Second Year..."

Draco winced, and had the good grace to look sheepish. "Sorry about that, Harry." Draco offered a small smile.

The Gryffindor swallowed quickly and matched the other boy's gaze. "Quite alright, Draco." Harry savoured the feel of saying his new friend's name out loud. "It's all in the past now."

The silver eyes softened further. Their owner seemed to enjoy hearing his first name in the other boy's mouth, as well.

The two boys simply stared at each other for a moment in the half-light. Harry wondered whether he was imagining that they seemed to be beginning much more than a friendship. He pushed the thought away, though. It was no good hoping for more than he'd been offered. Draco seemed pretty adamant about insisting that he wasn't gay.

Draco finally broke the silence. "But you haven't answered my question," he persisted. "*Why* do you want to be my friend, now?"

Harry thought for a moment. He knew the answer, knew his motives both basic and ulterior, but he didn't know how to explain them. A recounting of every thought and impulse and dream since the rematch would not only confuse Draco, it would probably send him running away, screaming.

Harry couldn't explain it sufficiently, though, without talking about the dreams. And he couldn't talk about the dreams without confirming any fear Draco might have about his intentions, especially after the spectacle Dumbledore had made in Defence Against the Dark Arts on Friday morning.

Harry couldn't explain it, but he thought he could make Draco understand.

"I suppose it's only that I couldn't see a reason *not* to be friends, anymore," he responded simply.

Draco examined his former nemesis for a long moment, considering this.

"Well," he said finally, "I suppose I can't, either."

The two Seekers smiled at each other freely for the first time, though hesitantly. For the first time, being Seekers seemed like something they had in common, instead of another reason to be opponents and enemies.

After a brief moment, Draco turned back toward the library. Harry watched him walk away until long after he had disappeared around the corner. Harry's heart was beating wildly in his chest.

Suddenly, the last few weeks at Hogwarts seemed full of possibilities. As Harry followed the corridor into a new beam of sunlight, he could almost literally feel a giant weight lift from his chest.

He sighed blissfully as he placed his foot on the first step up toward West Tower and the Owlery. Draco was going to be his friend. Draco *was* his friend.

The sky outside the window was a bit brighter than it had looked from the library.

Harry was so happy, he could sing.

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**End of Part I**

**Author notes:** Thus ends the first 5-chapter Part of SPW. There will be two more, plus an Epilogue. Part II: The Foundations Under Them starts with Chapter 6: Progress, which will hopefully follow a lot sooner than this one did! Also, be watching out for a R/Hr prequel, The Taming of the Weasel, which will be posted on Astronomy Tower around the time I post SPW07. Need to finish it, first!

Thank you thank you thank you

## Part II: The Foundations Under Them

### Chapter 6: Progress

*Darkness surrounded him on all sides, pressing in on his face, chest and legs. Through the murkiness of his vision, Harry could barely make out the walls of a narrow tunnel. The only light source was a pale apparition that floated several feet ahead of him, at the very farthest reach of his sight. It appeared weightless, hung in the nothingness before his eyes.*

*Harry knew the light was leading him, but although he hurried to catch up, it stayed always just beyond his reach. The faster he moved, the faster the form moved ahead; soon Harry was running, his pounding feet echoing in the darkness so that they sounded like another's footfalls had joined his.*

*The glowing must have been increasing for several minutes before Harry became aware that he could see a bit more of his surroundings, infused with the orange light of embers or fire. The tunnel was opening into a vast cavern where dark, robed silhouettes moved silently about. Harry stumbled into a slower pace as he began to make out a robe hanging below the light that guided him; eventually, he came to realise he'd been following the back of Draco's head all along.*

*At the very moment that Harry recognised his companion, Draco turned to face him, smiling in a way that turned the marrow of Harry's bones to ice.*

*"Have you met my mother's cousin?" Draco asked, showing very straight, white teeth.*

*His arm swept out, and when he drew it in again, an emaciated figure with long, matted hair and hollow eyes crouched there.*

*Harry probably wouldn't have recognised his godfather if it hadn't been for all those posters, back when he'd escaped from Azkaban.*

*"Sirius!" Harry shouted, falling to his knees before the ruined figure. "Sirius, what happened to you? Why do you look like this again?"*

*Sirius smiled brightly, and Harry had the odd sensation of seeing the sickly and healthy versions of the familiar face superimposed.*

*"Sirius," he asked, "have you seen Mum and Dad? Will I get to be with you all when ... when I die? Will I ever get to meet my family?"*

*Sirius glanced at Draco, whom Harry had temporarily forgotten in the shock of seeing his godfather again. Draco raised a single eyebrow at both of them, but gave no other sign.*

*When Sirius opened his mouth to reply, Harry saw with a shock that in place of a tongue, a dancing flame flickered from between the yellowed teeth. With a voice that rasped from disuse, but carried a jovial cadence, Sirius began to speak:*

*"S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse  
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.  
Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo  
non tornò viva alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo."*

*Despite Harry's obvious bewilderment, Sirius paused only briefly before opening his mouth as though to continue. He seemed to change his mind at the last moment, however, and transformed instead into his dog form.*

*He pounced on Harry, knocking him onto his back. While Harry lay winded, Padfoot fixed him with a clear-eyed stare for a moment, gave a very definite wink, then bounded off into the darkness.*

*Harry looked to Draco in pleading confusion as he struggled to his feet, brushing himself off. Draco only shrugged.*

*"Dead people," he said with an amused shake of his head. "Who can understand them?"*

*He glanced at Harry, taking in every nuance of his posture in an instant. Harry's perplexity didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.*

*"Shall we go then?" Draco asked, as though they were simply running a bit late for a cocktail party.*

*"Where - ?" began Harry, but Draco cut him off.*

*"Don't ask," he answered quickly, but not without a measure of indulgent patience. "Follow me."*

*Before leaving, Harry looked back over his shoulder to spot a second exit, which led to a large, brightly lit atrium. Harry could see part-way into the room, which was dominated by an enormous golden statue of a man; around the figure's ankles wound a trio of elegantly dressed young women, who appeared to be admiring its arse.*

*In the middle of the cavern, near the source of light, Padfoot was worrying at the fleas on his haunches with his teeth. A cat who looked remarkably like Crookshanks lay curled against him, purring.*

*Harry shook his head, convinced he'd gone mad, but ran to catch up with Draco's disappearing halo rather than risk being left behind.*

*"Draco, what did Sirius say to me?" Harry asked his guide. "And what else was he about to say? There was more, wasn't there?"*

*When Draco didn't respond, Harry pressed further. "You **know**, don't you?"*

*"You will understand everything in time, Harry," answered Draco without turning around.*

*As they moved away from the light, Harry felt the walls pressing near him again, and was sure they were in a darkened tunnel again. The ceiling began to dip, as well, and the pair were forced to crouch as they made their way. A yellowish smoke oozed from the ground, wrapping around their legs.*

*"You know what he means to me, too. I know you do," persisted Harry, still concerned about his godfather.*

*"I will in time," Draco said again, stopping to prop himself against a wall.*

*Harry stopped, facing him. "What is all this about, anyway?"*

*Draco merely stared at him, without answering. After several long moments had passed, he turned and continued walking.*

*Something struck against Harry's foot, and he bent to pick it up. It was a pomegranate, fresh and ripe. Harry's mouth began to water simply from looking at it; he was suddenly ravenous. He cracked the fruit against a wall, breaking it open to reveal the glistening red gems inside.*

*Before Harry could eat a single seed, Draco plucked the pieces from his hands and threw it far behind them.*

*"There will be time to eat, as well, but you shouldn't take anything from here."*

*Harry stayed his steps, exhausted and frustrated, but soon had to jog to catch up with Draco again.*

*With each step, he felt he heard voices echoing from the walls, speaking of destiny and sin, murder and the end of Harry's reason for existence. He felt the eyes of friends and enemies alike watching him, and not for the first time, wondered what the point had been of him surviving the final battle. He thought of how he should have died in combat, so that he could have rejoined his family and found out what had happened to Sirius. Instead, he was stranded in the land of the living.*

*These final thoughts seemed to sound aloud in Harry's own voice, but behind the words, he heard the echoing of the sea, and smelled salt in the air. It reminded him of the shack where the Dursleys had taken him on his eleventh birthday, trying to hide from the Owl Post. But the Dursleys weren't the kind of family Harry wished to rejoin.*

*The floor of the tunnel was rising slowly, and Harry felt the air growing fresher around him. The sounds and smells faded until they were replaced with the smell of cold, damp stone and the sound of lightly dripping water. The tunnel became a stone corridor, which opened into a brightly lit room with a neatly swept stone floor and five four-poster beds, all hung with deep green, velvet hangings. A plush, green rug lay on the ground.*

*Draco sprawled on his bed, the one closest to the fire, gesturing casually at a tray on the bedside cabinet. "Tea and biscuits?" he offered, relaxing languidly into the mattress.*

*Harry accepted the food hungrily, and found it gone before he could remember eating it, but somehow knew he must have consumed it.*

*"Do you know what I like about you, Harry?" asked Draco suddenly, making Harry almost drop his cup. Before he could blink, he found the entire service had disappeared.*

*"So you **do** like me, then?"*

*"Of **course** I like you, Harry, don't be stupid."*

*"But you said, in your letter, you said it was a hex, that you hadn't meant to kiss me ..."*

*Harry knew he would normally never have said any of these things, but here in Draco's dormitory, by the soft light of the fire, he couldn't stop his thoughts from flowing out of his mouth, until he realised how Draco was looking at him.*

*"That is not what I meant, at all," said Draco cryptically, settling a pillow by his head. "That is not it, at all."*

*Before Harry could work out which part Draco hadn't meant - that he'd been under a hex, or that he liked Harry in a more-than-friendly way - a rustling by the door caught his eye. Peter Pettigrew was standing there, holding the Invisibility Cloak open, as if for Harry to put it on. He was snickering unpleasantly, and it made chills run up and down Harry's spine.*

*"There's no sense in wearing that, you know," said Draco, but when Harry turned to look at him, Draco was wearing Professor Trelawney's thick spectacles and many-coloured shawls. "You can't hide from your destiny. You can't hide from what you did."*

*He pointed toward Pettigrew, and Harry knew he didn't want to look, but his eyes were pulled around as if by a will greater than his own. When his gaze finally returned to Wormtail, he saw the small man lifting a bundle from behind the Cloak, which Harry was sure contained the perversion of a creature he'd seen in Little Hangleton.*

*Wormtail gave Harry a hideous smile, making him want to run from the room, screaming. What he did instead, helplessly, was to move toward the snivelling man and peer at the tiny bundle.*

*Harry gasped in shock at the sight he beheld: instead of Voldemort's half-living form, the wrappings contained a baby, about the age Harry had been when his parents had been betrayed and murdered. Without thinking, he accepted the bundle into his arms. It weighed far more, and yet somehow less, than he'd expected.*

*The baby opened its striking, silver eyes and looked very directly at Harry. It seemed to know who he was, and reached out its left hand to touch his face.*

*When it opened its mouth, it spoke in a voice as clear as the ringing of a tiny silver bell, with a command of language far beyond its apparent years. Harry saw that Wormtail cringed with pain at the sound, and seemed to grow dim behind the pale glow that emanated from the child.*

*"Have you done all you could?" it asked, but before Harry could respond, a white light began to shine from its forearm, engulfing Harry, Wormtail, Draco and the entire room in brightness. As the light passed through his body, Harry felt renewed in a way he hadn't felt in years.*

*The bundle lost its weight and seemed to float up and disappear, and as it did, the light became even more blinding, until Harry had to close his eyes. The last thing he remembered thinking as the room dissolved around him was that he hadn't heard the answer to Draco's question.*

*When the light faded, Harry saw that he stood in the middle of a ballroom, surrounded by dancing couples. Draco (now in his own robes again) faced him stiffly, seeming very aware of the eyes of everyone else nearby.*

*As Harry watched, a rejuvenated Sirius waltzed by with Narcissa, laughing and chatting. He passed back a moment later, now dancing with Remus. The couple changed direction, moving close enough for Harry to hear his godfather say:*

*"Death is like life, Harry - it's what you make of it."*

*It was around that same time that Harry noticed the ballroom floor was made of ice; in fact, it was built on the frozen surface of the Lake, and all of the couples were dancing on skates. Some part of his brain protested that it was May, but it was too faint for him to pay it much attention.*

*Light danced in Sirius's eyes as he dipped Remus low toward the ice and kissed him deeply, then spun him around into an upright position and both glided away again.*

*Harry's followed them with his eyes until he spotted the golden statue he'd seen before, only now he recognised it as having Seamus's face. The three women still at its feet were now revealed to be Pansy Parkinson, Morag MacDougal and Millicent Bulstrode, apparently aware and yet completely unperturbed by the stories he always told about them at meals. Millicent caught Harry looking at them and dropped him a very lascivious wink.*

*Hermione and Ron spun past at that same moment, so quickly Harry barely saw them, but he did hear Hermione whisper, "Just be careful, okay, Harry?"*

*No sooner had she spoken, then Harry felt the ice under his feet begin to melt.*

*"Do you understand now, Harry?" asked Draco, who was still standing there in front of him. Lucius had appeared behind his son's shoulder, looking stern and displeased.*

*"No, I don't understand," answered Harry distractedly as the water seeping into his shoes made him start to panic. "Help me, Draco. I need help!"*

*"You'll understand when you're ready," replied Draco, and began to turn away. His father's hand was on his shoulder, ready to guide him.*

*"I need help **now**, Draco!" protested Harry in panic, as cracks began to form under his weight. He reached out his arm, as though for a handshake, or in a plea for rescue.*

*Draco turned back to face Harry fully, but stood stiffly, watching him sink into the hole that opened in the ice. In the last moment before the water closed over Harry's head, Draco began to speak: "I don't know how you plan to go about it," he said, "but I'll let you work it out."*

*Harry tried to respond, but spluttered when he opened his mouth and found he couldn't breathe. From beneath the water, he could hear a distant song:*

*In waters deep our voices sound,  
where trespassers are rarely found.  
'Tis each-to-each we sing, and yet  
our audience will not soon forget.  
For though 'tis not for him we call  
our voices may his mind enthrall.  
He'd do well to remember this:  
he still has what he'd sorely miss.*

*The darkness was closing in. He couldn't breathe. No one was helping him; he could still see Draco's and Lucius's pale outlines above the surface, standing over the place where he'd sunk.*

*"Harry!"*

*Ron's face loomed up before him in the water, pale and frightened.*

*"Harry!!"*

*Harry started awake with a giant gasp for air, sitting up so suddenly he clunked heads with Ron, who was gripping both of his shoulders and shaking him vigorously.*

*"Are you alright, mate?" asked Ron, clutching his forehead in pain. "You were yelling and thrashing about in your sleep!"*

*"Wha - Ron?" Harry stammered breathlessly.*

*In a second, relief washed over Harry, and he threw his arms around his best mate like a drowning man to his saviour. "Oh, Ron, thank *Merlin*."*

Ron patted him on the back awkwardly, looking completely confused. "It's alright, Harry," he murmured through his shock at Harry's reaction. "You're going to be alright."

As all the details of the dream came flooding back to him, Harry could only hope Ron's words were true.

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Breakfast on Monday morning went about as well as could be expected.

Ron had obviously told Hermione all about waking Harry from his nightmare, so Hermione spent the entire meal alternately shooting Harry concerned looks and asking him probing questions about the stress he'd been experiencing lately. Harry understood completely why his nightmares would be of concern to his friends, but that really didn't give him any more patience for it.

Anyway, it hadn't precisely been a *nightmare*. It had mostly only been a very odd dream, that happened to have a terrifying ending.

Harry stole another glance over toward the Slytherin table. He'd been trying to catch Draco's eye ever since he'd arrived in the Great Hall, but an initial setback had caused Draco to avoid Harry's gaze.

Harry had walked into the Great Hall that morning with every intention of greeting Draco by name as he passed the Slytherin table. He had even sort of gone over the moment in his head, imagining how he would show his new friend that he was completely comfortable with their new rapport, while simultaneously demonstrating to the other Slytherins that he didn't care one snit what they thought about it.

When confronted with the reality, however, he had balked at seeing Draco surrounded by his usual crowd, feeling the animosity oozing from every student except one, and had scurried off to his own table without so much as a nod.

How *did* he 'plan to go about it?'

Harry was still thinking about all of this as the N.E.W.T. Potions class made their way down to the dungeons after breakfast.

"Look at them." Ron's bitter grunt interrupted Harry's train of thought.

Harry followed his best friend's eyes to spot Hermione walking along several paces ahead with Goyle, deep in animated discussion. "I can't believe she actually *talks* to that... that *Slytherin*."

"Goyle's not so bad, Ron," replied Harry distantly.

Ron rounded on him suddenly. Due to his four-inch advantage in height and broad, muscular shoulders, Harry actually felt threatened for a fleeting instant.

"How can you even say that!?" Ron demanded. "This is *Goyle*, one of Malfoy's idiot cronies, and Hermione's *working* with him!"

Harry bit back a comment in Draco's defence, knowing that would only inflame Ron's temper further, and scrambled for an alternate retort.

"It's one of the perils of the alphabet, Ron. Granger and Goyle," Harry pointed out at last, his heart-rate slowly returning to normal. "And besides, you and Zabini seem to be getting along fine."

"That's because Zabini isn't a total prat," protested Ron. "He just shows up and does the work. I mean, he's never done anything to *us*. And at least he has half a brain."

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you might actually *like* your Potions partner."

Ron scoffed. "I'm just saying he's better than Goyle. How can Hermione be willing to work with him?"

"Relax, Ron," Harry reassured him. "Hermione's just taking her schoolwork seriously, the same way she always has."

By now, they were passing into the classroom. Ron looked about to add another protest, but stopped when his eyes rested on Draco.

"At least I don't have *your* partner," he said, loudly enough for all to hear. "I don't know *how* you put up with that git, Harry. Snape must *really* hate you."

Harry smiled sickly, averting his eyes from both of them as he took his seat. Satisfied with his remark, Ron headed off to sit next to Blaise Zabini in the back of the room.

Draco's eyes remained on Harry as he unpacked his textbook and cauldron. Feeling his partner's gaze, Harry turned around.

"Hi," he began, and discovered he hadn't any idea what to say next.

"Hi," responded the Slytherin, with a slightly perplexed twist to his mouth. "Are we talking in public now?"

Harry smiled shakily. "Well, that was the plan. I just wasn't sure how to start," he admitted.

"Couldn't start by getting the Weasel to shut up, I see," Draco commented wryly.

"Don't call him that," murmured Harry quickly, "and you're right, I should have. It's only ... it's a lot more complicated than I thought."

Draco gave Harry a long look. "Well, you'll work it out, I'm sure."

The words reminded Harry of his dream, and he had to force air into his lungs in order to remind himself he could breathe. Draco appeared slightly alarmed, clearly perceiving some change in Harry's eyes. He didn't have a chance to enquire as to Harry's well-being though, if indeed he had planned to do so, because Snape swept into the room at that moment with his customary glare.

The lecture began before Harry even had a chance to dip his quill in ink.

"Those of you who grew up in Muggle families have probably already heard of the cannabis plant, also known as 'hemp' or 'marijuana,'" said the Potions Master in opening.

Several of the Muggle-born and half-Muggle students sat up to attention at these words. Hermione looked moderately shocked, but not surprised, because naturally she had revised ahead of time for this lesson. Zacharias Smith smirked a little, and Hannah Abbott giggled. Harry guessed that some of his classmates might be pretty familiar with the plant. He himself had unfortunately learned to recognise the smell of its smoke in past summers, when it had wafted out of Dudley's bedroom daily.

All of the Slytherins simply looked blank.

"Apparently, it is common among certain groups of Muggles to smoke the leaves of the plant as a soporific. This use is illegal under Muggle law in all countries except the Netherlands, but nonetheless popular among younger Muggles. As we continue our study of medical potions, we must consider this plant, which is a key ingredient of a Pain-Eliminating Potion, which is indispensable in treating various types of chronic pain, in improving a suppressed appetite, in calming stress, and even in reducing tumors. The plant has so many medicinal purposes that I understand even Muggles have noticed; some of their laws allow for the smoking of cannabis by those with certain medical conditions. Wizards, however, have no need for such a filthy method of consumption."

Snape's hooked nose appeared to engulf the entire lower part of his face, as he wrinkled it in disapproval.

He continued, "The essence of cannabis, provides many of these benefits, along with the soporific effects I mentioned earlier when it is taken in its raw form. Potions Masters, along with Medi wizards, have discovered that dragon's blood will neutralize the intoxicating nature of cannabis essence while amplifying its healing qualities. Thanks to developments in this area, afflictions such as chronic pain, migraines, glaucoma and cancer are virtually nonexistent in the modern wizarding world.

"Which is why," he continued, looking around the room, "I can see from your dim expressions, that most of you have never heard of any of those conditions."

Harry noticed a few bitter expressions among the Muggle-born and half-blood students, some of whom had probably lost loved ones to cancer. Draco and the rest of the Slytherins looked unperturbed, and a bit bored.

Snape's shiny black eyes fixed on various faces around the room, all of them Gryffindors. "Now, I would like to see who has prepared adequately for this class."

Harry groaned, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

"Mr. Potter!" snapped the professor. "What three other ingredients combine with cannabis leaves and dragon's blood to make a Pain-Eliminating Potion? In what ratio and in what order must the five ingredients be added to concoct a successful potion?" A predatory sneer spread across the Potions Master's face.

Harry stared at Snape, his stomach sinking into his spleen. He had planned to read the material for this lesson after finishing his Charms homework last night, but had been too distracted to complete any of it. He hadn't the slightest idea how to answer these questions.

Snape sensed the opportunity, and glided closer to his prey. "Well, Potter? Surely you wouldn't have been so foolish as to have failed to revise for today's class? By now you must know how much importance I place on proper preparation?" Harry could almost feel the fine drops of spittle from the alliterative plosives sprinkling onto his face.

Harry looked up at Snape, wincing. "No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. That is to say..."

"Water, bubotuber pus, and powdered unicorn horn," came the voice from Harry's left. "To make one pint of potion, start with one and a half pints boiling water, pour over a mixture of one ounce of crushed cannabis leaves and two fluid ounces of dragon's blood, and steep for five minutes."

Snape's eyes were growing dangerously dark, but Draco kept speaking.

"Add two ounces powdered unicorn horn to the infusion while stirring quickly to ensure complete dissolution, then add seven drops of bubotuber pus at eight-second intervals. Boil the mixture in a

large-mouthed cauldron until it has changed from its initial muddy brown colour to a deep magenta hue."

For several seconds, Harry imagined he could actually hear the corner of Snape's eye tick in the deadly stillness. His normally sallow complexion was demonstrating the 'deep magenta hue' Draco had just mentioned.

The Potions Master's voice hissed out in a perilously quiet rasp that was nonetheless heard throughout the silent dungeon. "Mr. Malfoy, I don't remember directing any question to you at any point yet in this morning's lesson. I believe I had made it quite clear," he enunciated his consonants with the sharpness of a knife's edge as he stepped closer to his student, "that I was interested in learning how well your *partner* had prepared for today's class. Would you care to explain your interruption?" Snape's tone reminded Harry of a swarm of angry wasps.

Draco regarded his Head of House coolly, yet visibly conveyed respect in his manner. "Professor, it was our understanding that you had asked each pair to work together on all assignments for the remainder of the school year. Potter and I chose to divide up the work by taking turns doing the preparatory reading for each lesson, so that we could test our knowledge by teaching it to each other in class. I volunteered to go first, so it was my turn today."

A vein pulsed in Snape's forehead as his narrowed eyes flicked back and forth between his favourite student and his most hated. "Potter," he murmured threateningly, "you had better know the formula and preparation for Skele-Gro backwards, forwards, and inside-out by Thursday's lesson." The eyes narrowed yet further in Draco's direction before the professor spun around and swept back to the front of the room.

Harry could hear the entire class exhale, but he was only able to stare at his partner in open amazement. The blond kept his eyes to the front of the room, with an expression of polite interest.

"Wow, Draco," stammered Harry. "I -"

Draco cut him off with a slight shake of the head. His only acknowledgment of what he'd just done was a slight lift in the right corner of his mouth.

\*\*\*

"What in the world was that about?" demanded Ron as he, Hermione and Harry walked up the stairs from the dungeons.

"Oh, Ron, be reasonable!" countered Hermione, stepping in while Harry remained mute. "I thought it was rather *nice* of Malfoy to stand up for Harry like that!"

"Nice? *Nice!?*" spluttered the incensed Weasley, "Malfoy doesn't *do* 'nice.' He's up to something, I just know it!"

Harry's gut twisted itself in two directions, as he longed to defend his newest friend to his oldest, but also desperately wished to avoid a scene. Furthermore, after the dream last night and his brief conversation with Draco before the lesson, Harry hadn't the slightest idea what to make of the Draco's behaviour in front of Snape.

"Ron, maybe Malfoy has simply decided to get along with his Potions partner, the same way you and I have!" Hermione insisted.

This just caused Ron to make more incoherently incensed noises, but Hermione continued:

"They're going to have to work with each other all the way until N.E.W.T.s, so Harry's work affects Malfoy's, now." She fixed her boyfriend with a piercing look. "That's why I've been working with Goyle so cooperatively, as well, of course."

Ron flushed, as usual. "Of course," he muttered, and dropped the subject.

Harry made a mental note to be extra nice to Hermione for approximately the next thousand years.

\*\*\*

Tuesday morning's Owl Post still brought no response from Charlie. Harry knew it would take Hedwig a couple of days each way to get to Romania and back, and that he shouldn't expect a response until Thursday at the earliest. Still, after the dream and Draco's performance in Potions the previous day, Harry needed advice more than ever.

Charlie must have felt as frantic as this at some point! He must know how eagerly Harry awaited his response.

He would write back as quickly as he could, wouldn't he?

Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table. Draco caught his eye and flashed him a mischievous smile. Harry flushed, grinned nervously, and looked away quickly.

Charlie *had* to write back soon. If he didn't, Harry was sure he'd go thoroughly mad.

A delighted shriek from Hermione returned Harry to his surroundings.

"Yes! She did it!"

"Who did what?" enquired Ginny immediately.

"My aunt," answered Hermione, "she got married!"

"That's great!" said Dean. "But you sound surprised ..."

"Not surprised, exactly," corrected Hermione, "only relieved she was allowed."

"Why wouldn't she be?" asked Seamus, earning himself a sharp glance from Ron for his typical bluntness.

"My aunt is gay," explained Hermione, cutting her eyes at Ron to make sure he would behave himself. "She and her girlfriend - wife, now - have been together as a couple for the last fifteen years. They've finally got married legally!"

"But Britain doesn't allow same-sex marriage," argued Ron, who knew because Charlie and Viktor were getting serious enough to consider their options.

Wizarding laws about marriage fell along roughly the same lines as those observed by Muggles. Only a few countries allowed same-sex couples to marry in either the Muggle or the wizarding community.

Hermione shook her head. "No, you're right, Ron. Emma lives in America, in Massachusetts -"

"That's where Salem is, right?" asked Harry.

A nod. "- and a new Muggle law just took effect yesterday, allowing gay couples to get married there. Emma and Persephone were the very first couple married at City Hall in Beverly, where they live."

Hermione beamed, skimming the letter again with her eyes. "Emma's my favourite aunt. I'm so happy for her! They've wanted this for so long."

Harry drifted off again. In the few days since Harry had realised his orientation, several ramifications had hit home. He felt very grateful for the support of his friends, but knew that certain doors were probably closed to him: marriage, children... He was still far too young to be thinking too immediately about such things, anyway, but he didn't like to consider that he might never be allowed the type of family he'd wanted for so long.

When he'd been a small child, as early as he could remember, Harry used to stare into the dark of the cupboard and imagine what life with his parents would have been like. As he grew older, he'd promised himself he would do whatever he could to form the kind of family that had been stolen from him. When he had his own children, someday, he would give them a good home, and figure out how to be a happy family together.

For the past few days, Harry had been afraid that he'd unwittingly broken this promise.

Now, hearing about Hermione's aunt, Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief. He still didn't know much about relationships at all, but he was glad to know that somewhere, people like him were allowed to get married.

Hermione's aunt and her new wife must be really happy, Harry thought.

He understood a little better, now, why Hermione's response to his coming out had been so immediately positive. If she had a favourite aunt who was gay, no wonder Hermione had known exactly what to say to set Harry at ease.

"Hermione," said Ginny, "you never told me you had an aunt in America. Have you been?"

Hermione's shiny curls bobbed as she nodded. "Just once, when I was six," she confirmed. "Mostly, Emma comes to visit us. I even visited Salem, when I went, which is right next to the city of Beverly, but I didn't know I was a witch yet then."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I'll bet you can't wait to go back and visit every place Binns ever talked about!"

"Well, yes..." Hermione stated without embarrassment. "I think it will be fascinating, don't you?"

Ron simply rolled his eyes again, meeting Harry's eyes and shaking his head in amusement. Harry thought Ron might not have been listening carefully enough, however, because it sounded as though -

"So then you *don't* want to go?" teased Hermione, causing Ron to snap to attention.

"Go? To America? Me?" Ron's jaw hung half-open in shock. "Can I?"

Hermione giggled at him. "Of *course* you can, Ron. Did you expect me to take someone else to the celebration as my partner?"

Harry joined in the good-natured laughter, as all the Gryffindors watched Ron twig. He couldn't help feeling a little left out, though. He and Ron and Hermione had always been an equal trio, and in most ways, they still were. Hermione and Ron were still the best friends he could imagine, and their plans

always included all three of them, until now. Ron and Hermione's talk of going to America reminded Harry that he was now a bit on the outside of the couple they had become.

\*\*\*

Dear Harry,

*Congratulations on joining the ranks! There are actually a lot more of us gay wizards than you think, although for some reason Hogwarts has never had a very large supply. Hufflepuffs tend to be late bloomers, for one thing, and most of them don't come out until after they've left. I used to hear stories about orgies in the Slytherin dorms after hours, but those might only have been fantasies concocted by my bored dormmates.*

*So, you've already had a snog, have you? Congratulations again! I'm sorry to hear that things have been awkward since then, though. For what it's worth, I know that can happen for wizards who go out with witches, too. In fact, I think you learned that with Miss Chang a couple of years ago? (Yes, Ginny talks to me, too. Please forgive her for having shared a little gossip - you know how she is.)*

*Dear Merlin, Harry, you can't ever pick an easy battle, can you? A Malfoy? You're right - Ron will go apoplectic when he learns about it. But (and you promise not to tell him I said this!) I've seen your Draco, and I understand the attraction. I hope you're right about him. Weasleys and Malfoys haven't got on well for generations, so you'll have a tough job getting Ron to accept Draco in your life, but maybe now that the war is over, even Weasleys and Malfoys can make peace?*

*Now. As to what to do about his reticence: I'm afraid you're just going to have to be patient. If you're right about his feelings for you, though, you won't have to wait very long. At your age, all your emotions bubble so close to the surface, even in someone as private as you or Draco. Nurture that friendship, allow him to take the lead sometimes, and before you know it you'll find him unable to deny his feelings any longer.*

*And then ... I think you will find you're in for a great deal of fun. Enjoy it, and watch out for yourself. First relationships are always exciting, but they don't always last. That's just the nature of being seventeen. Just try to have fun, and value the time you have.*

*Harry, despite what I said earlier in this letter, I must emphasise that you're going to have a hard time with Ron on this one. He hates your Draco with the fury of a thousand poison arrows. More, even, than Dad hated Lucius when there still was a Lucius to hate. I think Ginny may be able to help you to some extent, but she's not any fonder of Draco than Ron is. With Ron, your best weapon is perseverance. He's all snap judgments and quick reactions and bluster, but if you can keep your steady course, you will eventually win him over. I have a feeling that Hermione might be able to help you there, too. Good luck.*

*I'm so happy that you came to me. I may already have four younger brothers by blood, but you will always be part of my family. You're also very perceptive to have noticed that I was making myself available as someone you could ask if you ever needed advice. If you ever need anything else, please don't hesitate to write.*

*Yours affectionately,  
--Charlie Weasley*

Harry rolled the parchment back up and stretched out his legs, letting the sun warm his face.

Hedwig had returned that morning at breakfast, the fourth day since Harry had sent her to Charlie. Charlie must have written his response almost immediately for the owl to have returned this quickly. Harry had allowed his bird the better part of his breakfast before she returned to the Owlery, as

thanks for her long journey. He considered briefly how happy Salazar must be to see her now, causing his mouth to tease upward at the corners.

Harry had barely seen Draco since Monday's Potions lesson. They had spoken briefly after Defence Against the Dark Arts on Wednesday, but Harry had been nervous about Ron's reaction if he'd seen them having a civil conversation, which seemed to annoy Draco, so the exchange had been a bit tense. Harry wished he'd thought through this whole thing before deciding to be Draco's friend.

Once Harry had Charlie's response in his hand, his morning lessons had crawled by. At lunchtime, he'd finally got a chance to sneak away and read his letter in private. He had found a quiet corner at the foot of North Tower where the outer stones of the castle wall provided a kind of bench cradled in sunbeams. There, he had unfurled the parchment and read Charlie's words.

Harry's heart warmed at the elder Weasley's response just as his skin warmed in the sun. He had been so right to contact Charlie. Between the letter and Draco's behavior in Potions on Monday, Harry allowed himself a glimmer of hope that his one interrupted snog with the handsome Slytherin might not be his last, after all.

At the very least, he felt fortified for his next Potions lesson, which was to start in half an hour.

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"Harry!"

He spun around to confirm that the voice that had called his first name in the corridors, in front of everyone, really belonged to the blond wizard who was striding purposefully toward him, wearing a friendly smile.

Harry knew it was already too late to keep his face from lighting up like a Lumos Charm. He also knew, however, that it wasn't too late to keep Ron from making a scene in reaction.

"All right, Draco?" Harry greeted his Potions partner before the towering redhead could block the Slytherin's path.

"All right, Harry," responded Draco, still smiling. "You? Ready for class today?"

Harry had spent two hours revising the chapter on Skele-Gro Potion in detail, and then an additional hour discussing the finer points with Hermione until he was sure he could handle any question Snape could throw his way.

"I'm ready," confirmed Harry. "Can't expect you to bail me out every lesson, now, can I?"

Draco smirked, but in an entirely new way that made Harry feel that he was in on the joke. "I could try, but I don't think Snape can be convinced more than once."

"True enough," agreed Harry. And hesitated before adding, "Thanks, Draco. For Monday."

The blond shrugged. "What are friends for?" He started to move in the direction of the classroom before his eyes cut to Ron. Draco gave a cursory nod. "Weasley."

Ron only gaped.

Draco smiled yet more broadly at Harry before turning to resume his quick stride. "Don't be late, Harry!" he called over his shoulder, as he turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Harry's heart skipped merrily as he watched the silver-blond hair vanish into the darkness.

Ron, meanwhile, was fuming. "What is he playing at? What does he mean by talking to me? And what does he mean by 'friends'?"

Harry avoided his best friend's eyes, as if he could wish away the inevitable confrontation.

"Harry?" Ron insisted.

"Yes, Ron?" responded Harry unwillingly.

"What. Does he mean. By 'friends'?" enunciated Ron.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He summoned the memory of how relieved he'd felt when Ron had woken him from that nightmare on Monday morning, and did his best to speak in a peaceable tone. "Draco and I have decided to be friends, Ron."

"What do you mean, 'friends'? You mean -" Ron caught himself and lowered his voice to a whisper. "You mean *boyfriends*? You're not going out with him now, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," muttered Harry evasively. "Draco hasn't said anything about being gay."

Which, technically, was true. More or less.

"Oh, so it's '*Draco*' now -"

"Yes, it's '*Draco*.' I call my friends by their first names."

Ron gaped. "You can't mean this, Harry! You can't *want* to be Malfoy's friend! I doubt he and his Death-Eater minions even know what it *means* to be a friend!"

"What does it mean to *you*, Ron?" snapped Harry, too angry even to respond to Ron's accusation that Draco was a Death Eater. "How about accepting your friends for who they are, *including* who they want their other friends to be?"

He was trying to stay calm, but his exasperation was building quickly.

"Who they want -!" spluttered Ron. "So you really do think you want to be *friends* with the git?"

"He's *not* a git anymore, Ron," sighed Harry tiredly. "You'd know that if you gave him half a chance."

"I don't *want* to give him half a chance, Harry. I don't want to give him any *part* of a chance. He's been nothing but horrible to us since our first ride on the Hogwarts Express together. Why should he be any different now?"

"Because I say that he is. Because my word should be enough for you to believe me."

Ron narrowed his eyes and stepped away. "It was until I found out how poor your judgment is," he said darkly.

Harry shifted his bookbag on his shoulder, and backed toward the Potions classroom. He tried to pretend he didn't feel as though Ron had punched him in the gut.

"Look, Ron, I'm just too tired to keep fighting," he said quietly. "Him, or you."

Having spoken the words, he turned and strode angrily away from his best mate, not stopping until he reached his seat next to Draco. He didn't look at Ron again for the entire double-period lesson.

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Dear Charlie,

*Thank you so much for writing back so fast. It really does help to hear from someone who has gone through all of this before.*

*I can hardly believe it, but Draco and I are already friends. He stopped me on my way to post my letter to you last weekend - come to think of it, I should have added that at the end, but I was so surprised and excited that I forgot.*

*It's been a mad week. First I had a very odd dream Sunday night, then Draco lied to Snape to save my arse when I wasn't prepared for class on Monday morning. Can you imagine? Then yesterday, he called me 'Harry' and said we were friends, right in the corridor before Potions, in front of everyone.*

*But Ron was there, and ... well, you know what happened next. I'm relieved he doesn't know how I really feel about Draco! I know I'll have to tell him eventually, but after the way he reacted to Draco and me even being friends, I think I'll put it off as long as possible, thank you!*

*Ron's been my best mate for years, but I really don't understand him sometimes. He's just sulky and contrary about Draco, without even any reason. I mean, okay, he has plenty of reason, considering the way Draco acted for our first five years at Hogwarts. But can't he see that he's changed? I mean, we all have - it's a different world, now that Voldemort's gone. Especially for Draco. He doesn't have parents anymore. He could use some friends now.*

*I suppose I'll try your advice about enlisting Ginny's and Hermione's help with Ron. I know I won't really lose Ron over this. Ron's my best friend, the first friend I ever had other than Hagrid, and nothing could make him any less important to me. I'm just afraid he'll be too angry to see that.*

*It's late, I'd better go to sleep. If you have any more suggestions about how to handle Ron, I could do with all the help you can give me. Otherwise, I just wanted to say thanks again. I'll keep you posted on everything.*

Cheers,  
--Harry

## Read? Review!

**Author notes:** THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU to:

Aarra, alfirin, Amata, Anne, Aoki, bagira, Beren, Bloodyrose, cdbrock9, cennet, dmweasley, dracoloverxoxo, Eighty-Sixed, Evening Glory, evan malfoy, ferveum\_x, Fyre\_bird, gloriousnewday98, hdbaby14292, Hidden\_By\_Walls, HP95351, iri, Jerrika, Kaerda Lystone, Katie of Gryffindor, Katja, katsanders528, KellBelle, kowaiyoukai, livewithit, loveander, lovelyginny, Malfoy\_is\_lush, Maryx, mishty, mysinisterblackRose, natabug, nataliefly, nikirlan, olwen, PhonixEnigma360522, PhoenixRose, potterfan3242, PurpleWatermelon, Ranmenedhel, serina\_malfoy, shocolate, Siriusly Black2, taliapadfoot, The Eighth Weasley, TheBloodDoll, Tigger27pe, tyree\_25yrs, urnesha001, X\_Faerie\_Dust\_X, waterprincess, Waywren Truesong, White Owl 2, Why Cant I Breathe, xingou,

yesterdays\_mmry

I hope you are all still reading, and will bear with me, even when the interval between postings gets even longer! I really do think it gets better from here. (In fact, I'm very pleased with my rough draft for Chapter 11! \*g\*)

I promise, as always, to finish this fic unless the world should end before I get a chance. Rough drafts and notes for future chapters are backed up in various safe places, so even iBook death shouldn't stop me! (Hear that, Murphy? No need to kill the iBook!)

A few notes about the chapter, to cover my bum and otherwise satisfy the curious:

Opening dream sequence was based loosely around *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, by T. S. Eliot. Sirius's speech is the epitaph printed before the poem, and is taken from Canto XXVII of *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri. The passage, as translated by Allen Mandelbaum, reads thus:

*"If I thought my reply were meant for one  
who ever could return into the world,  
this flame would stir no more; and yet, since none -  
if what I hear is true - ever returned  
alive from this abyss, then without fear  
of facing infamy, I answer you."*

(The Italian version in the chapter is reproduced as printed by Eliot, not as edited by Mandelbaum.)

Information on medicinal uses for cannabis taken from [http://www.friendlystranger.com/info/med\\_use.htm](http://www.friendlystranger.com/info/med_use.htm). The inclusion of cannabis in this chapter is in no way intended to condone the use of illegal substances; it is simply a dramatic imagination of how the scientifically-established medical properties of the plant could be used in the wizarding world.

The [Human Rights Campaign](#)'s website contains a great compilation of data on marriage laws. Info on European laws used in this chapter comes from [this page](#).

As I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, the titles of all three eventual Parts of this fic come from quotations that appeared on my high school senior yearbook page. In this case, from Henry David Thoreau, as quoted in a *Boston Globe* "Reflection for the Day." back in the 1980s sometime:

"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

## Chapter 7: Healing

"Is this seat taken?"

Harry looked up from Bathilda Bagshot's chapter on Goblin Rebellions, to see Seamus's easy grin. With a raised eyebrow, he surveyed the seven empty chairs around his table.

"Does it *look* taken?" he asked dourly.

Seamus hesitated, taking his hand off the back of the chair. His smile faltered, and he looked as though he couldn't decide whether he was welcome.

"Go ahead, sit," said Harry quickly, and the smile returned.

"Found anything good?" Seamus gestured toward Harry's open text.

Harry shook his head blearily. "This book is *almost* as boring as Binns's lectures. I can't wait until N.E.W.T.s are over."

"Yeah," agreed Seamus. He opened his mouth as though to add something, but only smiled again, and started to unpack his books.

The one glimmer of good fortune in Harry's life was that he was actually ahead on his revision for N.E.W.T.s. Most of the Gryffindors had been giving Harry a wide berth since the explosive argument he and Ron had had Friday afternoon. Hermione and Ginny didn't want to appear to be choosing sides, but since Ron was Hermione's boyfriend and Ginny's brother, they felt uncomfortable spending time away from Ron to be with Harry. So, finding himself uncomfortable around all of his friends, Harry had spent most of the weekend in the library.

Harry was sure everyone didn't *mean* to shut him out so completely, but he was feeling very, very isolated. More so, even, than he had during the rushed days of preparation for his final confrontation with Voldemort.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry tried to find clues that would explain Seamus's presence. He hadn't expected Seamus, of all people, to be the one to cross the invisible boundary and remind him he had friends. After all, Seamus had been the one who had believed everything the Daily Prophet had written about him in Fifth Year.

Maybe he'd learnt his lesson.

Harry finally realised that Seamus was stealing sidelong glances back at him. Once they both caught each other, both began to chuckle.

"Checking up on me?" asked Harry, but without the bitterness that question could have contained.

"Maybe a little," admitted Seamus. "How *are* you doing?"

Harry exhaled slowly. "I'm ..." he began, then was surprised to find he hadn't the slightest idea *how* he was. He shrugged. "I miss Ron, but I'm angry at him, and I miss Draco, but I don't want to make Ron angrier."

Draco had been keeping his distance all weekend. He'd said a brief 'good morning' before Friday's Defence lesson, but hadn't spoken to Harry since. It was Harry's own fault, really; Ron had been present, and already very grumpy, and Harry had completely botched his attempt to act friendly to

Draco while placating Ron. Instead, he'd managed to give Draco the cold shoulder while simultaneously making Ron's anger smoulder more furiously. The row he and Ron had had later had been inevitable, after that.

To Harry's great surprise, Seamus didn't flinch or look murderous at Harry's mention of Draco - which Harry couldn't believe had actually escaped his lips. He simply sat for a moment, first looking at Harry, then watching the light play over the surface of the table.

A sunbeam slanted across the space between them. The dust mites billowed and swirled in it, from an invisible draught, or perhaps from the breath Harry had expelled while speaking. His second finger was warm at the tip, where a corner of the light barely touched it.

"Yeah," said Seamus sympathetically. "Ron's being a bit of an idiot, isn't he?"

Harry's jaw stayed behind when his head snapped up. He sat there, gape-mouthed, half wanting to thump Seamus out of loyalty to Ron, half unbelieving that he might have just heard Seamus *defend* Harry's friendship with a Slytherin.

This was Seamus. 'Let's tell nasty stories about Slytherin girls at meals' *Seamus*. He couldn't possibly be supporting Harry's decision.

Could he?

"The thing is," continued Seamus, now staring into the same sunbeam that had distracted Harry a moment earlier, "I can understand why it's hard for Ron. Having you be friends with Malfoy, I mean."

Seamus must have noticed Harry's tensing expression, because he held up his hands and spoke in a rush: "The Weasleys are one of the nicest families in Wizarding Britain, but they've always been poor. The Malfoys are one of the nastiest and snobbiest, and they've always been rich. Mam told me stories about them, when I got my letter. You know Mrs. Parkinson is Mam's cousin? They were really close, coming up in school together. But she was friends with Narcissa, too, and when Mam married Dad, it was like she'd died; Pansy's mam never spoke to her again. That's how the lot of them are.

"When you picked Ron for your best friend, instead of Malfoy, a lot of us were glad. It was like we all finally won one against those Purebloods. And Ron, too ... I mean, it's not because he didn't really want to be your friend, but ..."

Harry picked up the thought as Seamus trailed off. "... but having me brush off Malfoy in favour of him was the icing on the cake."

Seamus's smile was bright with relief. "So now that you're friends with Malfoy, it's like they're winning, after all."

Harry gaped again. "How is that *possible*? All those people, their parents are gone because of me! How can you say the Slytherins have *won*?"

Harry's stomach did a sick, slow roll. It did every time he thought about how he'd left Draco with no parents, no matter how evil they had been.

"I see what you mean," answered Seamus, tracing the grain of the table with his eyes for a moment before he looked back at Harry. "It's still a victory, though, for them, if you choose Malfoy over us."

"I'm *not*," said Harry vehemently. "Ron will always be my best friend, and Hermione, too. Gryffindors will always be my family. Only Draco has changed so much, he deserves a chance."

Seamus nodded, and stayed quiet.

When he finally spoke, he asked, "You saw his dad, as a Death Eater, didn't you?"

Harry remembered that day in Little Hangleton, at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, and shuddered.

"Yeah, I saw him."

"Do you know why Malfoy didn't join up, too?"

"So you believe he didn't?" Harry's words came out in a rush.

He was so relieved to know another Gryffindor was on his side, he didn't stop to think about the answer to the question.

Seamus snorted. "Of *course* I believe that. And so does Ron, he was only being stupid. If Malfoy had been a Death Eater, he would be just like his parents right now."

Harry's stomach rolled again. The children of the Death Eaters might have been as snobby and nasty as their parents, and some might have been planning to join up, too, but he still hated that they had all lost their families. He hated that he hadn't ever had a choice in the matter.

He hated that he had fought with Ron over it, too.

"I wish Ron hadn't said those things on Friday. I wish *I* hadn't said some of the things I did."

"Yeah," said Seamus simply. "You know Ron, though. He doesn't believe in himself. Remember how he never thought Hermione liked him?"

Harry smiled at the memory of how he and Ginny had nearly had to lock Ron and Hermione in a room together, in order to get them to stop moping over each other and start snogging already.

"It's funny," said Harry, remembering another draughty, sunlit castle room, many years earlier. "When Ron saw himself in the Mirror of Erised, in First Year, he saw himself as Quidditch Captain, Head Boy, with the House Cup. If we get that Cup, he'll *have* all those things. And he still doesn't think he's good enough for any of it."

"Well, that's why we love him, isn't it?"

Harry gave Seamus a very long look. There was a painful vulnerability behind his jovial demeanor.

"Yeah," said Harry slowly. "I only hope everything's going to be okay."

Seamus gave a smile that was more of a wince. "It will all work itself out," he said with a tone that sounded as though he were trying to convince Harry, or himself.

The sunbeam shifted, drawing Harry's attention to a table in a different part of the library. He remembered seeing Seamus, Dean and Ginny sitting there, only a week ago, while he penned his first letter to Charlie.

"Is everything alright with *you*, Seamus?" Harry asked finally, at a tone barely above a whisper.

There was something false in the bright grin. "Sure, why?"

Harry shook his head, but didn't break eye-contact. "It's only, you and Dean seemed to be having some trouble last week."

The grin dropped a fraction. "Oh, that," said Seamus. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

A fragile note in Seamus's voice made Harry choose not to question him any further on that subject.

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Monday morning, Harry sat morosely in Potions, barely hearing Snape drone on about N.E.W.T. preparations. He could see Draco sneaking sidelong glances at him, but felt too conflicted to meet them. Likewise, he refused to look toward Ron's seat in the back of the room, even though he could feel Ron's eyes boring into his head.

Black robes glided along the rows of desks, and Harry became aware that the Potions Master was handing sheets of parchment to each pair, and in some cases, small vials of potion. Harry blinked twice, trying to simulate an appearance of attentiveness before he had to come face-to-face with Snape.

He needn't have worried. Snape avoided Harry's eyes as he placed a sheet of comments on the desk between him and Draco.

"Congratulations, boys," he murmured in a thoroughly sarcastic tone. "You have qualified to take the Dreaming Draught."

Harry glanced at the parchment, where the Potions Master's neat script affirmed the positive result of testing their potion, and clearly outlined the instructions for the follow-up essay. Motion in his peripheral vision revealed that Draco had reached out a hand to accept one of the two vials that was being offered to them.

After what he'd learned about the hawk dreams in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Harry had planned on skipping this opportunity. After the long, strange dream a week earlier, though, he found himself with a lot of new questions.

Was it worth it to get the answers, if Snape would get to read about them, too?

"Professor," asked Harry, his hand hesitating on its way toward Snape, "if we take the potion, are we required to hand in the essay?"

Snape's eyes narrowed as he smiled unpleasantly. "*Naturally*," he sneered. "Our little *celebrity* has to play by his own rules. It's not *good enough* for him to do things the way the rest of us have to do."

Harry felt his temper rise, but fought to keep his voice even. "It's only, what if we learn something *private* in our dreams, and don't want to write about it?"

A titter ran through the class. For once, Harry hadn't been worried about 'private' dreams of that particular nature, but he wasn't surprised that everyone else thought he had. All the rest of the class knew, after all, was that Harry's dreams were showing him something about a 'Destined Love.' He wished it were still that simple.

Snape grimaced at the laughter. He plunked a vial down, rather roughly, in front of Harry.

"You *will* take the potion, Potter. And you *will* write the essay." His lips curled into a sneer. "Don't worry about me selling your secret dreams to the *Daily Prophet*, Potter. I'm sure even *you* aren't famous enough for anyone to *care*."

Harry braced his hands against the desk as though to stand and face the Potions Master. He wasn't sure what he would do once he got to his feet, but he couldn't allow that sneer to exist a single second longer.

His breath caught as he felt Draco's hand come to rest lightly on his elbow. And when he heard the words Draco spoke, he feared he would never breathe again.

"I believe Harry has already proven himself worthy of his fame, Professor," came Draco's calm voice. "Perhaps it is no longer necessary to fault him for the attention of others."

Snape's black eyes narrowed into obsidian slits, nostrils flaring in distaste.

The entire class held its collective breath. First Draco had lied to cover up Harry's lack of preparation, and now he was talking back to Snape. Harry was sure, if everyone could have hidden under their desks to avoid the ensuing confrontation, they would have done.

"Mr. Malfoy." Snape's words cut like daggers. "I'll ask you to remember that you are a *student* in my class, and I am your *professor*. Your being in my House will not prevent me from removing points if you do not show me the proper respect."

The voice dropped to a barely audible hiss. "I'll see you in my office at the end of the lesson."

Harry stared openly at Draco as Snape swept on to the next desk, where Parvati Patil and Morag MacDougal received the brunt of his displeasure. Draco fixed his eyes toward the front of the room, wearing a small, amused smile.

"Draco, look," began Harry. The silver eyes did just that, coming to rest on Harry's own. His heart skipped a beat, but he managed to keep his voice steady. "I really appreciate you standing up to Snape for me, but don't you think you're taking it a little far?"

The eyes scanned Harry's face, then returned steadily to meet his.

"Snape has had it in for you since you arrived. You only have a month left at this school, and he *still* won't leave you be." Draco's voice never rose above a quiet murmur, never lost its matter-of-fact tone. "If anyone is 'taking it a little far,' then *he* is."

It took Harry a long moment to find enough voice to respond.

"Wow, Draco," he whispered reverently. "You really have a handle on this friendship thing."

The smile that rewarded Harry, though barely discernible, seemed to light up the entire dungeon.

\*\*\*

A swarm of third- and fourth-years obscured the message board in the Gryffindor Common Room when Harry returned from classes that afternoon. He spotted Ron and Hermione studying quietly in a corner by themselves, but their body language when they saw him made it clear that he wasn't welcome to approach.

Dean and Ginny were cuddled up by the fire, talking to Seamus, to Harry's great relief. Hopefully, whatever problems these friends had had were already worked out, then.

Harry dropped himself into a chair among them.

"What's the occasion?" he inquired, gesturing toward the crowd with his chin.

"Hogsmeade, a week from Saturday," answered Dean.

"Already?" asked Harry, surprised. Usually, the final Hogsmeade weekend didn't take place until just before exams.

"It's an extra," responded Ginny, who as a prefect had access to more information than the rest of them. "It's been such a warm spring that all the students will want to be outside, anyway, and this way we're out of the staff's hair."

Harry nodded absently in response. Hogsmeade would be fun, but his current row with his best friend made the prospect less appealing. Perhaps he and Draco could spend the day...

"Harry."

He snapped his attention back with a small start, to notice Ginny was leaning toward him, looking at him intently. Seamus and Dean were watching, too.

"Harry," she began again, "you *have* to talk to Ron. No one can stand watching you two fight like this. It's going to drive us all mad."

"She's right," added Seamus. "You've had your strop, now you need to get over it before we all go barmy."

Dean nodded his agreement. Harry wasn't sure whether to feel ambushed or touched.

Harry looked at the three pairs of eyes locked on him, and felt his shoulders go tight. Why couldn't everyone leave him to live his *own* life?

Hearing his own stupid thoughts, Harry forced himself to take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Really, he wanted nothing more than to reconcile with Ron, and told his friends so.

"He needs to accept that things change, though," continued Harry. "Ron will always be my best friend, and Hermione, too. All of the friends I already have are still very important to me. I only want to be free to make other friends, as well."

"Other friends are one thing, Harry," argued Dean, "but *Slytherin* other friends?"

Seamus's expression was communicating his displeasure, now, too. Harry didn't understand - what had happened to the supportive Seamus who had talked with him in the library the day before?

Ginny worried at her lower lip with her teeth as she watched the angry eyes of the three boys.

"I don't get it, Harry," she said evenly, catching and holding Harry's gaze. "I really don't. But if this is important to you, then you must have your reasons."

Harry had almost released the tension in his shoulders when Dean added, "It's not just sex, is it?"

Seamus coughed to cover a cackle, while Ginny said "Dean!" in a sharp voice that sounded exactly like Molly. Dean grinned mischievously, prompting Ginny to punch him affectionately in the arm before she cocked an eyebrow at Harry. All three pairs of eyes watched for a response.

Harry sputtered and blushed deeply. "No, we're not - I mean he's not - I mean I don't even know if he'd want -"

He struggled to compose himself, drawing up very straight in his seat to look them all in the eye.

"That's not what it's about," he stated finally. "It's about recognising that Draco has changed into a decent person, and giving him another chance. Sirius came from a family exactly like the Malfoys, after all, but my dad gave him a chance, and *he* was good."

Harry had to drop his gaze to the floor, because his eyes had started to sting.

When he looked up again, Seamus gave him a small smile, which Harry was grateful to see. Dean looked doubtful, but remained respectfully quiet.

Ginny narrowed her eyes and nodded at Harry. "Alright," she replied carefully. "I think I see why this is so important, now. Now go and tell Ron what you've told us."

"But he won't *listen!*"

"Tell him *anyway*," Seamus interrupted firmly, leaving no room for argument. "It's Ron. He's stubborn, but he's worth it."

"He's right," added Dean, his eyes set steadily on Seamus. "Even though he's being a stupid git, no one but you can make him understand. And you'll both regret it if you don't."

Seamus returned Dean's gaze, looking slightly relieved and mostly grateful. Ginny nodded at both of them with a smile before looking at Harry again.

Seamus *was* right, and so was Dean. There was no disputing their logic, and anyway, they were doing much better than he and Ron were doing on working out their differences. He could do with following any advice they had to give.

Harry therefore let Ginny lead him over to where Ron and Hermione studied in the corner.

Dean and Seamus waited behind, smiling wryly at each other. Harry felt jealous, for a moment, that whatever conflict they'd had had been something they had managed to fix.

Rising color in Ron's face was the only indication that he was aware of Harry and Ginny's approach. For a long moment, he refused to look up.

Harry stood by Ron's shoulder, shaking with frustration. He was still so angry about the accusations Ron had made on Friday, and about all the horrible things they had both said. Why did *he* have to be the one to bridge the chasm that had grown between them?

He looked at Ron and saw the eleven-year-old boy who had walked into his compartment on the Hogwarts Express with a smudge of dirt on his nose. A part of him always saw that boy when he looked at Ron, even now. Harry couldn't possibly stay angry with him.

"We can't keep fighting, Ron," he said quietly. "This isn't right."

Ron stared at his desk, his eyes dark. He didn't speak.

"You're my *best* friend," Harry told him finally, remembering what Seamus had said in the library on Sunday. "Nothing can change that."

He held his breath as Ron's eyes traveled upward to meet his. "And Malfoy?"

"Is my newest friend," confirmed Harry. "And you have every reason not to accept him. Please just accept my decision to give him another chance."

"*Why?*" burst the bitter syllable from Ron's mouth.

"Because I'm asking you," said Harry, echoing their argument in the Potions corridor.

He'd meant to say what he'd just told the others about seeing a similarity to his dad and Sirius, but now that he was faced with Ron's stubbornness, the words sounded stupid in his head.

"Because that should have been enough for you in the first place," he added instead. Seeing the colour rise in Ron's cheeks, he added, more softly, "Because if you asked, I'd do it for you."

"Trust Malfoy? The head Death Eater's son? No, you wouldn't - if I asked you that, you'd do your nut."

"I'm not asking *you* to trust him, Ron. I'm asking you to let *me* trust him."

Ron looked at Harry with bewilderment. "You really don't get it, do you? If I accepted you being friends with that git, I'd *have* to trust him not to hurt you ... and I can't do that!"

Harry paused a moment. Ron was right, of course. He was wrong about Draco, but he was right about how Harry would have reacted if the tables had been turned. And his motives were so ... *Ron*. Only Ron would get angry at Harry for putting himself in a situation where he might get hurt.

This was why Ron was his best friend. This was why it was worth fighting to keep him.

"Alright, yeah, you would. You're right."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "I think you're mad, Harry."

"I know you do, Ron. But will you give him a chance? Please?"

"Even though I think he's going to hurt you?"

Harry looked at Hermione for a moment. Her forehead was wrinkled, her neck tight and strained. Having him and Ron fighting was hard on her. It was hard for all of their friends.

Ginny was standing quietly by his side. Seamus and Dean were watching from their couches. Around the room, most students were continuing their own conversations, but a few - especially the other members of the Gryffindor Quidditch side - had begun to pay attention.

"Yeah, Ron," said Harry. "Even though. If this is a mistake, then let me make it. Please."

Ron ran his long fingers roughly through his hair. Harry watched him look at Hermione, who continued to look exhausted.

"Harry, I just don't get it. Why do you think he even *deserves* another chance?"

Harry could only offer Ron the same answer he'd given Draco for this question: "Because I can no longer see a reason *not* to be his friend, Ron."

Ron's face hardened, so Harry clarified his point. "I will never like the person he used to be. I will never like the way he treated you or Hermione. Or me," he added, almost as an afterthought. "But he's not that person, anymore, Ron. Look at the way he has stood up for me with Snape."

"Oh, and that doesn't seem suspicious to you, at all? You haven't considered that maybe it's a trick?"

"It could be," answered Harry quietly, still holding Ron's eyes. "But I don't think so. In any case, I'm willing to take that risk."

Harry took a deep breath, and finally added the words he wanted to say: "My dad took a risk, being friends with Sirius. And everyone thought he'd taken a bad risk, got betrayed by someone he trusted. But they were wrong, Sirius was always good."

Ron's jaw dropped open an inch. "Harry, Malfoy *isn't* like Sirius. Think about all the time he's spent swaggering about, saying how great his dad was."

Harry balled his fists in frustration. "No, Draco isn't Sirius, and he's spent most of our school years being a git, but I think he's changing *now*. I want to give him that chance."

Ron only looked at him, his expression a muddle of anger and confusion and something a bit like pity.

When he still hadn't spoken, Harry said, "You don't have to like it. Please just don't let it come between us."

Ron's eyes narrowed for a moment, and Harry became aware of Hermione and Ginny waiting expectantly in silent witness. Finally, he nodded.

"You're right, Harry," he began. "I don't have to like it. But you *are* my best mate." Ron paused as though he would continue, but then his eyes fell away again, indicating that he had said all he could on this topic.

Harry felt only slightly relieved, as he stared at Ron's distant, wounded expression. Hermione furrowed her brow at the pair, while Ginny slipped away quietly. Tension still hung in the air between them, but at least they had both put the importance of their friendship into words.

For now, Harry would have to hope that would suffice.

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In the darkness before Wednesday morning, Harry woke gasping for breath.

For a few moments as he blinked his eyes clear, he saw nothing in the blackness around his bed. For a few moments, he thought Ron's face had been only a phantasm from the dream.

Harry fumbled for his glasses in the darkness, hoping against hope that the pale blur beyond his shortsighted vision was more than a beam of moonlight. He nearly sobbed in relief when his vision cleared to reveal Ron actually sitting there, at the far end of his bed, watching him warily.

"Ron -" he began, but Ron's closed-off expression stopped him.

"You're alright, then?"

Ron's voice was so clipped and chilly that Harry tried to reach out to him, but he stood up before Harry could touch him.

Ron scrutinised Harry's face. "Was it the Dreaming Draught?"

Harry's mind went immediately to his bedside table drawer, where the tiny vial was stashed. He'd worried about it for hours after the last Potions lesson, trying to work out a way to avoid doing the assignment; once he'd got tired of thinking about it, it had slipped entirely from his mind.

"No." He shook his head blearily. "No, I haven't taken it."

Ron shrugged jerkily. "In that case, maybe you *should*," he said quietly. "It might help." Without another word, he turned abruptly and returned to his own bed, where he immediately drew the curtains.

Harry sat for several long minutes, staring at the dark hangings of Ron's bed. It was hollow comfort, to know Ron cared so much about his well-being, when it was that caring that had caused this rift between them.

Ron could be right, that a friendship with Draco would only hurt Harry in the end. On some level, Harry was quite touched that Ron was so upset at the idea of Harry putting himself in a situation where he could be hurt. In the end, though, if it was a mistake, it was Harry's right to make it. Ron had to let him make the choice.

Harry lay back against the pillows and closed his eyes. As soon as he did, images from the dream danced through his head: the darkness of the tunnels, Sirius's bedraggled appearance, that strangely light child, and Draco's ghostly presence throughout.

Each image was so vivid, so imbued with strong emotion, that Harry could hardly stand to relive them upon waking. He couldn't bear the idea of having to endure the dream again. He needed it to go away.

Ron's advice about the Draught was a good idea: the Draught would make Harry relive the dream again, but it would protect him from the emotional effects. It would help him understand.

He rolled over and slid open the drawer in his bedside cabinet. Seeing the vial, he was jolted with a different strong memory: that of the day they'd brewed the potion, and the spark that had zinged between him and Draco when they'd touched as he'd handed him the vials. Their first kiss had come bare moments later.

Harry liked to think of it as their "first" kiss, because he wanted so much for there to be more.

He pressed his forehead to the pillow. He had a handle on his feelings for Draco, pretty well, but any essay he wrote about his dreams would obviously give them away. He really didn't want to have to write an essay for Snape that catalogued his attraction to Draco. There were few things he wanted less.

One of those things, as it happened, was to experience that dream again.

If understanding the dream would make it stop, it might be worth having to deal with whatever he learned. It might even be worth having to show what he learned to Snape.

Harry slipped the sheet of parchment from beneath the vial, and *lumosed* his wand so he could read it. Snape's instructions told him almost nothing about how to use the potion, only that he should concentrate on the dream, drink the full contents of the vial, and go to sleep. Most of the sheet was filled with a list of books he should consult for help with interpreting the symbols; at the bottom, a length requirement was noted: thirty inches.

*Bloody Snape*, thought Harry. He might be ahead on his revisions, but that didn't mean he had time to write an essay that long.

He would worry about the essay later. He would take the Draught, and do the research ... and see.

Harry replaced the parchment and picked up the vial. "Nothing to lose, right?" he whispered as he uncorked it.

He lifted the tiny vessel toward Ron's curtained bed in a silent toast before drinking the lot. Immediately sleepy, which he remembered was an intended effect of the potion, Harry replaced the vial in the drawer, along with his wand and glasses, and pulled the blankets up to his chin.

As he drifted off Harry's last thought was that he hadn't ever heard Ron's snores start up again.

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Hermione nearly dropped her books when she saw Harry had arrived at the library before she had the following morning. Harry had to allow himself a bit of a snicker at her expense - he was probably the first person to arrive before her since Krum had left after the Tournament.

"What ...?" she stammered as he cleared a space on the table for her things.

After gaping a moment longer Hermione got control of her wits.

"You've taken the Dreaming Draught, haven't you?" she asked. "Oh, Harry, I'm so *relieved*. I was so worried!"

Harry rolled his shoulders, once, to loosen them. He really *didn't* like it when Hermione fussed over him, but he forced himself to shake off his annoyance. He had to remember that he was really grateful to have friends who cared so much that sometimes they worried a little *too* much.

He didn't want to talk about it, though. Avoiding her searching gaze, he ran his finger along the page of *Who Am I to Disagree?: Gleaning the Sweet from Your Dreams*, by Ann Spode.

It was unlikely that any portion of his dream would turn up in a volume on positive symbology, but it was worth a try.

Halfway down the page, Harry jammed his finger in surprise. Wincing and shaking his hand, he peered closer at the text.

***Tunnels: dark and/or narrow***, he read. *Passing through a narrow and/or darkened tunnel in a dream clearly indicates a form of rebirth, an emergence or recognition of new knowledge hitherto hidden, often represented as a light source, which might seem ghostly, distant, or otherwise mysterious. [See: Rebirth Imagery, p. 822; see also: Ghostlike Apparitions, p. 131]*

Harry flipped over to the page on *Rebirth Imagery*. Scanning the list, he was surprised to find the mysterious baby, sounds of the ocean, and even the crushingly final feelings of drowning, all listed as symbols of rebirth.

Something in his subconscious was clearly trying to tell him to look for another chance. Or was it encouraging him in his choice to give Draco another chance? It was all very unclear, and Harry really couldn't see how all of this was different from Divination.

He turned back to page one hundred thirty-one, to read more about *Ghostlike Apparitions*.

At the top of the page, he read: ***Ghostlike Apparitions:*** *The appearance of an insubstantial, ghostlike apparition in a dream indicates that knowledge to be gained or goal sought is ephemeral, uncertain, perhaps unobtainable; also, the dreamer may fear what is ahead, may not want to know.*

Harry thought again of Draco, of how he spent so much of the dream following a faint outline of Draco's form in the darkness.

There was so much he still didn't know about Draco, and so much he wanted to learn. Or did he? Perhaps his subconscious was telling him what his conscious mind wouldn't admit: that he was setting himself up for disaster, that Draco would hurt him, that he would regret having tried to be with him.

Harry's eyes kept drawing back to the word *unobtainable*. Maybe it was all impossible, in the first place. He pushed the book away.

Hermione looked up. "Finding out anything interesting?"

He couldn't help smiling. To Hermione, everything was available, in books. All the knowledge in the world was printed, somewhere, if one could only but find the right page.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "Some of what I'm finding might be relevant, but I can't tell for sure."

He showed her the notes he'd scrawled so far. Hermione tugged absently at a stray curl as she squinted to decipher his writing.

After a moment, she looked up. "I think you've made a good start. It all makes sense to me. What do you think?"

Harry retrieved his notes and skimmed them again. "It might do," he answered, then froze as his gaze settled on an open page of *And the Horse You Rode In On: What Our Nightmares Can Tell Us That We Don't Want to Know*, by Alexander Mann.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Guilt," he answered hollowly, staring at an entry headed ***Haunting***.

When Hermione didn't answer, Harry looked up to see why. She was simply looking at him sadly. "It isn't your fault," she said quietly.

That was something about having best friends; they knew without having to ask, sometimes.

He only wished he believed her.

"If I hadn't killed Voldemort, Draco would still have parents," he said in a flat, dull voice.

Hermione touched the back of his hand, very lightly, with her fingertips. His eyes followed her arm back up to her face.

"If you hadn't killed Voldemort, he would have killed *you*," she said.

"And if I'd killed him sooner, Remus would still have Sirius," Harry replied, thinking of the skating couple and their tender kiss. It had never occurred to him, before Sirius had died, to notice how close he and Lupin had been. Harry had known the two men had been childhood friends, and hadn't thought any more of it.

If Sirius had been alive, Harry could have talked to him about being gay. Sirius could have been there for him. He could have seen Sirius and Remus *happy* together, and maybe even seen them as a glimpse of his own future.

Harry watched his fingers turn the book automatically over to the page on *Guilt Symbology*.

There was so much there, as well. The ghostlike apparitions, apparently, could have something to do with feelings of guilt; seeing Sirius in his Azkaban-escapee state fell under this category, as well, as did Draco in Trelawney's spectacles.

"You did everything you could," offered Hermione. "You did the very best you could."

Harry blinked at her, slightly shocked. He remembered the words of the baby in his dream: 'Have you done all you could?'

As he looked over his notes about the possible meanings of the dream, he began to suspect that the answer was *no*.

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Few places at Hogwarts were as deserted as the Potions classroom on a Friday night. This was probably why Draco had suggested they meet at this time, so they could study without being disturbed. Harry noticed Draco had not mentioned what reactions their friendship had elicited from the other Slytherins, but it was safe to guess that they had not been positive.

Especially after everything Harry had learned while researching his dream, Harry could hardly blame them. He was more aware of his guilty feelings than ever. Most of Slytherin House, and a handful of students in the other Houses, were now orphans because of him. Harry hated that he'd been forced to cause other children to endure the loss of their parents, as he had lost his.

Harry knew his dreams were right about another element, as well. He *did* wish for another chance, a new start, somewhere he wouldn't have to be the One Who Had Saved the World. In the course of his so-called heroics, Harry had also ruined lives. The angry eyes he saw at breakfast every morning served as a more-than-adequate reminder of that. He longed to escape the accusations in those glares.

Harry smiled at Draco, who was scrutinising the instructions for the potion they were reviewing. Things were *good* between them now. It was relaxing to find some time alone with someone who was on his side, and away from all of the angry eyes that reminded Harry of his guilt.

It was relaxing, yet disturbingly exciting. Being alone with Draco held its own set of challenges.

As much as Harry was trying to concentrate on simply being Draco's good friend, he couldn't help entertaining a thrill of excitement at being alone together so late at night. Every time Draco's eyes met his over the cauldron, Harry lost complete track of the process they were practising, and kept nearly fouling up the whole thing.

Trying to focus on the current step of the procedure for the Pain-Eliminating Potion they'd covered the previous week, Harry picked up the vial of powdered unicorn horn. Draco caught his wrist just in time to stop him from adding the whole quantity, which had not yet been measured.

Harry looked up sharply at the contact. Draco's eyes became everything he could see for a second that seemed endless.

Finally breaking the gaze, Harry exhaled.

"Sorry," he explained, pulling his wrist unwillingly from Draco's grip to set down the precious powder. With his other hand, he pushed his fringe out of his eyes. "I don't know where my mind is tonight."

Draco didn't respond, nor did his hand completely leave Harry's. An uncomfortable moment passed before Harry understood that Draco was staring at his forehead. The familiar impulse to flatten the fringe over his scar passed through him and vanished.

"It's fading, isn't it?" asked Draco without breaking his gaze.

The hand that had been holding Harry's wrist started to reach out, then stopped and hung in midair between them.

Harry allowed his head to bob slightly in affirmation. He was transfixed by Draco's attention.

"It's alright," he ventured, making a point of looking at the extended fingers. "You can."

Draco hesitated, then seemed to watch his hand move of its own will to bridge the gap between them. His fingers, once arrived, traced lightly over the lightning-bolt-shaped scar that seemed to have defined Harry's adolescence.

Harry breathed very shallowly. He was nearly overwhelmed by the urge to grasp Draco's wrist and bury his lips in the softest part of Draco's palm.

Draco's gaze flicked the few degrees from his fingertips to Harry's eyes. "Did it start healing?" he asked. "After you killed him?"

Harry nodded again, enchanted by Draco's proximity. It was like dreaming all over again, suddenly to be this close to the boy who had haunted his dreams and waking thoughts for weeks. He couldn't move, for fear of breaking the spell.

In the midst of a caught breath, however, Harry's attention was captured thoroughly by surprise, and he spoke before he could think:

"Draco, what *is* that?"

Draco's sleeve had fallen back to reveal a scar of his own, on the inside of his forearm. It resembled the one on Harry's forehead in shape and color, only differing in size.

It also looked *rougher*, somehow, as though each line had been sliced deliberately into the flesh.

Harry caught the extended arm - Draco's left - before he could draw it back. The arm tensed a moment, then relaxed as Draco allowed Harry to pull it closer for better examination.

He cupped it delicately in his right hand, running the fingers of his left over the familiar shape.

"Did you do this?" he enquired, looking up into the raw eyes that watched him, more vulnerable than Harry had ever seen them. "Is this how you got free?"

Draco didn't ask what Harry meant; it would have insulted both of them to have claimed ignorance. He simply nodded, and looked away.

"I knew what was going to happen when I came of age," said Draco in a detached monotone. "Father escaped Azkaban when Sixth Year had barely begun - I knew he would, like I told you. Only I was so angry with you for beating him, I couldn't let on how scared I was. The truth was, I didn't want to see him. I didn't want to go home for the Christmas holidays. My birthday was the day I would have arrived."

Harry sat silently, completely absorbed. It was more than he could have hoped, to hear Draco say unequivocally that he hadn't wanted to join his father. It was almost more than he could believe.

The contrary part of Harry's mind conjured the thoroughly unwelcome image of Draco, proud and insolent, pushing his way into Harry's compartment on the Hogwarts Express to rub salt in the wounds that were still fresh from Cedric's death. Before Harry could force his mind away, it let Draco's long-ago words echo, taunting him for having chosen the 'wrong' side.

The Draco he had once known had supported his Death Eater parents. He had supported Voldemort.

Harry gritted his molars together and focused his eyes on the Draco who sat before him.

Something must have changed, over the past couple of years. At the moment, Harry didn't care what had happened, so long as it was true. He was afraid, though, if he so much as moved, that the glamour would crack and Draco would go back to being the selfish, spoilt prat Harry had always known before.

Harry sat, therefore, perfectly still. He dragged his mind back to the thread of Draco's story.

So Draco's birthday fell on the Solstice. Harry had even heard somewhere that he'd been born at the exact moment of winter's arrival. If Lucius had had his way, then, Draco would have been branded with the Dark Mark on his first night home from Hogwarts that winter.

"But you didn't go home, after all," he murmured, assuming that must be the case from Draco's choice of words, although he couldn't remember ever seeing him at Hogwarts that Christmas.

"No," agreed Draco with a gentle shake of his head. "I couldn't, after what I had done. My father would have had me destroyed."

Harry winced at the thought of anyone, even Lucius Malfoy, being willing to throw away his child so easily. Even more, he hated the idea of any child being raised with the knowledge of his own expendability.

"But what *did* you do?" Harry wasn't sure how to make his question any more clearly, so he simply traced the scar again, letting his eyes communicate the rest.

Draco's eyes followed Harry's finger up and down his forearm. Harry brushed the skin impossibly lightly, feeling the tiniest variations in its topography. Draco's arm was completely relaxed in his hand, permitting, welcoming.

For a long moment, neither spoke, absorbed in the sensation of contact.

"I had read about it," came Draco's quiet words at last. "I found a book in the Restricted Section that outlined ancient protection spells against procedures like the Dark Mark. The Dark Lord wasn't the first to brand his followers with magical Binding Spells, simply the most recent. Long ago, a few wizards found a way to resist."

Harry was familiar with one such process from helping Snape, but wanted to hear Draco's account. He remained silent, letting the words wash over him as he continued to stare at the silver lines in the milky flesh.

"I knew I could go to Snape for help, or to Dumbledore, but I was afraid they would try to talk me out of it. The Light Protection is a very advanced procedure, and very dangerous. There was a strong possibility that I would not survive. But because of Father's plans, I had to do this before I came of age, which made Dumbledore and Snape responsible for the outcome. I couldn't give them the chance to stop me. I didn't know whether anyone else would understand: I would rather have died than have taken the Dark Mark."

Harry blinked and swallowed the rising burn in his chest. It hurt to think of Draco being so alone, making such a terrifying decision.

Despite Harry's fascination with Draco's story, his eyes had their own priorities. His gaze stayed riveted on the delicate shapes Draco's mouth made as he spoke.

"The night before the train left for Break, I came to this room. I cleared the desks away from the middle of the floor and drew the pentagram around myself for protection. I had already prepared the potion I was to drink and the balm I was to spread across my arm. All that remained was to speak the incantation, and break the skin so it would not accept the Mark.

"It probably won't surprise you that I had already had some experience with very advanced spells, most of which were the kind of thing Dumbledore doesn't teach. My father had seen to that. I had managed to hold off on starting to learn anything really horrible - I'd faked being ill the last week of the summer after Father had given me a text to read about the Cruciatus curse - but I had learned enough to know I didn't want to follow the road my parents had chosen for me.

"Before I started the spell, I had memorised the words exactly, and learnt to focus my mind completely on the task at hand. I spread the balm on my arm and pointed the tip of my wand at my flesh, exactly where the Dark Mark was meant to be made. I knew the spot precisely, from seeing my parents' so many times since Voldemort had returned.

"I had chosen the shape of your scar" - his eyes flicked back to Harry's forehead - "because I knew yours had protected you. And because I knew I would be near you, here at Hogwarts, so maybe that would be the protection that would be strongest here.

"I used my wand, and the spell, to gouge the shape into my skin so that the Dark Mark could never be placed there. When I started to cut my skin, though, something went wrong. I think I was too intent, channeling too much of my energy into the spell. I didn't know how much power I had.

"I cut too deep, or maybe too close to the vein. It made me bleed too much - there was so much blood. I remember everything being covered in red. I felt myself getting weak. There was this warm, wet puddle that was getting into my robes and my hair, and I couldn't quite get my brain around the fact that that was *me*, my life, soaking into the stones.

"I knew I was dying, though. I knew I had to choose between finishing the incantation, and saving my life. I chose to save my soul."

Harry blinked for the first time in minutes. As he forced himself to draw a breath, a dull pain seized the bottom of his lungs. It was hard to accept how close he had come to losing Draco before he'd ever really known him.

"Then what happened?" he prompted quietly.

Draco's eyes flicked toward Harry's, breaking the trance that had held them. When he spoke again, his voice was steady and objective.

"I'm not entirely sure," he admitted. "I woke up in the Hospital Wing, nearly a week later. My arm was swathed in bandages, and I was too weak to sit up. I couldn't stand or walk until the day before all the other students returned.

"My only guess is that Snape found me, and brought me to Dumbledore. Snape has always known when I needed him, somehow. I think it was Snape who ensured that I lived."

Harry looked at Draco for a long moment, thinking back over his behaviour in the last few Potions lessons.

"If Snape has always been there for you, though," he asked, "then why did you stand up for me?"

Draco scowled and squared his shoulders, pulling completely away from Harry.

"Snape wouldn't even *be* here, if it weren't for you. I know he hated your dad, and that you look like him and everything, but that's no excuse for Snape never giving you a chance." The corner of his mouth turned up in a wry smile. "If anyone understands that a son and a father can be different, I can."

Harry thought back, with yet another pang of guilt, on that awful day when he'd seen his father in Snape's Pensieve, hanging a teenage Snape up by his ankles. Harry was sure there were reasons he should look up to his father's memory, but he was also sure that wasn't one of them.

He walked around the desk to take Draco's arm again. Draco didn't resist as Harry pushed his sleeve back to expose his scar.

He laid his hand flat, lightly, over the silvery mark. "I'm glad," he said, without looking up. "I'm glad you did this. And glad you survived it."

He raised his eyes now to meet Draco's. Their faces were so close, Harry could feel the other boy's breath against his skin. It reminded him of the day they'd kissed, only this Draco was so different, so much more complicated, than the boy who had accosted him in the shadowy corridor.

He wanted, more than ever, to kiss those lips again.

Draco nodded solemnly in response to Harry's words. "It was the only choice I had. And I didn't even know -" He broke off, blinked twice, then continued, "I didn't even know, then, about what was going to happen to the rest - to my parents and all of them who had the Mark."

Harry's heart constricted. He thought again of his dream, and his feelings of guilt over the fates of the Death Eaters who had children at Hogwarts. He knew that, ultimately, the responsibility for the terrible fate of those men and women lay in their own hands, and in Voldemort's, but that never seemed to make him feel any better about it.

Draco saw Harry's expression, and continued, "It's a good thing, really, what happened to me. The other kids with Death Eaters for parents - they used to look up to me. When I risked everything to avoid taking the Mark, they all decided to resist, too. Snape helped shield them from their parents; his cover was blown once you helped him deactivate his Mark, so he was free to help even the ones who aren't in Slytherin. That's why we still have all our classmates."

The darkness seemed to creep out of the corners of the dungeon classroom, gathering around the grey in Draco's hooded eyes. Harry was acutely aware, all over again, of why they were there alone.

"You said 'used to' look up to you," Harry commented flatly. "They're angry because of me, aren't they?"

Draco shrugged a single shoulder, looking down at his arm. "They're angry because their parents are dead," he answered simply. "They blamed me because they blamed Father because their parents all did what he told them to do." He glanced up and saw the look in Harry's eyes. "I mean, yeah, they blame you, too, of course. They have to blame *someone*, after all, because that's the way they've been taught to think. So they're not *happy* I'm friends with you, now, but they really haven't been fond of me in quite a while."

"What about you? Weren't you taught to think that way?"

Draco shrugged the same shoulder again. "I was taught to think a lot of things," he said.

Harry held Draco's gaze, wishing he could communicate a tithe of his sympathy for all Draco had lost. Harry had grown up with no parents and no friends, but he hadn't remembered any other way. He didn't think he would like to have all that Draco had had, and then lose it all at once.

"Draco, I'm sorry," said Harry quietly. "About your parents."

Draco's regard changed sharply.

"Don't you ever be sorry for what you did," he said harshly, insistently. "You saved us *all*."

Harry shook his head, looking away. "Don't -" he pleaded, closing his eyes against the tightness in his chest.

Killing Voldemort hadn't saved anyone, really. It was just something he'd had to do, or die trying. The world was better than if he'd failed, he did understand that, but sometimes he didn't really care.

Harry hadn't *wanted* to kill. It didn't matter what kind of life it was that he had taken; he didn't feel triumph, he only felt *stained*.

Draco was wrong. Harry hadn't saved anyone. His parents were still dead, Sirius was still dead, Draco and the other Death Eaters' children were still orphaned, and so many people still hated Harry and Draco for that fact.

Harry felt his face growing hot, and his collar felt itchy. He was sick of being the 'saviour.' He wanted it not to be true. He wanted Draco to have a family again, even if it meant him being an insufferable snob who hated everyone and everything that Harry loved.

A cool, smooth hand covered Harry's where it rested over Draco's scar. Harry let his eyes open at the sensation. The face he saw didn't look like the one he used to see contorted into a hateful sneer, back when they were younger. So much had changed about Draco; that much, Harry was sure, was true.

Draco was regarding him intently. "You saved *me*, Harry, whether you knew it or not. Don't you *ever* be sorry for that."

His pale pink lips made soft, insistent shapes as he spoke the words. Harry didn't really hear them; he was too busy watching the tip of Draco's tongue dance in and out of sight behind his teeth.

Harry leaned closer. He could smell the scent of Draco's soap and clothes and exhaustion. The tiny, fair hairs just above Draco's left ear were slightly mussed, and wanted Harry's fingertips to smooth them gently into a single direction.

Something about the intensity of Draco's expression looked like trust, and under its weight Harry felt that he existed only because Draco was seeing him. He feared that if Draco looked away, he would vanish as a wisp of steam over the surface of the Lake on nights when the air temperature dropped too suddenly for the water to keep up and the breeze swept ripples across in the darkness.

Something about Draco was drawing Harry closer. His lips still looked soft, and Harry dared to believe he could lean forward another inch and feel them for himself again.

It was in precisely that moment that Draco's eyes dropped shut and his head tipped back, pulling those lips away.

At the edges of his vision, Harry sensed that the torches in their sconces might have brightened; the darkness receded back into its corners, leaving only a plain classroom occupied by two plain boys.

Draco looked paler than Harry had noticed a moment earlier. His eyelids appeared bruised from fatigue. Harry couldn't help wondering whether Draco had slept at all, lately, either.

"I'm very tired, Harry," he said in a barely audible whisper. "I think I need to go to sleep, now."

When Draco opened his eyes, they wore invisible shields. Harry swallowed and held his breath as Draco pulled away, then stood up and began packing away his books and the potion ingredients. Automatically, Harry joined the task, avoiding the horrible, shielded eyes.

They had to throw away the unfinished potion, but it didn't matter at all.

Harry and Draco didn't look at each other again until they reached the foot of the stairs Harry would have to climb to leave the dungeons. They didn't say any words, simply nodded once guardedly and went each his separate way.

Harry fought himself not to look back. He couldn't bear the idea that Draco wouldn't be watching.

The curfew bells were chiming their final toll as Harry reached the Fat Lady.

"Are you alright, dear?" asked the voluptuous portrait. Harry nodded distantly, still reeling from Draco's story, and from the tension in his own wound-up body as he'd stood so painfully close to the boy he wanted so intensely.

"Oh, good!" she gushed. "Your friends will be so happy to see you, they just can't wait to share their news."

"Canary creams," replied Harry, thoroughly perplexed and too spent to care.

"Yes, indeed!" sang the Fat Lady, as she swung forward to admit him.

A quiet common room greeted Harry as he entered. He was about to head up to an early bed when he heard his name called from the direction of the fireplace.

Hermione and Ron were sitting together on the very same couch they had shared when Harry had told them who would be refereeing the Seeker rematch. The day seemed years, not weeks, ago. Both looked happier than he had ever seen them, glowing and contented. Both pairs of eyes lit up as they gestured him over to join them.

Hermione reached out, misty-eyed to take Harry's hand as he sat on the chair nearest them. Ron, all evidence of disagreement gone, clapped a hand to Harry's shoulder.

Harry remembered the Fat Lady's words about "news," and returned the expectant looks of his friends.

"So?" he prompted. "What's the occasion?"

Hermione flushed happily and held up her left hand. A tiny, but finely cut, stone glinted from the gold-coloured band on her fourth finger.

"We wanted you to be the first to know," she told him as Ron looked on, grinning proudly. "Ron has asked me to be his wife."

**Author's Notes:** Beta'd TWICE by my most beloved darlings, CopperBeech and Petunia. Any remaining errors, as always, are all my fault.

This is the midpoint of the fic. It is the central chapter, and therefore should be the place where the plot pivots and sends us careening toward the climax. Yeah, there will be some of that in Chapter 9. Chapter 8 is where Crikkita indulges a plot-appropriate fetish.

This chapter was hideously delayed by the horried RL monster. I have a lot more of the fic already written, and plan to post as frequently as I can, until the fic is finished or RL butts in again.

This chapter's special love goes to sunidale, who [recced](#) this little ficcy, wayyy back in its larval stages (but I didn't know it until more recently). And to jamsf, who just can't get enough Harry.

Many thanks to my favourite *maina*, for helping me with the details I couldn't remember.

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Chapter 8: Kinship

Harry went directly to the library when he finally rolled out of bed around lunchtime Saturday.

Hermione was there, of course, the top of her head barely visible over a towering stack of textbooks. It looked as though she might have summoned the contents of an entire shelf for her current bout of revision. She appeared to be comparing references in at least four of the tomes simultaneously, and didn't look up when he entered.

Harry smiled in her direction, heading to the section of the library where the dusty volumes on dreams were kept. He would come back to chat with Hermione when he was ready for a break, but first he needed to look into another image he'd remembered from his dream.

Settling in a secluded niche in a remote corner of the library, Harry covered the table with the works of Spode, Mann and company. He unfurled the parchment on which he'd begun his essay, smoothing it flat with his palms.

Before opening any texts, he read over what he had already written. It was some of the worst writing he'd done in years: blotchy, disjointed and jumbled. He had to admit that, if he did end up handing this in, he would have to rewrite it first.

He hadn't made up his mind to give in to Snape's bullying and hand in this essay, but Harry was determined to draw some conclusions for himself, in any case. Ron's advice had served Harry well, and he had been sleeping better since he had taken the Draught and begun to decipher the dream. If only to satisfy his own curiosity, he would finish the job.

With a long-suffering sigh, Harry heaved open the cover of *Who Am I to Disagree?: Gleaning the Sweet from Your Dreams*, and started flipping pages. When something caught his eye, he got drawn into reading a column and a half before he realised it had nothing to do with the information he was seeking. He stretched his neck a little, then flipped more pages.

After several more irrelevant passages read in this manner, Harry looked up to discover that he'd already wasted an hour here. He pushed back from his table, stretching a few sore muscles here and there, and made his way back toward the entrance to see Hermione.

When he arrived at her table, though, she was gone. She must not even have seen him come in, or she surely would have come to see him before she left.

Harry shrugged and headed back to his corner.

He opened the Spode book again and continued perusing. This time, he only spent about fifteen minutes reading before he got frustrated and slammed the heavy book closed with a resounding thud. He coughed and spluttered for several minutes in the dust cloud that went up from the pages, wryly musing that Madam Pince might have charmed all of her books to fight back like this when mishandled.

To clear his lungs, and his head, Harry wandered over to a window. He eased one side open, inhaling deeply. Out on the grounds, a group of fifth-years from Ravenclaw were playing four-flyer Quidditch against some sixth-year Gryffindors. He could see Ginny's hair shining crimson in the sunlight.

Even though he hadn't had a recurrence of the dream since taking the Dreaming Draught - and thank Merlin for that - another detail had clicked into place as he'd drifted into consciousness late that morning.

Could it be a coincidence? But then, how did he *know*?

Harry closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the cool pane on the side that was still latched.

When his spectacles clicked against the window, he removed them instinctively and set them on the sill. He settled forward again into the relaxing posture, letting sunlight burn orange through his eyelids. He brought his hands around, sliding them between his face and the glass to create darkness.

He knew what he'd already written about the baby Wormtail had been holding: it represented rebirth, new beginnings, a chance to start over. It represented all the things he wanted, after seven years of being expected to be the Saviour of the Wizarding World, and after finally fulfilling that destiny.

The child also had silver eyes, like Draco's.

"Wotcher, Harry."

Harry literally gave a small jump at the sudden bark of greeting. He hadn't heard anyone approach.

"Oh," he said, shoving his glasses back onto his face as he looked around. "Hi, Professor."

A bray of a laugh answered him. "No need to be formal. *You* knew me before this teaching business happened. It's still 'Tonks,' if you don't mind."

He couldn't help grinning. "Sorry, Tonks."

"No matter at all. I'll take 'Professor' over 'Nymphadora' any day. A little dignified, isn't it?" She leaned against a nearby bookcase, overbalancing it and sending half the contents of the top shelf crashing to the ground.

Harry tried not to smirk as he helped her charm the books back into place.

Tonks's nose wrinkled when she smiled mischievously. "At least nowadays when I do that, Madam Pince never screams at me. Nice to get a little respect around here, finally."

A trio of Slytherin fifth-years passed them by. One of the boys wore a noticeable sneer. Tonks changed her hair colour to Slytherin green and gave her students a cheerful wave.

"A little *more* respect wouldn't hurt, of course," she amended with an unconcerned shrug.

Harry couldn't think of an appropriate response, so he simply nodded. The fifth-year boy had reminded him so much of Draco, he had got distracted all over again.

Tonks glanced at her reflection in the polished brass of a sconce. She touched her hair and chuckled. Apparently green appealed to her.

Watching her, Harry suddenly remembered her familial relationship to Draco. Perhaps she could help him realise he wasn't so alone? He knew Draco's family hadn't been kind to the Tonkses, however. He had no way of knowing how Tonks might feel about Draco.

"Tonks?"

"Mmm?"

"Say you had a cousin who needed help. Maybe he's someone you never got on with before, but it was mostly his parents' fault, and now they're gone. Dead or something. Would you help him?"

Tonks looked at him for a long moment without speaking. Finally, she asked, "Are the Dursleys all right, Harry? I didn't hear about anything happening to them, but the Aurors haven't been watching them since all the Death Eaters were destroyed."

Harry shook his head. "No, I think they're fine. I haven't talked to them since summer, anyway."

"So this is a hypothetical question."

He couldn't quite meet her eyes. He gave a half-shrug, hoping to avoid admitting his real reason for asking just yet.

Tonks gave a long sigh and stepped back half a pace. "I see," she said.

Meeting her narrowed eyes, Harry saw that she did, in fact.

"Look, Harry," Tonks told him briskly, "I've heard that you've got to be friends with Draco. I don't know why, and I don't really want to know. What *you* should know, though, is that there's a long history between his part of the family and mine. And it wasn't only his parents."

"But he's -"

Tonks held up her hand. "I like to think of myself as a generous person, Harry, but there are some leaps of faith even I can't make."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Tonks's expression left no room for argument.

"Stay out of it, Harry. I'm sorry, but you can't ask me this. You can't ask me to make him family now."

She glanced toward the circulation desk. "I should get going. I heard some Metamorphmagus wrote a book last century on teaching Transfigurations to non-Metamorphmagus students, but I can't find it anywhere. I'll have to ask Madam Pince where she keeps it."

The silence between them had lost its easy comfort. Harry gave her a smile that felt molded out of plastic on his face. "Good luck, then," he said stiffly.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, with a more genuine-looking smile. "Come see me anytime you need anything, alright?" With a wink and a nod, she disappeared back around the corner toward the circulation desk.

Harry stared out the window for a long time. His anger turned his stomach into a hard, heavy lump. How could Tonks refuse to help a family member in need? A quiet voice in his head tried to make him consider how he would react if someone asked him to help Dudley in the event that Petunia and Vernon were suddenly killed, but he wouldn't listen.

Draco had no other family left. Family was important; Harry, who had so little of his own, knew that for sure. He couldn't imagine leaving a family member in need, no matter how insistently the little voice reminded him that he couldn't really blame Tonks for feeling no loyalty toward the Malfoys.

Harry pushed back from the window, turning back to the essay he'd neglected for so long now. He reread the words he'd written this afternoon. The silver eyes in his dream didn't have to mean anything; Draco had been on his mind quite a bit lately, so it made sense for his eyes to have snuck onto the child in his dreams.

It wasn't so easy to explain away the silver birthmark on its forearm.

Precisely where Draco had his scar.

Harry still didn't know what it was meant to tell him. Was Draco supposed to be some sort of saviour for him? Was Draco supposed to help Harry find his new chance at life?

Or was the baby Harry's conscience? He remembered his guilt at the its question - "*Have you done all you could?*" - and his chest grew tight again with the fear that he would never understand.

Harry dragged the Mann text closer, and heaved it open. There had to be another explanation for the light coming from the baby's arm. He would find it. He *would*.

By late afternoon, though, Harry was getting tired and frustrated. He hadn't found any leads, and kept getting dragged back into his circular, self-blaming thoughts. He pushed away the book he was currently searching and pulled his glasses off with one hand. The other arm wiped impatiently across his drooping eyes.

He inhaled deeply, again. He had time. The essay wasn't due until Thursday, if he even *did* write it. He could take his time working this out.

Harry stood up and shoved his glasses back onto his face. He stacked the books neatly and gave them a single tap with his wand. They vanished instantly, heading back to their home shelves.

On his way out, he walked toward a window in the main part of the library. The Quidditch game was clearly over. A few students lounged lazily in small groups all over the grounds. Ginny's brilliant hair was no longer visible among them.

He wondered whether his dream had been right, about Sirius and Remus being a couple. That would explain why Remus had never really joined in on trying to reassure Harry, after Sirius had died. It would explain why Remus had left Britain, as soon as the war was over. He had taken himself to Romania, where he was undergoing an experimental new treatment that was reputed to heal those afflicted with lycanthropy. Harry knew all of this; he also knew that the first few letters he'd written had never been answered, so he'd given up trying.

He only hoped Lupin could forgive him, someday.

Harry stretched his arms high above his head, and then out to the sides. He rotated his neck, feeling the crackles of tension dissipating in his joints.

A month and a day, he thought. *That's all I have left here, ever - one month and one day.* His shoulders sagged in resignation. A part of him was ready to put this long chapter of his life behind him, but another part was already mourning the separation from the only true home he'd ever known.

"Harry!"

He span around, catching the glare from Madam Pince at the loudness of the voice which had called his name across the quiet library.

"Dean?"

Dean was bright-eyed, clearly pleased to see Harry. In fact, he was practically hopping from foot to foot with excitement.

"What's going on?" Harry asked him.

Harry eyed the exit. He couldn't decide whether he was relieved at having a friend find him, or whether he'd prefer to be left alone to think about what he might have learned from his day of fruitless research.

"We've been looking for you *everywhere!* You've got to come with me *now*, it's important." Dean grabbed Harry's arm solidly above the elbow and proceeded to drag him away.

"Hang on a minute!" protested Harry. "What's so important? Is everyone okay?" His voice took on an edge of panic. "Did something happen to Ron? Or Hermione?"

Even after the happy scene that had taken place the night before, Harry felt edgy around Ron. Things still weren't quite right between them. If Ron were in trouble now, and still had even the slightest doubt as to Harry's devotion to their friendship, Harry didn't know how he would live with himself.

"No, no!" assured Dean. "Nothing like that. But ... I'm not supposed to tell you."

An eyebrow cocked appraisingly, Harry waited for more information.

Dean blushed. "It's a surprise. Go on, Harry. Come with me, will you?"

Naturally, as Harry's luck always seemed to work, it was at exactly that moment that Draco stepped around the corner into the library, obviously looking for Harry. His eyes wore that guarded

vulnerability they'd shown the night before, when Draco had allowed Harry to cradle his arm and brush his fingers over the scar that had both saved and almost killed him.

Harry's heart jumped into his gullet. He wished, on a disloyal and ungrateful level, that Dean would go away and leave him alone with Draco.

At the same time, Harry's impatience surged. Why did Draco have to show up right now, when his friends wanted his company? Where had he been all afternoon, when Harry had been alone in the library?

Why did Draco have to be so unavailable when Harry wanted him, and show up only when Harry was ready to move on? Who was *he* to decide the terms of their relationship?

Harry was dully aware of the illogic of his train of thought, but he couldn't help listening to himself. He was mad for Draco, even blind with it at times; why did he have to wait around for Draco to admit what was right in front of him?

Meanwhile, Draco's and Dean's eyes were both narrowing in a diluted sort of hatred, born more from habit than from current emotion, as they regarded each other from a safe distance of separation.

After a moment's standoff, Draco broke his glare away from Dean and met Harry's eyes.

"I've been working on my Dreaming Draught essay," he said in a perfectly even, uninflected voice.

"Me, too," answered Harry, cursing the crack in the second syllable.

Draco only nodded, and continued staring for what seemed a very long time. "I thought perhaps we could compare notes," he added at last.

Harry's stomach twisted and dropped. He ached with curiosity about what dreams Draco might be having. He panicked at the thought of showing Draco any detail of his own dream. His heart soared at the flattery of knowing that Draco was willing to share his dreams with him.

He cursed Draco for toying with his affections, probably knowing full well how curious Harry was about his dreams.

Harry needed Dean to go away and give him some time to sort this out. Or maybe he wanted to leave Draco standing alone, wanting more, the way he'd left Harry the night before.

Harry glanced at Dean, who must immediately have seen the hesitation in his eyes.

"It's been too long already, Harry," said Dean quickly, "we have to go *now*." He tugged on Harry's elbow in a renewed attempt to budge him into motion.

After one more quick glance at each of his friends, Harry made a quick decision: he and Dean had never been close, but he clearly had a particular plan in mind which couldn't go forward without Harry's presence. It was nice to feel needed that way.

Draco, on the other hand, kept dancing around the attraction between them, pretending they had never kissed and that he himself wasn't gay. It was exhausting and depressing, to be frank, quite a lot of the time.

"Sorry, Draco," said Harry shakily, wishing he could sound more confident. "Dean and I have plans."

Draco's eyes went dark. "I see," he responded quietly, and turned toward a different set of desks.

Watching him walk away, Harry cursed himself. Draco might not be being entirely honest with either of them, but he wasn't the only one at fault for the turmoil in Harry's gut.

"Draco?"

He turned halfway, the tip of his nose pointed somewhere between Harry and the wall to his right.

"Maybe we can meet tomorrow instead? This time tomorrow?" Harry gritted his teeth, hating the desperate tone in his words.

Draco shrugged inscrutably and left, disappearing into back of the library so quickly that Harry briefly fantasized that he'd never been there at all. Only the lingering expression of bitterness on Dean's face confirmed what Harry had seen and heard.

Harry mustered up all available enthusiasm for the treat that apparently awaited him, and smiled at his friend.

"Lead on," he mock-commanded, and Dean did.

*Oh. This **is** a good surprise!*

Harry was jogging to keep up with Dean as they descended the final staircase to the Entrance Hall. Waiting for them, not looking nearly as impatient as Harry had expected, were Hermione and the predictable heads of flaming red hair.

What Harry hadn't predicted was that there would be *three* heads of flaming red hair.

Ron's face lit up when he spotted Dean and Harry approaching over his brother's head.

"Finally! I was thinking you two would never get here!" He looked down at his stocky older brother. "Now can we eat?"

Charlie chuckled, turning to face the new arrivals. "Yes, Ron," he replied, stepping forward to shake Harry's hand.

"Come on," continued Charlie, "Viktor's waiting for us all in the kitchens."

By the time they reached the portrait of the fruit bowl, Ginny was giggling relentlessly. Although Hogwarts seemed unchanged over the millennium of its existence, the castle was in fact modifying itself imperceptibly each day. The alterations were minor enough that the current students never even noticed, but over time, they added up. Charlie had already got hopelessly lost no fewer than five separate times trying to find the right corridor before his younger siblings had taken over the lead.

Harry marvelled once more at the impressive magic contained in the Marauder's Map. Somehow, Moony, Padfoot and Prongs had thought to charm the document so it would keep pace with the castle's changes.

Harry gritted his teeth against the pain that rose in his gut when he thought of his father and his friends. Instead, he forced himself to smile, thinking of the 'mysterious' return the map had made into his life on his sixteenth birthday. Dumbledore hadn't been all that subtle, though - the handwriting on the card had matched the one that had accompanied the Invisibility Cloak on Harry's first Christmas at Hogwarts.

Still snickering sporadically, Ginny reached out a finger to tickle the pear. It squirmed, joining her laughter as it turned into the handle of the hidden door.

The Hogwarts kitchens were as warm and welcoming as ever. Perhaps even more so, for Harry, who was thrilled to be in the company of these friends. It felt spectacular to be surrounded by Weasleys again, and his heart floated upwards until the corners of his mouth had to rise, as well.

The heavy oak table in the middle of the room had been set with seven places, a small heavy drinking glass and a plate in front of each. A flagon of something suspiciously golden sat in the middle of the table.

Viktor Krum clomped in from beyond a corner and approached them in his familiar, duck-footed stance, offering handshakes and hugs all around.

As soon as Harry had stepped aside from shaking Krum's hand, Hermione embraced the man warmly.

"*Zdrasti Viktore!*" she greeted him. "*Kak si?*"

Krum smiled at her. "*Mnogo dobre, Hermione. I ti?*"

"Fine, she's fine," interrupted Charlie. "Hermione, I didn't know you spoke Bulgarian!"

Hermione blushed happily. "*Samo malko,*" she responded.

"Maybe only a little bit, but you still pronounce very well," amended Viktor, whose English pronunciation had improved to the point that Harry could only discern a soft purr of accent.

Harry was amused to note that Ron was now acting much more friendly toward Krum than he had during Fourth Year, and hadn't scowled at all when Hermione had hugged him. Harry caught Ginny's eye and exchanged a grin, both clearly sharing the same thought.

"Please," said Viktor finally, "everyone sit. I have a surprise for you."

The friends all chose chairs, couple by couple, leaving Harry feeling a bit like a seventh wheel.

He tried to push those self-pitying thoughts out of his head. Everyone had gone to a lot of trouble to include him, after all. It would have been easy to have left him to study while they enjoyed this feast.

Harry caught himself with a bit of a start. His friends would never really consider having this gathering without him! He must be feeling more left-out at Ron and Hermione's increasing closeness than he had realised.

Charlie, seeming to read Harry's mind, patted the chair at his own right side. He looked up at Harry with a wide, warm grin.

Harry smiled gratefully and joined him.

No sooner had he sat down, than two familiar pairs of ears bounced around the edges of the table. Dobby and Winky, the latter having sworn off Butterbeer and cleaned herself up considerably, greeted the friends happily as they placed a loaded plate in front of each person.

"Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked the male house-elf with glee. "Dobby was so pleased to learn that you would be visiting the kitchens this evening! Dobby hasn't seen Harry Potter in a very long time, sir!"

Harry naturally experienced a twinge of guilt at this. The past year hadn't been easy, and he still hadn't entirely recovered from the emotional aftereffects of his final confrontation with Voldemort, but that was no reason to have neglected his friends.

"I know, Dobby. Sorry."

Dobby shook his head, bat-like ears waving around his enormous eyes. "Harry Potter must not worry about Dobby, sir! For Dobby is simply thrilled to see him now, sir! Dobby and Winky are cooking Bulgarian food for the first time tonight! Mr. Viktor Krum is teaching us how!"

Krum smiled at the pair. "Thank you both. The *shopska salata* looks exactly right." He began to pour a small amount of liquid from the flagon into each glass, starting with Ron, who was seated to his left.

Dobby smiled at the compliment, then leaned toward Harry, lowering his voice. "Dobby is enjoying learning about this Bulgarian food, sir, but Dobby is thinking that what Mr. Krum calls 'cheese' might be spoilt." His ears wilted with worry as the group looked ready to eat.

Ron sniffed at the salad in front of him, clearly sharing Dobby's opinion. "Ugh! What's this white stuff? It smells like feet!"

"Ronald!" snapped a mortified Hermione.

Dobby ducked as though about to have his hands ironed, but only Harry noticed this as Charlie and Viktor burst into laughter.

"That's what he said the first time, too!" gasped Krum through his guffaws, pointing at Charlie.

Charlie calmed himself to a chuckle. "It's true, I did," he added, looking warmly at Viktor. "But *sirene* is actually very good."

Only Harry saw Dobby's expression of extreme relief as the house-elf snuck back toward the stove.

Krum raised his glass, which he had filled about two fingers deep with the amber liquid. Harry noticed that the rest of the glasses contained a significantly smaller quantity.

"It is wonderful to be back at Hogwarts." Krum held his glass forward in a toast. "To friendship and family. *Nazdrave*."

A chorus of "*nazdrave*" and "*cheers*" (and "*noroc*" from Charlie, who still worked in Romania) echoed around the table.

Harry lifted his glass to his lips. Before he could even sip, the fumes smacked his nose and he nearly began to cough. Not to insult Viktor, however, he allowed a few drops to enter his mouth. The liquid burned all the way down his throat.

On the other side of Krum, Ron was bright magenta and gagging. His glass sat empty in front of him. Hermione was patting him on the back and glaring at the guilty party.

"What *is* this stuff?" asked Ginny, who had managed a little more than Harry had.

"Wow," added Dean. "How did Bulgarian Wizards figure out how to make a drink that's *more* than one hundred percent alcohol?"

"It's *rakiya*," answered Charlie, "and it's no stronger than vodka, actually. The taste will fool you, though."

He fixed Krum with a glare. "I *never* should have let you give this to them," he scolded. "McGonagall will have my *head* if she catches them weaving back to the tower."

Krum smiled at him indulgently. "I know, *kote*," he murmured soothingly. "You've said this all week."

"And you still gave it to them!"

"I told you, it's not a traditional Bulgarian meal if it doesn't start with *shopska salata* and *rakiya*."

"Well, you could have warned them. What's so funny?"

This last was directed at his sister, who was failing to hide her giggles.

"You sound just like Mum and Dad!" she managed to wheeze. "And like those two!" She pointed now to her other brother and future sister-in-law.

Hermione flushed to match Ron's colour, and the whole party broke into goodhearted laughter.

"Which reminds me," said Krum, adding a few more drops of the spirit to his brother-in-law's glass before raising his own. "To Ron and Hermione. May you enjoy a lifetime of happy years together."

"Cheers," spoke the company together, as Ron kissed his new fiancée gently on the temple.

Harry took a slightly larger swallow this time, starting to enjoy the warm feeling the liquor created in his stomach. Any feeling was better than the dead weight that hung in his middle every time he thought of his unresolved row with Ron.

"So." Ginny took charge of the conversation. "Hermione, you know I love you, and I'm thrilled you're going to be my sister - and sorry, Ron - but what in Merlin's name are you two thinking, planning to get married so young?"

Ron shot her an annoyed look, but Hermione laughed out loud and shook her head.

"I never said anything about getting *married* this young!" she responded with a good-natured nudge to Ron's shoulder. "We're going to wait until Auror Training is over, at least. We have three years of studying to complete, after all, and might have to spend months apart in the process."

"Awfully long engagement, that," responded Ginny amiably.

"True," began Hermione. "I had always assumed we'd get engaged later. But when Ron asked me, I realised I had always assumed we *would* get engaged. So why wait on making the promise?"

"What *I* can't figure," said Dean, "is how Ron managed to get the ring and everything, and never tell *any* of us that he was planning it!"

Harry exchanged a look with Ginny that confirmed she hadn't been informed, either. He felt a little better, knowing he wasn't the only one left out of the loop.

He didn't need to ask why Ron hadn't at least told *him*. He would have, in any other situation, but things had been tense enough since Harry had become friends with Draco that Ron probably didn't feel like sharing happy news with him.

Ron shrugged. "I was afraid I'd lose my nerve if I told anyone. Or that Hermione would get a whiff of it, and would say something before I'd found the right moment."

Ginny giggled at him, making Ron blush.

"The long engagement works out, anyway," said Charlie then. "You can use the time to plan. It won't be easy to hold a ceremony that will work for both our family and yours, Hermione."

"No," agreed Hermione. "You all and your parents do a fair job of passing as Muggles, but if the rest of you lot are anything like some of the people we saw at the World Cup ..." She trailed off, shaking her head in amusement.

Harry smiled at the memory of all the wizards who had so thoroughly failed to dress as normal Muggles at the last Quidditch World Cup. The whole clan of Weasleys being able to 'pass' as Muggles so as to avoid having to Memory Charm an entire family of Grangers ... well, it would be quite a challenge.

Listening to the conversation, it occurred to Harry that his own parents would have had the same concern. He wondered what they had done. But thinking about his parents' wedding reminded Harry of Sirius, who had been best man, which in turn reminded him of his earlier thoughts of Remus. Harry's emotions were still too raw on all of those subjects, so he wrenched his mind away from that path.

He took another sizable swallow of his drink, and poured himself a bit more. He chose not to notice Charlie's raised eyebrow as he did it, but tucked into the cucumber and tomato salad with its strange tasting cheese, instead.

As the salad disappeared - along with a little more of the *rakiya* - Harry settled back into his seat, cradling his glass comfortably. This was his family - the people at this table, plus the other Weasleys. And everyone at this table knew he was gay. Current problems with Ron aside, Harry had never felt so loved, accepted and relaxed in his life.

It probably didn't hurt that he was on his third *rakiya*. His face felt warm and a bit funny, and he was cheering up by the minute.

The salad plates were replaced with shallow dishes of a thick, white soup, which turned out to be cold. The flagon disappeared - to the great relief of all the English diners - and was replaced with a few bottles of fizzy drinks. Charlie complained, but Viktor insisted that pumpkin juice simply did not match well with a Bulgarian meal.

"*Tarator*." Viktor identified the new dish before anyone could ask. "It's a cold soup made from yoghurt, cucumbers, pecans, and dill. Good to eat in hot weather, because it cools you down."

The weather had not yet been particularly warm, but the soup was excellent. Harry enjoyed the unusual combination of flavours, crunching on the bits of cucumbers and pecans in the creamy concoction.

He had only been able to take a few spoonfuls when Krum spoke to him directly.

"Tell me, Harry, what will you do next year?"

Harry laid down his spoon. "Auror Training, with Ron and Hermione," he responded with a nod toward his friends.

"What a relief!" exclaimed the elder wizard. "My teammates on the Bulgarian national Quidditch team were very worried that you might want to play professional Quidditch."

"Your teammates *should* worry," muttered Ron, audible to everyone at the table. "You're the only decent one on the side."

Harry raised an eyebrow to watch for Krum's reaction, but he and the other Weasleys only shrugged. Apparently this was not a new topic of discussion among the family. In fact, Harry remembered Charlie making a very similar comment just before the last World Cup final.

"Well," Krum answered Ron, "with you and Harry becoming Aurors, your older brothers running their joke shop, and your sister planning to be a Healer, we should be safe from England for a while."

"Don't forget Angelina," interjected Dean.

Krum merely scowled. Angelina Johnson, an excellent Chaser and former Gryffindor Quidditch captain who had finished Hogwarts two years previously, had already proven her skill as a member of the English national team. If she continued to play as well as she was, England was very unlikely to suffer another embarrassment such as the one that occurred against Transylvania three years ago. Bulgaria had plenty of reason to be nervous for next year's Cup.

"And Wood, playing for Scotland," added Ron. This touched off a heated debate over the relative importance of Keepers versus Chasers, Seekers versus Beaters, which lasted well into the next course.

Dean held his own, having learned a great deal about Quidditch in his years at Hogwarts, despite a childhood spent watching football and despite never having played the wizarding sport formally, himself. Hermione simply watched indulgently. Harry knew she really didn't care much about Quidditch, unless her friends were playing, but she was accustomed to sitting through long discussions of the sport. Wizards, all the Muggle-raised friends had found, were even more obsessive about Quidditch than Muggles were about football.

The food was so plentiful that even Ron's and Harry's endless appetites were sated. The English wizards and witches had the opportunity to taste *kashkeval pane*, a more-familiar type of cheese, prepared fried. The main dish was a meat-and-vegetable stew called *kavarma*, for everyone but

Ginny, who had turned vegetarian last year. Krum provided for his sister-in-law, as well, with *chushki burek*, fried peppers stuffed with eggs and cheese, which looked so good that everyone at the table had a taste.

Hermione didn't even have to remind the rest of the group to show their appreciation for the house-elves who had prepared the meal. Dobby and Winky were showered with so many compliments that they covered their eyes with their hands, bowing deeply in delighted embarrassment. Krum made a special point of declaring that the food was so authentically prepared that he felt as though he were back home in Plovdiv.

The house-elves smiled and shook their heads, refusing any sort of help as they cleared the dishes and brought the final course, a small dish of crème caramel for each person.

When everyone had finished the pudding, and the final plates had been whisked away, the conversation began to die down. Dean made a poor job of covering an enormous yawn, while Hermione blinked rapidly to keep her head from nodding.

Noticing the fatigue of their companions, Charlie and Viktor stood up from the table. They embraced Ginny and Hermione and shook hands with Ron and Dean.

Harry stepped up to bid them farewell, too, but a look from Charlie stopped him. Taking his cue, Harry lingered behind as his friends left the kitchen.

Krum produced three bottles of *Zagorka* from an unknown hiding place. Charlie looked at him askance but said nothing.

Harry knew enough to understand that it was not Butterbeer that was contained in those bottles. He had never tried Muggle beer, but felt that he was being treated as an adult for one of the first times in his life and did not want to botch it up. He sipped from the bottle, found he liked it more than he expected, and swallowed another mouthful.

Charlie looked at him askance, but said nothing.

"So Harry," began Krum, "you seem to be faring pretty well."

Harry had no doubt that Charlie would have told his boyfriend about the content of Harry's letters. Here was his confirmation.

"Pretty well, yeah," he responded. "Everyone here tonight knew. They've been great."

"How's Ron?" asked Charlie.

Harry didn't want to spoil his mood by thinking about his row with his best mate, so he covered his silence by taking another swig of beer. When he lowered the bottle, he grinned mischievously.

"Worried about that twenty Galleons he owes you," he replied.

"Twenty Galleons?" asked the Weasley with mock innocence. "I don't remember making any wager for twenty Galleons. I'm *quite* sure I said twenty *Knuts*. Ron must have misunderstood."

Harry's grin widened. The Weasleys were sometimes merciless with each other, but they knew precisely when to take pity, as well.

"Ron will be happy to hear that."

All three shared a chuckle.

"But seriously," continued Charlie, "what about Ron's attitude toward Draco?"

Harry shot his eyes toward Krum as he took another swig. So much for keeping his pleasant mood - Charlie was going to force him to think about Ron. He supposed he should be grateful for the help.

He hadn't really wanted the *entire* contents of his letters to be common knowledge, of course. But then, Charlie and Viktor would probably already be married if it were legal in any of the three countries they frequented. Harry supposed that telling one of them *anything* was as good as telling the other, and would be treated with equal confidentiality.

Viktor read his mind. "Don't worry, Harry. I kept Charlie's secret for a year and half, I can keep yours as long as you need."

"A year and a half?" Harry did a little mental arithmetic. "So you two already knew about each other at the Triwizard Tournament?"

"A day or two afterwards, actually," corrected Charlie.

"Yes, I was still a bit confused at that point," admitted Viktor. "Hermione's such a wonderful girl, and I wanted very much to be in love with her, so I tried to convince myself that I was. I even invited her to visit me in Plovdiv during the summer, as she probably told you. I had noticed Charlie, of course, but I was scared of my own feelings. And I was afraid of what my family might say if they knew I fancied a wizard, so I thought I could fix it all by falling for a nice girl like Hermione, instead."

Charlie looked at him warmly, as if this were a long-familiar topic.

"Plus," continued the Bulgarian, "she has such beautiful breasts."

Harry almost spat out his beer. Charlie choked on his laughter.

"Now, hang on!" sputtered Harry. "That's not ... you're not supposed to ..."

Viktor raised an eyebrow at him, smirking dangerously. "I'm not supposed to *what*, Harry?"

Harry gaped at him. Wasn't it obvious what he meant? "I mean, you're *gay* -"

The couple looked at him incredulously before bursting out in unison laughter.

"Harry, you really don't know many gay wizards, do you?" asked Viktor fondly.

Harry shook his head.

"See the thing is," Charlie intervened, "some gay men, like Viktor, think they're missing something by never getting very close to a pair of breasts."

"While others, like Charlie," Viktor picked up the thread, "absolutely don't see the point of having extra fat on one's chest, and can do perfectly fine without."

Harry gaped a moment longer, before his mouth reorganised itself into a broad smile. He took another pull on his beer, watching Charlie and Viktor roll their eyes affectionately at each other.

"Oh," commented Harry after a moment's thought. "I think I must be in the first group. I was wondering why I still can't keep my eyes off Ginny's -"

"Hey!" Charlie punched him playfully on the arm, almost making Harry spill. "That's my sister!"

"Cheers," replied Harry with an impish grin, raising his bottle at him.

"She *does* have a lovely set," added Viktor, earning himself an affectionate elbow in the ribs.

Charlie mock-glared at his companions for a moment, then drew himself up so he could look down his nose at both of them in turn.

"Well, it all worked out for the best, then, didn't it? My little brother got to have his one true love, my sister found a nicer boy than *either* of you two, and I got Viktor."

The couple leaned their foreheads together for a moment, interlacing their fingers on the tabletop. Harry didn't bother trying to look away. He was fascinated to see how happy and *right* a gay couple could be together. It gave him hope.

Charlie turned to Harry. "We met at the First Task, actually, but it took me until the end of the year to have the guts to approach Viktor."

"Lucky that awful Rita Skeeter woman had disappeared by then!" added Viktor. "What a nightmare that would have been!"

"Yes," agreed Charlie. "With one thing and another, it was quite some time before we were ready to come out to our families."

Harry noticed that Charlie avoided any mention of the Order, Sirius or Voldemort, for which he was extremely grateful.

Harry thought now about his own predicament. "So, how did you finally talk to Viktor?" he asked Charlie. "I mean, where did you find the courage?"

Both Charlie and Viktor chuckled.

"I don't think 'courage' is the word," explained Charlie. "I knew I would never see Viktor again otherwise, so even if I totally humiliated myself by asking him out, there really wasn't any risk."

"But you shouldn't wait that long," admonished Krum. "You and Draco still have a month until school ends. You should enjoy that time together."

A cold feeling of panic gripped Harry at the thought of actually asking Draco to move their friendship to another level, even after the emotional intimacy they'd shared the night before.

"But how can I be sure of what he wants?" he protested.

"He already kissed you, didn't he?" reminded Charlie.

"Yes, but he claims he was under a hex."

Krum scoffed. "The only *hex* he was under was a little thing called *hormones*. He's only having trouble believing he could actually be attracted to someone he's used to seeing as an enemy."

Harry blushed a very deep shade of red at the thought of Draco being attracted to him, especially on a hormonal level. He hoped it was true, of course. In fact, he was rather excited at the idea. He wasn't used to discussing the topic out loud with anyone, however. He hadn't even mentioned it to Hermione since that first day by the Lake.

"And anyway," added Charlie, "statistics are in your favor."

Viktor snorted into his beer, prompting both men to laugh harder. Charlie threw an arm around his lover's shoulders as they shared the moment.

Harry sat looking perplexed, hoping one of them would take pity and explain the joke.

Krum noticed Harry's expression first.

"Traditionally," he clarified, "there is sort of an expectation about Seekers."

Harry's eyes flew wide. He felt his cheeks growing warm again. Indeed, all three wizards in the room, plus Draco Malfoy, were all current or former Seekers. But wait -

"Um, Cho Chang certainly struck me as being very straight," commented Harry, wondering whether he would have said that out loud before the *Zagorka*.

"*Male* Seekers, he means," amended Charlie.

Another thought hit Harry. "So Cedric -?"

Viktor and Charlie looked at each other uncomfortably, realising this was delicate territory for the younger wizard.

"Yes, I think so," answered Viktor simply, "but I really was never sure."

Harry nodded, and drank some more beer to get the prickle out of his eyes. A melancholy quiet settled around the table.

Harry began to feel wretched. And feeling wretched reminded him of Charlie's earlier question.

"Things are *bad* between Ron and me, Charlie," he said quietly.

The couple looked at him with great understanding and did not interrupt.

"I mean," Harry continued, "we were alright tonight, and last night when they told me, like we were on our best behaviour for the occasion or something. But Ron *hates* Draco. And he won't listen. I can't even imagine how he'd react if I told him I wanted to be more than Draco's friend."

Harry tipped his bottle up to his mouth again. His nose and lips felt a bit fuzzy, but that was fine. It made the words easier to say.

"Ron and I never hang around together anymore. He was so understanding when I came out to him, but now he won't even look at me most of the time. Hermione and Ginny are trying not to get stuck in-between, but Hermione is engaged to Ron now, and Ginny's his sister, of course. When I'm not studying with Draco, maybe I play cards with Dean and Seamus and Neville, but mostly I'm alone."

The bottle was almost empty. Harry swirled the suds at the bottom slowly, watching them foam and fizzle.

"I *never* see Ron," he added finally. "And I *miss* him."

Harry's eyes traced the grain of the table in front of him. He had almost never had such an uninterrupted opportunity to express his feelings. He had almost never said so much about his own thoughts at one time.

It was very, very scary.

He wanted very much to know what his older friends thought of his speech, but couldn't bring himself to meet their eyes. He continued to memorise the shape of the lines in the oak, using one idle finger to drag the condensation from his bottle into the grooves in the wood.

"Yeah, Harry," said Charlie softly. "I know."

A heavy, gentle hand landed on Harry's shoulder and stayed there. He looked up to meet two perfectly understanding gazes.

Charlie and Viktor hadn't been through *everything* Harry had been through, but they had still experienced enough to empathise. He could see it in their eyes.

For possibly the first time in his life, Harry was hearing someone say 'I know how you feel,' and he *believed* it.

"I should go," murmured Viktor. "There are a few other friends I'd like to visit while we're here."

For the split second that Viktor's eyes met Charlie's, Harry saw what it was for two men to love one another. For that instant, Harry knew that no one existed for those two except each other. For that instant, Harry believed that he would feel that way, someday.

"*Znaesh li, che te obicham?*" purred Viktor.

Charlie smiled at him, and leaned in to give him a soft, slightly lingering kiss.

"*Da, znaya,*" he murmured back, "*i az sushto te obicham.*"

Krum placed a hand on Charlie's cheek as he stood, then collected the empty beer bottles, which were whisked away by an obliging house elf. Harry, reminded of what he'd been drinking, moved his head from side to side experimentally. His brain seemed to lag behind the motion of his skull, and his tongue and earlobes were numb.

He reflected that he'd never noticed sensation *or* lack thereof in his earlobes before. This could be a problem. He hoped he would not meet Snape or McGonagall on his way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Or Draco. Harry shuddered at the humiliation he could cause himself by running into his unwilling love-interest when his inhibitions were down.

With a smile and a wave, Krum departed, leaving Charlie and Harry alone.

"I didn't know you spoke Bulgarian," commented Harry after a brief silence.

Charlie nodded. "Viktor has taught me a little."

"You've improved his English, as well."

"Yeah."

Harry observed the contented grin on Charlie's face.

"You're really happy, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," confirmed Charlie, his lips still quirked upwards at the corners.

Harry sighed, without bitterness. "You're lucky."

"That I am," answered Charlie with a nod.

Both wizards absorbed the exchange in silence. The fire flickered in the hearth. An army of house-elves bustled around the far end of the kitchen, finishing the last of the washing-up after the dinner in the Great Hall that the group had all missed.

Harry sensed Charlie looking at him steadily, more steadily than Harry could manage in his current state.

"You'll get there, Harry."

Harry blinked. "Where?"

Charlie's eyes flicked toward the exit whence Viktor had disappeared. "Happiness," he answered simply.

"You mean a boyfriend?" asked Harry muzzily. His brain was struggling to catch up with what he was sure would be a profound revelation, if he could only comprehend it through the fog.

Charlie's teeth were comfortingly crooked when he grinned.

"You might have. I hope you have one, for a while at least, to see how you like it. But there are a lot of ways to be happy, Harry."

"Even if I'm alone?"

Charlie grunted out a laugh. His left hand gestured vaguely around the table which had recently been surrounded by Harry's friends. "Alone?"

Harry shrugged, concentrating on watching the puddle of condensation in front of him as he poked it with his fingertips.

"You'll never be *alone*, Harry. And you'll find your own type of happiness. I'm sure of it."

Harry looked up. The expression of certainty in Charlie's eyes was tempting.

"I want to believe that," he answered quietly.

Charlie's fingers touched his wrist bone lightly. "You *will*," he emphasised, never releasing Harry's gaze.

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat.

"What about Remus and Sirius? They finally got their chance, when Sirius escaped Azkaban, and then he got killed." Harry was staring at the table again. He *hated* feeling this way.

He could feel Charlie's eyes on him.

"How did you know about them?" he asked finally.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't. Or, I mean I suppose I always did. I realised it because of something I dreamed."

"Right," said Charlie simply, looking at Harry without suspicion or accusation, but simply watching him for the next response.

"I miss Remus, Charlie," Harry said quietly. "I don't know how I could ever apologise, but I don't want him to be angry with me anymore."

Charlie's silence changed in quality, Harry sensed, from calm observation to speechless surprise.

When Harry glanced up, it was to find confusion in Charlie's eyes. For a long moment, Charlie simply stared at Harry without seeming to summon any response at all.

Finally, he said, "Harry, why would you think Remus is angry with you?"

Harry blinked. "He never wrote back."

Realisation dawned on Charlie's features, and he covered his eyes with one hand, looking very tired. Harry's eyes starting to sting, and he looked away, even as Charlie began talking.

"I saw Remus a few months ago. The Healing Centre where he's been staying since the war, it's really remote and they don't allow many visitors, but Mum had asked me to try, so I did.

"Remus is doing very well. He's managed to control his wolf side during the full moon, without having to take Wolfsbane, although he still changes. They think they might be about to make a breakthrough that would allow him and the other patients to avoid changing completely, at least for one moon cycle. Remus looks better than I've ever seen him, too."

Charlie took a deep breath. "He's still sad, though, mostly about you."

Harry's eyes lifted automatically at those words. The lump in his throat didn't allow him to speak, but Charlie must have seen the question in his eyes.

"He's sad because he feels he was never there for you, Harry," explained Charlie. "He feels guilty that he couldn't be around when you were growing up, because Dumbledore forbid him to try to contact you, and the Dursleys would've had a fit, anyway. He wishes now that he'd tried, somehow, sent you letters by Muggle post or *something*. He feels guilty that he left Hogwarts, when you'd just got used to having him around. He feels guilty that he and Sirius never told you about their relationship, and that he *was* angry, for a while, right after Sirius died."

Harry tried to look away at this, but Charlie's hand on his arm drew him back.

"The fact is, Harry, and you'll find this out now that you're an adult yourself: sometimes grown-ups fall out of touch with one another because they simply don't know what to say. That's what's happened with Remus: there are so many things he wishes he'd done differently for you, he doesn't know how to begin to tell you. So he hasn't written at all."

Harry hunched his shoulders, feeling miserable. "So that's it, then?" he asked in a thick voice. "I'll never see him again?"

Charlie's hand lifted and resettled on Harry's shoulder. All the angry little voices in Harry's head got quieter when the soft weight of that hand leaned on him. It made everything a little better.

"Give him time," said Charlie quietly. "He'll be back, and he'll be glad to know you've missed him."

Harry blinked quickly and swiped at his right eye with his palm, averting his eyes from Charlie.

"And what's going to happen with Ron?" he asked in a very small voice.

Harry held his breath, not daring to look at Charlie for fear of what he might see on his face. He desperately needed to hear encouraging words.

Charlie let his breath out in a sigh. "I'll deal with Ron."

"Wait, Charlie, I didn't -"

"Let me, Harry." He fixed him with a steady gaze. "It's why I came here."

Harry looked at Charlie incredulously.

Charlie didn't wait for him to articulate his confusion. "I'm glad I was here to celebrate Ron's engagement with him, but did you think we'd planned this trip on only a few hours' notice?"

Harry could only shrug. He hadn't thought through the logistics of the couple's voyage. He'd forgotten that most people chose not to Apparate over distances that great. Charlie and Viktor must have flown, or had to wait to arrange for a Portkey in order to travel all the way across Europe.

Charlie spoke again. "We decided to come here after reading your last letter. It sounded as though you were going to need some help."

Harry looked away, shoulders slumping. So much for being treated like an adult.

"I could've handled him myself," he muttered miserably.

Charlie's voice was quiet and even. "Harry, you've been around Weasleys for only seven years. Not even. I've been around them for twenty-five. Trust me when I say you needed help."

Harry forced himself to meet Charlie's gaze. "But what can you possibly do?"

"Ron's my little brother, Harry," replied Charlie with a sigh. "I can't work miracles, but I know where to start."

Harry sighed defeatedly. "Well, that's more than I know at this point."

Charlie rose, patting Harry on the shoulder again. Harry closed his eyes for a moment, feeling safe again at the briefly lingering weight. It was good to have Charlie on his side.

"Leave him to me. And write again, anytime you need advice."

Harry stood up as well.

"Thanks, Charlie." He managed a smile.

"I mean it, Harry. It means a lot to me that you came to me for advice."

When they got back up to the Entrance Hall, Charlie gave Harry a quick, hard hug before allowing him to start up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry had climbed only two or three steps before Charlie's voice made him turn around again.

"If you'll accept one more bit of advice," he offered with a wry half-smile, "you'll want to listen to Ron in the morning. He'll sort you out."

Harry would have liked to ask Charlie what he meant by that, but his brain was so jumbled that his mouth wouldn't do more than smile vaguely in farewell.

Author notes:

As always, you can find periodic progress reports, cookies, other fics and general wackiness on my [LiveJournal](#), and all of my fics are archived both here on FA and on [my website](#).

*

What little I know of the language and cuisine of Bulgaria is thanks to many of the twenty-five Bulgarian colleagues I had when I worked in Mexico. I must also give credit to [the Bulgarian restaurant at Broadway and Canal in Manhattan](#), where I sampled *Zagorka* and *kashkeval pane*. Supplementary information about the food came from [BulgarianTourism.com](#).

The two brief conversations in Bulgarian translate roughly as follows:

Hermione: Hi, Viktor, how are you?

Krum: Very well, Hermione. And you?

Charlie [in English]: Fine, she's fine. Hermione, I didn't know you spoke Bulgarian!

Hermione: Just a little.

*

Viktor: Do you know that I love you?

Charlie: Yes, I know. And I love you, too.

*

Also, Viktor at one point calls Charlie '*kote*,' which literally translates as 'kitty,' but is a very common pet name among Bulgarian couples. Roughly equivalent to 'honey' or 'dear' in English.

Finally, you may be wondering why Hermione calls Viktor "Viktorne" when she greets him. It's a hard-to-explain grammatical quirk of Bulgarian that has to do with the fact that the language once used declensions, as in Latin, German or (I think) Russian. Apparently it isn't entirely grammatically correct to call a Bulgarian man by his name without adding an ending or otherwise modifying it. At least, that's how my friends tried to explain it to me. *Blagodarya, Maina!*

Additional, heartfelt thanks to Minerva from Bulgaria, who read this story and offered some corrections to my Bulgarian. Blagodarya mnogo!

Chapter 9: Maturity

Harry wasn't sure which came first on Sunday morning: the stabbing pain in his eyes from the sunlight, the foul, fuzzy dryness of his mouth, or the surge of nausea in his gut. He rolled onto his side, facing into the shadows, and drew his knees up toward his chin, then groaned and stretched out again when that made the nausea worse. He couldn't decide whether to race for the toilet or stay in bed until Friday.

Ah. This must be a hangover.

As he hadn't ever really had much alcohol before, Harry been spared the experience until today. Now, the Whomping Willow had taken up residence inside his skull, and had left a couple of branches in his belly for good measure. He deeply regretted every refill of *rakiya*, every swallow of *Zagorka*.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time.

At first, Harry thought the sensation of tilting was another morning-after symptom. No matter how he adjusted his head, shoulders and hips, he couldn't shake the feeling that one side of his bed was lower than the other.

He braced himself for a return of the flat-spinning sensation he'd fought when trying to fall asleep the night before, but it never came. Finally, he started to wonder whether there might be another cause for his sense of imbalance. He split his eyelids open a millimeter to investigate the situation.

"Drink this," said Ron, who was sitting there, next to Harry's prone form. "It'll help."

Harry shifted into a half-upright position, still squinting woundedly. If Ron was playing games with him right now, Harry would repay him copiously in vomit.

Ron held the mug out toward Harry, nudging it into his fingers. "Hangover cure. Tastes horrible, but if you can keep it down, it'll sort you right out. The twins swear by it."

Harry raised an eyebrow. A wave of nausea hit him immediately, as his forehead erupted in agony. He closed his eyes in supplication and fell back onto the pillow, one hand covering his face and the other clenching his gut.

He'd never before imagined that it might be possible to feel pain in an eyebrow.

After a moment's rest, Harry raised himself back up on his elbow and peered at his best mate, who waited with increasing impatience. The cup in his hand was smoking pungently, intensifying Harry's queasy misgivings. Anything involving the twins had to be met with suspicion by anyone with half a brain; years of acquaintance had taught him that.

Harry doubted that as much as half of his brain was functioning at the moment, but considered that beside the point.

"Drink it, Harry."

Harry scowled, but took the mug and examined its contents. The lumpy, grey concoction gave off a foul odor. Harry wrinkled his nose and pushed the potion away from his face.

"I know, it's awful, but I promise it works. *Trust* me, Harry."

Harry looked up, finally able to focus on Ron's eyes. At the same moment, he heard an echo of Charlie's voice from the night before, saying, 'You'll want to listen to Ron in the morning. He'll sort you out.' The memory was blurry enough to have been a dream, but his roiling gut told him to believe it.

Anyway, this was Ron. Even on the rare occasions they had rowed, Ron had never done anything deliberate to hurt Harry.

As small a thing as it seemed, if Ron had asked Harry to trust him, Harry was going to do so.

He lifted the mug to his lips and took a long drink.

The liquid tasted worse than it smelled, but the texture was the most horrible part: viscous, slimy, thick and chewy. Harry clenched his jaws shut against his gag reflex, slapping both hands over his mouth. He squinched his eyes closed tightly and curled into a ball, lying on his side. He was dimly aware that Ron was awkwardly patting circles on his back, as if to help the potion stay down.

A second passed, and then another. The gag reflex began to relax.

The potion stayed down. Barely.

After a few more seconds, the Whomping Willow melted into mist. The buzzing in Harry's ears faded away, and his stomach calmed itself. He opened his eyes experimentally to see the sun flowing in through the parted curtains, but the brightness was now more cheerful than painful. The air from the open window smelled sweet and clean, and Ron looked thoroughly relieved.

"Thanks," Harry told him, smiling sheepishly.

"Anytime, mate," replied Ron.

The best thing about this morning was that Ron was here, and he was smiling. Harry didn't care if his amusement came at Harry's own expense. He only cared that life was getting back to normal.

"Think it'll be just the one time, thanks," said Harry with a penitent duck of his head. "No more *rakiya* for me."

"You're such a lightweight."

"Only because I don't have your brothers."

Ron's expression darkened at Harry's joke, derailing Harry's hopes of an easy resolution. He didn't understand what his offence had been, this time, but it didn't take long to find out.

"Been talking to Charlie a lot, have you?"

"Not really a *lot*, no," responded Harry carefully. "I've only written him a couple of letters, you know, for advice and stuff. I figured he would know how I'm feeling. About being gay, I mean."

Ron continued to glare.

"You didn't have to get my big brother to take your side for you," he muttered moodily. "You could have talked to me yourself."

"I *didn't*, Ron. I never meant for him to get into this. I asked him for some advice, when you got so angry about Draco and me being friends, but -"

"Will you *stop calling him that??*"

Harry started at Ron's outburst. Seamus gave an abrupt snort in his sleep, and rolled over.

"Who? Call who what?" asked Harry in confusion, although he had a suspicion he already knew the answer.

"You know *who*," snarled Ron. "That self-absorbed, stuck-up, over-privileged, spoiled *git*, that's who!"

Harry sat up a little straighter, pulling away from his friend. When was Ron going to accept Harry's friendship with Draco? When was he going to stop trying to come between them?

"Draco and I are *friends*, Ron," Harry said quietly. "I would really like it if you would understand that."

Ron's eyes went five shades darker in the shadows of the quiet dormitory. "You already have plenty of *real* friends, Harry. You don't need Malfoy, whatever he might be doing to try to convince you otherwise."

"What -?"

"He's blackmailing you or something, isn't he, Harry?" insisted Ron. "Look, whatever it is, you don't need him. I can help."

Harry let out a long, defeated sigh. Ron's accusations were infuriating, but Harry was pretty sure he knew what was really going through his head.

"So that's it, then. You're just going to be jealous of Draco, of me being friends with him. You can't trust me enough to believe that *you're* my best mate, and no other friendship could ever be more important!" Harry's words were tender, but his tone was sharp.

"*Jealous?* Of that -" Ron broke off, apparently having run out of colourful insults for the moment - "of *Malfoy?*" The blue eyes were almost black now; the deep voice kept its hard edge. "I'm not *jealous* of anyone, Harry. I'm only trying to watch out for you, which is something you seem incapable of doing for yourself, lately."

"Merlin's beard, Ron!" Harry snapped, understanding too well the half-truth of his friend's protest. "When was the last time Draco gave you any trouble at all? When, since last summer, has he even spoken to you? He's not the privileged rich kid anymore, as you should know. It's common knowledge that he lost his parents, and the Ministry seized all of his inheritance. He almost lost his *life* to avoid joining the Death Eaters, too. He's just an orphan now, like me."

Harry braced himself for the cutting response he expected, but Ron was struck silent.

For a long moment, the two boys stared at each other with wide eyes, neither moving nor speaking. Harry almost dared to believe that he had convinced Ron at last.

Finally, Ron spoke. "What do you mean, about Malfoy almost losing his life?"

Harry's heart dropped into his intestines. That was Draco's secret, told to Harry in confidence. Draco had *trusted* Harry with the story, and Harry had gone and blabbed about it to the person who arguably

hated Draco more than anyone. Worse yet, Harry hadn't even realised he'd said it, until he'd heard the words in Ron's voice.

He was going to have to be much more careful, if he was going to keep Draco's trust.

"Forget it," he replied, looking away. "It's nothing."

"Harry?"

"Leave it, Ron," he repeated forcefully, then pushed himself into a standing position on other side of the bed. The irrational part of his brain raged against Ron for getting Harry so worked up that he'd broken Draco's confidence. He needed to get away before he said anything else he'd regret.

"Harry, will you tell me what you meant?" Ron was almost pleading with him. Harry knew Ron hated the idea of Harry knowing a secret and not sharing it, but he had to keep this one to himself.

"I'm going to have a bath now. See you at breakfast."

Although the blue eyes burned into him all the way to the door, Harry refused to look back.

A distant clock was chiming the five o'clock bells. They'd been in the Potions lab since four, and Draco had barely spoken to him in the past hour.

Draco had arrived, essay in hand, ready to compare notes about their dreams. When Harry had feigned regret about having "accidentally" left his essay back in the Tower, Draco had closed his books brusquely and suggested they study potions from their their Healing unit, instead.

Harry suspected that Draco was feeling more slighted than he let on. He wished there were some way of explaining why it was impossible to share the details of his dream with Draco, of all people.

He wished there were some way of reaching out and taking the chill away from the air between them.

It had been a bad day, all around. Harry and Ron hadn't spoken another word to each other since the scene in the dormitory that morning. Harry's nerves felt jagged as broken glass over that conflict, and he needed everything to be alright with at least *one* of his friends.

Harry watched Draco finish the sentence he was writing. He willed him to look up, to make some sort of contact.

Draco nibbled on the end of his quill for a moment, then began a new paragraph. His eyes remained fixed to the page.

That bubbling anger welled inside Harry's gut again. He was so unimaginably *tired* of Draco always having the upper hand. He wanted, if only for one moment, to feel as though Draco wanted more from him than he wanted from Draco.

He wanted Draco to admit to what had happened between them, and to thinking and dreaming and hoping about it throughout the weeks since it had happened, the same way Harry had been doing.

And he wanted, very much, for Draco to look at him.

Draco paused in his writing to read over his last few lines. The tip of his quill feathered lightly over his parted lips.

Harry's breath went shallow, despite himself.

"I'm sorry I left you in the library yesterday," blurted Harry suddenly. He hated himself for his weakness, but couldn't keep from babbling on, "I had no idea you were going to come looking for me. And then it turned out -"

"- that Krum and one of the other Weasleys were visiting, I know," finished Draco, eyes still scanning the parchment.

He lay down his quill and looked up, at long last. When he did, he registered Harry's surprise.

Draco explained, "I got to be friends with Krum when he was here for the Tournament, you know. Nothing like Granger was, of course, but we've kept in touch."

Harry blinked. He remembered that the Durmstrang students had always sat with the Slytherins during meals that year, but had never imagined that any lasting friendships had been forged. At the time, of course, he'd assumed that Malfoy had only been latching onto celebrity to feel important. It hadn't occurred to him that he and Krum might actually get along.

Krum had said he'd been going to visit some other people before leaving last night. Harry had assumed he had meant members of the staff or something. To be honest, Harry hadn't given it the slightest thought.

"Did he come see you, then? Last night?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded. "He brought me some of that horrid Bulgarian moonshine, too. Lucky I knew to drink it slowly."

Harry shuddered at the memory of his waking that morning. "I'll know that, too, next time."

Draco smirked at him, but gently. "Ah, I see. Has Potter the Pure had his first hangover?"

"Don't call me that. And yes."

Despite himself, Harry let a sparkle of amusement jump to his eyes.

It wasn't reflected in Draco's. He seemed to have other thoughts on his mind.

"I still don't see why you waste your time with that family," Draco muttered.

Harry closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. The last thing he wanted was a fight.

The response was too deeply ingrained, though. He couldn't let Draco get away with making dismissive comments about the Weasleys; he wouldn't do it when he was eleven, and he *couldn't* do it now.

"That family' is *my* family, Draco. They've always taken care of me, unlike my blood relatives did. I never knew what a family *was* until I met the Weasleys."

Draco looked unimpressed. "They're not good enough for you, Harry. None of them are."

Harry shook his head. "That's where you're wrong, Draco. They *love* me. And I love them. I understand you might never have had a chance to know how that feels, but -"

A dangerous silence cut Harry's words short, more abruptly than any shout. Draco wore the face he had when Hermione had slapped him so many years ago.

"Why, you condescending little *shit*."

Harry's mouth snapped closed with an audible *click*. In the blink of an eye, his friend Draco had vanished. In its place had returned the proud, self-important Malfoy he'd always known.

"Hey, Draco, look -"

"Don't you 'Hey, Draco' me!" he snapped, icy-faced. "So, you think I never had a real family, is that it? 'Poor little orphaned son of Death Eaters, Mum and Dad must never have cared for him.' That's what you think, isn't it? Is that why you wanted to be friends, Potter? Because you think we have some demented, deprived childhood experience in common?"

"Look, I -"

"I was *loved*, alright?"

Draco's silver eyes had turned to liquid fire. The animosity there made Harry's joints freeze.

"Forget what you think you know about my father," hissed Draco. "My father was the best man in the world to me. I was adored and cherished and given everything any normal child wants: birthday parties and Quidditch games and every toy you can imagine. My father taught me how to fly and my mother kissed my scraped knees when I fell off my first broom, and I was *happy*, most of the time."

"Draco -"

"And now *you* come along, assuming that I grew up in the shadows of some marble mausoleum, seen and not heard, raised by nannies and left up on a shelf like an expensive treasure?"

"Draco, I -"

But Draco pushed back roughly from the desk, upsetting his chair.

"*Fuck you, Potter, I don't need your pity.*"

Harry sat, speechless. He'd never heard Draco swear before, even when he'd lost at Quidditch.

A heavy, dull ache settled just behind Harry's throat. Draco's guess at his assumptions had been entirely too close for comfort. Worse yet, he'd never questioned those assumptions at all, but had thought he was being a good friend.

Harry's head began to throb, too. None of what Draco was saying meshed with what Harry knew of Lucius. It didn't make sense.

As he thought about it, though, Harry conceded that Lucius could have been a very different man around his son. It was silly to have assumed that the conniving, back-stabbing politician or the snivelling Death Eater behind the mask was the man whom Draco had admired and worked so hard to please. Harry really had no way of knowing what sort of father Lucius had been.

He looked up to meet Draco's eyes, which were still somehow both smouldering and icy. While it was perversely exciting to see Draco riled up for a change, Harry couldn't stand to see the anger there. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "You're right, I *did* have those assumptions. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Draco softened slightly. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Harry watched his lips, wishing for the thousandth time that he could kiss them again. Instead, he'd fallen once more into a position of pleading for Draco's favour.

Before Harry's bitterness could well up again, Draco's lips parted to speak.

"Do you know why I hated you, Harry?"

Harry's eyes snapped up at hearing his first name again. He'd always thought he knew the answer to this question, but maybe *all* of his assumptions had been wrong. He shook his head fractionally.

"First Year, well, I only hated you because you were more popular than I was and got more attention than I did and got on your House Team and won the House Cup and because you hated me. But that's not important."

Some unimportant protest or comment died on Harry's tongue when Draco lightly moistened his own lips and continued.

"But after First Year, after everyone found out that Voldemort wasn't really dead, my father started to change. He'd been so happy and unburdened since I was a baby, thinking you'd defeated the Dark Lord, because although Father agreed with his ideals and the importance of Blood, he had never wanted to be the Dark Lord's slave. For many years, he'd thought he'd been freed.

"That was why I'd wanted to be your friend, by the way. I saw you as something of a personal hero, even though I sensed on some level that I shouldn't be expressing that view out loud with my parents. They were free, but their side had lost and Mother's sister was in Azkaban, so it was a touchy subject. But I knew what you had done for my family, and I admired you for it. And hated you all the more when you didn't admire me back.

"Then Quirrell went after you, and we all found out the Dark Lord was still out there. Father was still Father, still the good man I'd known, for a few more years, but that summer was when he started to change. He started to become secretive, locking his study and forbidding me from touching things in certain areas of the Manor.

"You have to understand, Harry, that before that I'd always had whatever I wanted. Well, *that* part probably isn't a surprise to you." A sparkle of warmth touched his eyes as he smirked. "It was such a shock when I was suddenly being told 'no' at every turn, and I knew it had something to do with you and your mysterious one hundred seventy extra points at the end of First Year, and I wasn't allowed to argue with Father, so I started to get angry at you, instead.

"It finally got really bad the summer before Fourth Year. My parents got word that the Dark Lord was making his move to return, and they turned into these people I didn't know. The way *you* saw them.

"I hated you because you hadn't finished the job the first time. I hated you because every time my parents were angry and weird and not *my parents*, your name seemed to be on the tip of everyone's tongue. I hated you because if you'd only done what you were supposed to have done in the first place, I could have had my parents the way I wanted them forever."

Draco blinked a few times, and found Harry's eyes again. The chilly fire had melted to the usual pewter pools, and the angry creases in his brow fell smooth. He gave half a conceding shrug and half a bitter chuckle.

"Of course," he continued, "I had no idea what would happen once you *did* finish it. So I didn't know that by failing the first time, you'd allowed me to live the happy childhood that you yourself never got to have."

In these final words, Draco's tone became apologetic, almost tender. Harry felt winded. He'd never heard Draco give such personal information, and so *much* of it, and all at *once*. His head reeled as he tried to absorb it all.

It all sounded so almost-plausible, and Harry wanted to believe Draco had had a better life than most people assumed. It had broken his heart, hearing about Draco's ordeal with the Light Protection, and thinking Lucius had always treated Draco as secondary to his goals as a Death Eater. It really was a relief to know that Draco had been happy, once, even though he clearly wasn't anymore.

Yet through it all, Draco stood comfortably slouched against the wall, without a trace of tension in his stance. He was as completely undisturbed and unflappable as ever, which some part of Harry knew was a lie, because he'd just heard Draco swear, but at the same time, a bigger part of his brain was still angry and jealous and wanted to see Draco suffer a little.

Before he'd really understood this desire, this urge to see Draco *suffer*, Harry's heard his voice take the situation away from the friendly context they'd created.

"If he was still good during Second Year, then why did he give Riddle's diary to Ginny?"

Draco's eyes grew dark, tightening at the corners. The edges of his mouth pinched together and curved downward.

"What diary?" A foreboding vulnerability crept into the proud voice.

Harry's breath stopped in his chest. He knew he'd found a chink in the shining armour of Lucius-the-father. He knew he'd found a sure way to cut Draco to the core. The logical part of his brain surged to the fore: Draco was his friend, whatever else they might ever have been, and he really didn't want to hurt him. He needed to stop before he shattered the image.

"Nothing, never mind."

"Harry, what are you on about?"

Harry refused to meet Draco's searching gaze.

"Harry, my father never had Tom Riddle's diary. He told me it had ended up in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, and Weasley had accidentally brought it home one day."

"And you believed that?" shot Harry back angrily, before he remembered he had been trying to drop the subject.

Draco had his sore subjects; Harry had his own. He had already discovered that he couldn't let Draco get away with saying anything to denigrate the Weasleys. He *couldn't*.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked Draco simply. "My father said it was the truth."

Harry narrowed his eyes, but repeated to himself that he didn't really want to hurt Draco, after all. He tried to force his features into a neutral expression. No matter how hard he tried to hide his doubt, though, Harry felt the grey eyes still fixed on his face.

"What aren't you telling me, Harry?"

Harry clamped his jaw closed, but the eyes wouldn't let him be. He was powerless against them.

Silently wishing he were stronger even as he inhaled, Harry met Draco's gaze and spoke. "Remember the day your father and Mr. Weasley got in that fight? At Flourish and Blotts?"

Draco nodded, eyes narrowed.

"When we all met up that day, your father slipped the diary into Ginny's cauldron with her other school things."

"You saw him do it?"

"No." Harry shook his head. He really wished he'd never mentioned it.

"Then what gives you the right to accuse an innocent man?"

An 'innocent' man?!? Harry sighed. He wanted to say something to make this whole conversation go away, but he wasn't physically capable of pretending to agree that Lucius Malfoy was innocent, especially in this case.

Now that he'd begun, he had to finish telling the truth as he knew it.

"Dobby told me. And when I accused your father in front of Dumbledore, he didn't deny it. He just said, 'Prove it,' and turned all white when Dumbledore warned him not to try anything like that again."

"You trusted the word of a house elf?" Draco's disbelief was palpable.

"I trusted my own eyes, Draco." Harry met Draco's gaze as steadily as he could, despite the pain he saw welling up there. "He did it, Draco. I'm sorry."

"No. You're lying." In Draco's voice was a simple request: *Make it not true. Leave me the memory of the father I knew.*

Harry dropped his eyes. He looked at the desk, his own fingers, the wall. He couldn't bring himself to look at Draco. He hated that he couldn't have kept his mouth shut in the first place, and all because Draco wouldn't acknowledge one stupid kiss in a dungeon alcove.

"Harry, tell me you were lying." The voice had begun to plead. It was a wrenching sound, in a voice that had never betrayed anything but pride.

It would have been so easy to say.

"I can't Draco. I'm sorry. Really."

A small, strangled noise emerged from Draco's throat, drawing Harry's attention to him at last. His normally fair face had gone a sickly white, and his relaxed posture had crumpled against the wall so he appeared to be barely holding himself up.

His eyes were full of hurt. They were staring at Harry, reflecting his own guilt back one thousand times over.

Harry stood on shaky legs and stepped quietly over to Draco's side. He ached to wrap his arms around him, but didn't trust that he would be allowed, so he simply leaned close next to him against the wall, feeling the warmth where their shoulders supported each other. Draco's body felt strangely stiff and unyielding, but Harry forced himself to stand his ground.

"She was just a little girl," Harry murmured gently. He said it as a sort of apology. Whatever his motivations, he really hadn't meant to destroy any of Draco's few happy memories. His guilt for his selfishness was strangling him. Had he really raised the subject only to get Draco's attention?

Underneath all his self-flagellation, though, Harry knew this was important. If Draco was really going to be in his life, as he hoped, Draco had to know the truth of what had happened that year. He had to start to see things from Harry's point of view.

"It was Ginny's *first* year at Hogwarts," he told him, "after hearing about the school her whole life. She had to spend it in fear, possessed by the Darkest wizard of our age, and committing unspeakable acts that she detested. It's a miracle she's faring so well these days, or even that she survived at all."

Draco swallowed and nodded. He looked so utterly defeated, Harry couldn't help but want to comfort him.

"Draco," spoke Harry even more softly than before. The other boy looked up at his gentle tone. "It's not your fault. Your father showed you what he wanted you to see."

Draco averted his eyes, his face ashen. "I cheered him on," he said flatly. "I saw what was happening, and I welcomed it."

Harry leaned a little more heavily into Draco's shoulder. He was relieved to feel the pressure against his own shoulder increase to match it. Daring to test the waters further, he leaned his head to the right until his cheek came to rest on Draco's hair.

Draco made a quiet little sound, like a sigh, and let his head be supported by Harry's face.

"Yeah," replied Harry at last, "you did."

For a few long moments, all Harry could hear was Draco's breathing and his own pounding heart.

"I taunted you after Diggory died, too."

Harry nodded very slightly, barely enough to let Draco feel it.

A few breaths later, Draco added, "My father was there, wasn't he?"

Harry couldn't shrug without dislodging the comforting weight of Draco's shoulder, so he simply said, "Yeah."

"Merlin, you must have hated me."

Again, after a heavy sigh of an exhalation, there was nothing to say but, "Yeah, I did."

Draco's breathing became a little shallower, a little less regular. Harry was sure he was working up to saying something more.

Finally, he said it: "So why in the world would you have decided to be my friend?"

Harry could feel the tension in Draco's body while he waited for a response. A tiny, perverse part of his mind came over all giddy at the idea that Draco might be afraid of losing Harry's friendship, after all.

Ignoring the traitorous lightening in his heart, Harry asked his friend, "Would you do those things now?"

Draco's head was moving slightly back and forth against Harry's cheek before he even finished speaking.

"No, Harry," he said emphatically. "I wouldn't. I never would."

Harry let a smile touch his face, now, and reached for Draco's left arm. With his other hand, he slipped his fingers into Draco's sleeve to run them lightly up and down the scar he knew to be there.

"I know, Draco," he said. "I know you wouldn't."

Monday morning broke harder than even a Monday usually could, and Harry had to drag himself to breakfast and on to Potions. Ron was still angry with Harry for reasons that were becoming less clear to anyone, which forced Hermione to spend breakfast straining to make conversation with both of them. Harry was too tired to keep up his end, and merely mumbled into his porridge.

The owl post brought a few Daily Prophets to the Gryffindors, another letter for Hermione about her aunt's celebration in July, and a letter for Dean. Seamus craned his neck to look at his best mate's parchment, but Dean pocketed it quickly, making a lame joke about wanting to maintain his air of mystery.

Seamus scowled and nicked one of his kippers.

Harry yawned widely, stretching his arms, and gathered his books. He smiled sleepily at Hermione, and started the slow walk toward the Potions classroom.

As if Monday morning weren't bad enough, why did it have to start with Snape?

In an attempt to delay the inevitable, Harry stopped off at the toilet next to the stairs to the dungeons. There was no reason he needed to get to Potions any earlier than the moment the lesson began.

When he finally resigned himself that he couldn't waste any more time, Harry headed down the stairs and turned along the corridor toward the classroom. As he approached the room, it was to the sound of raised voices. Sensing trouble, Harry ducked a little outside the doorway to observe the scene without being noticed.

Trouble was clearly happening.

Ron and Draco were facing off in the back of the room, near Ron's desk. Hermione stood at Ron's side, with Dean, Parvati, Zacharias Smith, and Ernie MacMillan behind them. The other Slytherins watched with narrowed eyes from the far side of the classroom. Draco stood alone.

"What do you mean, 'Good morning'?" snarled Ron.

Harry recognised the tone Draco's voice got when he was trying very hard to hold it steady. "It means it's morning, and I wish you a good one," he replied evenly.

A moment of stunned silence met this pronouncement.

"What are you on about, Malfoy?" burst Ron's voice, rising in pitch as he became more agitated.

"Look, Weasley. You're Harry's friend, I'm Harry's friend. I thought maybe we could try being civil to each other."

Harry peeked around the door to gauge Ron's reaction to this ill-advised olive branch.

Ron's face darkened from crimson to puce. "I'm Harry's friend, alright, and I'm going to keep showing it by keeping an eye on *you*. Don't think I'll start trusting you just because Harry does, Malfoy. I'll figure out your game -"

"What game, Weasley?" Draco's exasperation was starting to show. "What could I possibly have to gain by pretending to be his friend? It isn't exactly making my other friends happy." He gestured toward the scowling crowd of Slytherins in the corner. "And it obviously isn't making *his* other friends happy, either."

He opened his hands toward Ron and Hermione, as if in offering, or supplication.

Hermione stepped forward. She spoke quietly, but with clear authority, as she asked, "Then don't you think it's better that you go?"

In the hallway, Harry let out a sigh of resignation. He'd hoped Hermione, at least, would be kinder to Draco.

He didn't want to admit that maybe that was the kindest she could be, given the circumstances.

Harry didn't know why Draco was doing what he was doing, and he didn't know whether to thank him or thump him for trying. All he wanted was peace.

As Harry stepped into the room, everyone there froze. This had been an uncomfortably common experience in previous years, but hadn't happened since the first month or so of school this year. Now that Voldemort was gone, once the initial rush of interest in the battle was over, most people left Harry alone.

Today, thanks to the very people he trusted most, Harry was thrust back into the spotlight.

Harry looked steadily at each of his friends in turn, then silently took his seat at the desk. He was simply too exhausted, and too frustrated with them all, to choose sides in this battle.

A few minutes later, Draco slipped a note onto Harry's side of the desk.

I'm sorry, it read. I thought I could help.

Harry exhaled sadly. *I know*, he wrote, and pushed it back toward his friend.

The week dragged by. Harry felt more alone than he had since he had first met Hagrid, the way he had felt when he'd lived with the Dursleys and no one had ever been on his side and he'd had no reason to expect that anyone ever would.

But no, things were improving imperceptibly. He only needed a little patience to see it.

Tuesday afternoon in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Hermione had smiled at Draco. It had been cursory and fleeting, but unmistakable.

Wednesday in History of Magic, Draco had nodded on his way past the desk that Harry and Ron shared, and Ron's face had gone only one shade pinker in annoyance.

Thursday morning, Ron had laughed at a joke Harry had made at breakfast, and looked at Harry with the laughter still dancing in his eyes.

Thursday afternoon, the Dreaming Draught essays had been due in Potions. Harry had looked around as the students passed in their scrolls, and realised how few had actually completed the assignment. Hermione had, of course, and Goyle as well. Hannah and Millicent had done it, too, as had Zacharias, but not Dean.

Harry glanced at the parchment in Draco's hand, curious about the dreams which Draco had been so willing to share, and the revelations he'd found from taking the Draught. He'd had ample opportunity to find out, but fear had made him avoid the risk of letting Draco see his own essay. In any case, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know.

When all the other students had handed in their scrolls, Snape stared around the room, finally bringing his eyes to rest on Harry. Harry had straightened his back, glared at the professor, and after another moment's hesitation, had fumbled in his bookbag for the scroll he'd been carrying around for over a week. He had decided he didn't really care that what he had written was still rough and disorganised; he only cared to show Snape he was able to rise to any challenge put before him.

It seemed to take forever for Harry to find that scroll, but he had finally risen to hand in his essay. Snape's eyes had never left him until a full minute after he had returned to his seat and begun work on the day's potion.

Friday night found Harry and Draco studying in the Potions Lab again. The argument that had tainted their previous study session appeared to be forgotten, along with the unpleasantness of much of the past week.

The two boys sat quietly side-by-side as they revised the current chapter, taking notes from time to time. The more they relaxed in each other's presence, the more aware Harry became of Draco's every movement.

This was becoming a disturbing trend.

At each page turn, Draco would shift his weight slightly to his left - toward Harry - and let out a quiet sigh. Sometimes, the shift would carry him into the faintest hint of contact with Harry's shoulder before he readjusted himself.

When Draco was deep in thought, concentrating on a particularly difficult passage in the text, he would brush the feathery end of his quill slowly back and forth across his mouth. Sometimes he would part his lips slightly, letting the wisps glide along his upper lip, along the edge that was hidden when his mouth was closed, or against the very point of his tongue.

The more Harry watched, the more agitated he felt. The same anger that he'd felt all week returned in full force. How dare Draco take away the only decent kiss Harry had ever had, by refusing to take responsibility for his role? Didn't he know how much his denial *hurt* Harry? Didn't he know how crazy it was driving him?

Harry tried to rein in his feelings. The last time, he'd let himself get carried away into deliberately hurting Draco. He couldn't let that happen again.

Why couldn't Harry just *enjoy* being around Draco, without getting caught up in these thoughts and feelings? Only it was getting worse every time. Pretty soon, Harry was going to lose his patience entirely, and he didn't know how to keep it from happening.

Harry was so mired in his train of thought that he failed to notice how long he had been staring at Draco, until the grey eyes flicked up and met his.

"Something wrong, Harry?" Draco returned his focus to the reading.

"Huh? No."

"No?"

Yes. "No."

"Really?"

Yes. *No. Wait, what?*

"Harry?"

Harry could only stare at him, tongue-tied.

Draco looked up again. "Alright. What's wrong, then?"

He was so cool and collected, Harry wanted to throw himself on top of him and send them both crashing to the floor, just to crack Draco's cool veneer and get him *flustered*.

He couldn't believe he'd come this close to saying it. It wasn't too late. He could backpedal and the whole thing would be forgotten.

Except that Harry couldn't forget it.

Here goes.

"Look, are we ever going to talk about this?"

Draco regarded him cautiously, as one would a previously friendly dog who has suddenly begun to growl.

"Alright then," he responded lightly. "Which part of the text did you want to discuss?"

Harry felt his neck grow hot with frustration.

"Not the text, Draco. I mean *this*." His hand flailed between them in a pointing gesture. "You. Me. Us. The alcove in the corridor." He flung his arm wildly toward the door.

Draco stared at Harry for a long time, his face completely impassive. Finally, he lay down his quill and spoke.

"I've explained to you about that already, Harry. It was a spell. I had nothing to do with it."

"*Bollocks!*" shouted Harry, much more loudly than he'd intended.

Draco's eyes went a bit wider, but he kept his composure.

"Harry, I'm sorry if it meant something more to you. It was never my intention to lead you on. But you're going to have to understand that there *is* no 'this' to talk about. I'm happy we're friends. But that's all we are."

The words fell like hailstones on Harry's fragile skull. There was no way, after everything that Draco had shared of himself, after the way he'd caressed Harry's scar, after he'd even tried to make peace with Ron, that Harry was going to accept that the kiss had meant nothing to Draco.

Harry pressed his palms into the desk. He pushed his body away from Draco, seeking a safe distance even as his neck strained forward.

"Why are you so afraid?" he spurted. "What is so horrible about wanting something more with me that you can't admit it even to yourself?"

Draco was starting to look angry now. He stood up quickly, knocking over his stool, then whirled to face his accuser. "What makes you think I'm afraid? Maybe you're just not used to rejection, have you thought of that?"

"*Rejection*, what -?" Harry stared at Draco, dumbfounded at the extent of his denial. Draco's eyes challenged Harry to overrule him, and Harry was all too willing to comply.

Harry left his seat and strode quickly over to Draco, stopping only a breath away. He could see the panicked fluttering of the capillaries in his eyelids. Harry lifted his chin and stared down into Draco's hard, unyielding eyes.

"If I believed for *one second* that you weren't really attracted to me, then I would never have brought it up."

Draco tried to hide a nervous swallow. He didn't quite succeed in meeting Harry's stare. "Attracted to you? Are you mad? Harry, I like *girls*."

"Yeah? Prove it." Harry leaned even closer, in challenge. At this range, the grey eyes shattered into thousands of tiny prisms of silver. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me."

Harry didn't know what had come over him. He'd never been so brave, or so forceful. Against Dark wizards, sure, in *battle* he'd been courageous. But he'd never been able to stand up to anyone on a personal matter before. He was terrified at what might happen next, but also thrilled at the surge of power he felt from the fear in Draco's expression.

Fear?

Yes, that's what it was. Draco looked terrified.

His gaze dropped to the floor before Harry could examine it more closely.

The only sound was the blood rushing in Harry's ears; neither of them was breathing, and the classroom was too isolated to hear any sound at all from any other part of the castle.

"I *can't*, okay?" Harry barely heard the whisper, even standing so close.

"What?"

"I said I can't. I can't be with you." Draco's eyes flicked up into Harry's for the briefest of seconds. "I'm sorry, Harry, but it's impossible."

Harry's heart and lungs stopped. He wasn't sure whether this was an admission or an ultimate rejection. Unsure how to react, he stayed silent and still.

Draco focused on a point somewhere across the room. "I'm the last Malfoy, Harry. Do you understand that?"

Harry didn't know anything about the Malfoy side of Draco's family tree, having only seen the Black side. It didn't surprise him, though, to hear that Draco was the only remaining member of the line.

Draco glanced back for just long enough to see Harry nod absently.

"My family - we weren't always bad people. I don't just mean my parents. I mean, the entire Malfoy line, going back dozens of generations. We were always powerful and respected and Pureblooded, but we used to be *good*. I'm the last one left because my father and uncle and cousins were all Death Eaters. I'm the only one who can restore the line."

Harry started to breathe again, but only because he was about to pass out if he didn't. He still wasn't sure what Draco was trying to tell him, but he was starting to get an idea.

"I can't be with you, Harry, because I have to marry a witch and keep my family alive. Don't you see? It doesn't matter what *I* want."

Harry closed his eyes for a long moment, breathing deeply. He scarcely dared believe what Draco had just told him. Or had just implied, at least. Had he just admitted to being gay? To having feelings for Harry?

He knew he should stop. He had pushed Draco further than he was willing to go on his own, into admitting something he had probably never wanted to say out loud. But now that the moment was in his grasp, Harry had to know.

"Draco?" Harry could barely hear himself speak. "What are you saying?"

Draco continued to look at the floor. "You know what I'm saying, Harry. Even you can't be *that* thick."

Harry focused his gaze on Draco's averted eyes. He knew he didn't quite feel right, but still let himself say, "Let's pretend I am."

Draco made a funny noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. He was even nearer to Harry now. Harry could have counted the tiny points of silver stubble on Draco's upper lip.

"I really like you, Harry."

Harry could not think. A tingling sensation was spreading through him, paralysing his arms, legs and brain.

Draco was much too close. Harry could see every last one of his pale eyelashes ...

Harry returned to the common room half an hour later to find Hermione and Ron in the best seats by the fire; nearly everybody else had gone to bed. Hermione was writing a very long letter; she had already filled half a roll of parchment, which was dangling from the edge of the table. Ron was lying on the hearthrug, trying to finish his Transfiguration homework.

"Out late, aren't you?" he asked, as Harry sank into the armchair next to Hermione's.

Harry didn't answer. He was in a state of shock. Half of him wanted to tell Hermione what had just happened, and even Ron, despite the fit he would have, but the other half wanted to take the secret with him to the grave.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked, peering at him over the tip of her quill.

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug. In truth, he didn't know whether he was alright or not. "What's up?" said Ron, hoisting himself up on his elbow to get a clearer view of Harry. "What's happened?"

Harry didn't quite know how to set about telling them, and still wasn't sure whether he wanted to do. Just as he had decided not to say anything, Hermione took matters out of his hands.

"Is it Malfoy?" she asked carefully, glancing toward her fiancé. "Did something happen while you were studying together?"

Numbly surprised, although he didn't know why he should be, Harry nodded. Ron looked at him darkly, averting his eyes when Hermione shot him a warning glare.

"So - er - what was it that happened?" asked Ron in a voice that clearly failed to attain the desired degree of ease.

"He -" Harry began, rather hoarsely, knowing he must be mad to say anything in front of Ron; he cleared his throat and tried again. "He - er -"

Hermione's eyes suddenly went as wide as Ron's went narrow. She jumped up from her chair and grabbed Harry's hand.

"Harry, come with me. Now."

"Why?" both boys asked in chorus.

"Never mind. Only it's important."

"Alright, then," said Ron, starting to pack up his homework, but his progress was quelled by a sharp look from Hermione.

"No, Ron, you wait here. We'll only be a minute." Hermione was talking very quickly, and the pitch of her voice was climbing steadily. "Harry, come *on!*" She yanked at his hand, until he was obliged to follow her.

The Head Girl bedchamber was located on the girls' side of the dormitories, but had its own entrance so that any student could reach her in an emergency. It also made for convenient access for distressed friends who needed late-night advice.

No sooner had they crossed the threshold to her room, than Hermione rounded on him.

"Did you kiss again?" she demanded, both excited and stern.

Harry swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and decided to tell Hermione as much as he possibly could.

He closed the door and crossed to a chair to sit down.

"No," he answered sadly. "We didn't."

She continued to stare at him in a silent demand for more information.

"I mean we almost -" he continued without meaning to speak, "but it felt all wrong somehow. I couldn't. He was all upset and vulnerable, and I was having the most wicked sense of *déjà vu* about the whole thing, and I don't know, Hermione, I *couldn't*."

Hermione hadn't moved. Her gaze searched Harry's face. "Is he gay?" she asked finally.

Harry considered this. Draco hadn't said it outright, but all the signs had been clear. "Yes, I think he is."

"You *think*? Oh, Harry..."

"No, Hermione, I mean I - I know. He didn't say the words, but did he say he liked me, and that's what he meant, and then he almost kissed me -"

"'Almost' kissed you." Hermione appeared to be searching her brain for understanding of the phrase. "What do you mean by that?"

Harry blushed. He felt dirty, telling details, even about something that didn't quite actually happen.

"Well, we were standing really close. And he said he liked me. And he wasn't looking me in the eyes, because he'd been talking about how he couldn't be gay and I was pushing him to admit it, so he was staring at the floor. And then when he finally said he liked me, he looked at me, and we were standing so close he barely had to move to kiss me. And I realised he was about to do it, and I - well, like I said, I couldn't."

"Right," she said quietly. "So what did happen?"

Harry shrugged miserably. "I - I sort of took a step back, and put a hand on his chest, like to say it was okay, we didn't have to ... you know. And then I sort of left my hand there for a moment, and he *looked* at me, with those eyes, and I couldn't look at him anymore because it was too much. So I picked up my things and got out of there."

"And came back here."

Harry tilted his head side to side. "Eventually. First, I had to walk around a bit, to clear my head." He met her eyes for the first time in several minutes. "Sorry if I worried you."

Hermione smiled. "It's okay, Harry. I understand."

Harry dropped his eyes to the dry cracks in his knuckles. It was just hitting him: Draco liked him. Draco had tried to *kiss* him.

And Harry had passed up the opportunity. He had to clamp his hand on his kneecap to keep from smacking his palm to his face; he didn't fancy breaking his spectacles against his nose at the moment.

"Merlin, Hermione," he said, looking up again. "He finally wanted to kiss me again, and I pushed him away. What if I never get another chance?"

Hermione met his gaze very directly. She took a step toward him, then another. It took Harry's brain a moment to understand that she was marching directly at him.

By the time his mind had cleared, Hermione was leaning over him with her hands on both of his shoulders and a wicked grin on her face.

"You said he wanted to kiss you, right?"

Harry flashed back to the look of sorrow, pain and shame he'd seen on Draco's face.

"Well ..."

Hermione backed off a bit, without breaking eye-contact. Her expression took on a note of concern.

"What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry shrugged miserably.

"I felt like I'd forced him into saying what he did, Hermione. He looked so miserable, and I made him feel that way, and I'm supposed to be his friend." He let his right hand wander up to his shoulder and grasp her fingers. "I want him to be happy when he kisses me. I want to know he *means* it."

He looked down, dejectedly, letting his own words sink in. He'd really only bullied Draco into the moment. It probably was never even supposed to have happened. Her weight leaned onto his shoulders again, and her grin returned.

"The thing is, Harry," she said, "I've never known Draco Malfoy to do anything he didn't want to do. But," she added, "if you really were worried, then you did the right thing." She lifted her free hand to run it lightly over the top of his impossible hair. "You're going to be fine. And I wouldn't be surprised if you got another chance."

Harry let a relieved smile come to his lips. Hermione wasn't the kind of friend who told him what he wanted to hear; she didn't tend to mince her words. If she said he might get another chance to kiss Draco, then she really believed it could happen.

"Now go get some sleep!" she mock-ordered him. "And send my fiancé up to tell me goodnight." With those words, she dropped him a wink that was downright lascivious.

Harry twigged pretty quickly, considering how distracted he was.

For a moment he could only sit frozen to his chair, staring openmouthed at her.

She just held a finger to her lips and made shooing gestures with the other hand. "Go on."

When Harry returned to the common room, Ron was snoozing lightly on the rug. Harry considered letting him sleep, and then remembered what awaited his best mate if he would wake up. He bent over the large, sleeping boy and shook his shoulder lightly.

Ron's eyes cracked open. "Hmm? 'Snot morning yet. Lemmee sleep."

Harry poked Ron a bit harder, until the bleary eyes opened again. "Harry? What?"

Harry gave his best friend a sly smile. "You'd better get in there," Harry told Ron, pointing his chin toward Hermione's room. He then gave a slight mock-bow with a flourish and told him, "Your lady awaits."

Ron let his shock show for a moment, then smiled and extended a hand for Harry to help him up. A broad grin had stretched across Ron's face, and just like that, Harry felt the tension between them dissipate into nothing.

It didn't mean Ron was willing to accept Draco, but it meant he was willing to let Harry give it a chance. It meant that willingness was enough for Harry.

Harry smiled and shook his head as he climbed the steps to his own dormitory. He hadn't sorted everything out yet, but it was good to have some degree of normalcy restored in his own House, at least.

Chapter 10: Optimism

Harry woke early in the morning as the darkness was beginning to fade into light. He parted his curtains and peered toward Ron's bed. It was empty and undisturbed.

He scowled, hating that he was fighting with Ron. It had been going on so long that he'd lost track of whose fault it was, and he hated *that* even more. He hated knowing that it might be in his power to fix everything, only he wasn't sure how to start.

Harry's stomach kept twisting itself into several different awkward little shapes. He couldn't quite swallow the fact that his best mate hadn't told him immediately when he'd slept with Hermione for the first time. Harry had always assumed he'd be the first one to hear, that there would be some excited, hushed confession and he would take the piss and cheer for Ron through it all. Instead, he had missed it over his need to be close to Draco.

Harry stretched and yawned, still staring at the empty bed. After the night he'd had, Harry hadn't expected to sleep much; what he hadn't predicted were the images that would haunt him as he tossed and turned. He'd expected to see Draco's wounded eyes swimming before him, vulnerable and scared and entirely too close. Instead, as Harry lay awake, alone and confused and frustrated, his mind insisted on conjuring up vivid flashes of what might simultaneously be taking place in Hermione's bedchamber.

Now that the room was starting to brighten, Harry knew he wouldn't be getting any more sleep, so he gathered his toothbrush and towel and went to the bath. He washed and dressed, and descended the stairs to the Common Room, which would be deserted at this hour. If he couldn't get some rest, perhaps Harry could at least find some peace.

It wasn't long before Ron turned up. Harry watched his best mate as he snuck out of Hermione's room. His hair was thoroughly mussed and falling into his eyes, which blinked sleepily. His t-shirt hung unevenly, exposing the edge of a dark red lovebite near his collarbone. His whole demeanour was relaxed and comfortable, but careful, and he moved with a strong, long-legged grace that Harry had never seen before.

Ron was about to start climbing toward the boys' dormitories when Harry whispered his name. In the stillness, the one quiet syllable echoed like a shout.

Ron halted in his tracks, eyes widened at being caught out. When he saw it was only Harry who'd caught him, he quickly broke into a smile and joined him in the best chairs by the fire.

"Alright, Harry?"

"Yeah. What about you? Get any sleep?" Harry tried out the eyebrow waggle that had annoyed him so much when Ron had done it a few weeks earlier.

Ron blushed, but grinned. "Not much." He looked so pleased with himself, Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"So," said Harry; it was a bit of an accusation, a bit of a commendation, a bit of a question, a bit of a response.

Ron nodded, turning redder and smiling more widely.

"Since when?"

"It's ..." Ron rolled his eyes skyward, as though counting in his head. "Three weeks now. Will be, tonight."

"Wow." Harry counted back quickly to land on the very day he'd come out to everyone. It seemed like a lifetime. "And ..."

He wanted to ask more: how it had happened, whether they'd planned it, how it had gone, and a pile of other inappropriately curious questions. He and Ron could talk about anything, but despite Harry's assumptions of how this moment might go, he realised they really couldn't quite talk about *this*.

Harry was about to give it up and change the subject when Ron grinned and gave him half a gentle shove to the shoulder. "It's brilliant, of course," he answered without needing the question to be articulated. His expression changed to something slightly awestruck. "Hermione's - well, she's amazing."

Harry smiled, settling back into his chair, giving Ron time to enjoy his very recent memories. Harry knew he'd probably heard all he would, but the moment was so comforting, in contrast with all the rows they'd had lately, that he couldn't be bothered to move. While he sat there in silence, Harry's mind called up the memory of Hermione's confession that she'd had prior experience, and her promise that she would tell Ron. It made him curious as to whether she had.

Ron was staring into the fire, his hair glowing with reflected light from the flames. His silence matched Harry's for a long time. Harry was almost dozing off when Ron suddenly spoke.

"I wasn't her first, you know?"

Harry tried to hide the small start he'd given at being awakened from his almost-slumber. He followed Ron's eyes into the fire.

It didn't even occur to him to hide the truth.

"Yeah, Ron, I know. She told me, the afternoon I came out to her."

Ron looked up, surprised. "Really?"

Harry nodded.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I knew she wanted to tell you herself. That's what she said."

Ron looked away, back to the flickering flames. "How come she told you?" he asked quietly, with only a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

Harry touched his hand. "She was worried about me. Didn't want me to make any mistakes, like she felt she did. It came up, is all." Ron had slowly met his eyes as he talked. "But you're alright with it - with not being her first?"

Ron shrugged. A wry smile grew slowly on his face. "You know what's funny? It's better than alright," he answered. "I mean, I was disappointed at first, only because I'd always thought I *would* be, but..."

When Ron stayed silent for a long moment, Harry couldn't keep his patience. "But what? Go on," he wheedled.

Ron's face cracked into the widest grin yet. "Let's just say it's good to have someone in the room who knows something about what to do." He chuckled. "It's a bit odd, like she's tutoring me - you know, the way she helps us with homework - but I'm having too much fun to be bothered by it."

Harry laughed and shook his head. "Right. Sorry I asked." He leaned back in his chair and nudged Ron's knee with his foot. "It's good though, yeah? To see you so happy, I mean."

Ron grabbed Harry's foot and gave it sort of a squeeze and a shake before dropping it. "Thanks, mate."

They smiled at each other for a moment, and Harry felt himself breathe easily for the first time in weeks.

"Go get a little sleep, Head Boy," he told him at last. "You've got a couple of hours yet before everyone leaves for Hogsmeade."

Ron pushed himself to his feet and started toward the staircase. Before he began to climb, he turned back. "You going to come along with Hermione and me?"

"You two don't want to go alone?"

"Without you?" Ron looked incredulous. "Are you joking?"

Harry beamed at him and settled into a very comfortable position in his chair as his eyes followed Ron up the steps.

"Honestly, I think you two buy more at Honeydukes as seventh-years than you ever did when we were younger." Hermione stared her boys directly in the eyes as she spoke. It helped that she was currently hovering at Ron's eye-level, thanks to the effects of the Fizzing Whizbees she was eating.

"Ugh, Hermione, how can you eat those things?" asked Harry, cringing. "They have *billywig* bits in them!"

"Mmm!" sighed Hermione exaggeratedly, waving the sweets in front of Harry's face.

While Harry shuddered, Ron grinned playfully and swooped Hermione into his arms before she could land again. Hermione giggled and slung an arm about his shoulders.

Harry rolled his eyes at them, but matched Ron's expression. Deep down, he knew he could withstand seven more Dark Lords if he knew that, after the conflict, he would still get to see Ron and Hermione this happy and in love with one another.

"Hey, Harry, catch!" Ron made a half-turn to face Harry, and bounced Hermione into Harry's arms. Hermione laughed and locked her arms around Harry's neck, holding herself up. At eighteen years old, Hermione was no longer a seven-stone child, and Harry, who was four inches shorter and not at all as muscular as Ron, nearly buckled under her weight.

"Urh!" grunted Harry, struggling not to drop her. "A little help here, Ron?"

"*Levitare*," spoke Ron and flicked his wand, adding, "weakling," not-so-under his breath. Hermione suddenly felt no heavier than her bookbag, which was still a considerable weight, but far more

manageable than that of a fully-grown witch. If Hermione had had a free hand to cast it herself, of course, Harry knew she would have ended up as light as a pillow.

Hermione's face was rosy from laughter as Harry set her down gently, but Ron's had suddenly darkened. Harry followed his gaze to a small crowd of sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins. Draco was with them, and for the first time in months, seemed to be the center of the group. The erstwhile leader was once again holding court.

Something in the center of Harry's chest floated up and forward, buoyed by the simple happiness in Draco's expression. Harry couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Draco in his element, surrounded by the members of his own House, and felt the intrinsic irony of his relief at seeing him there now. It gave him a little twinge to remember that he, himself, would never be welcome in that group, but Harry was glad to see Draco being accepted again.

Draco looked over at that moment, catching Harry's eye. The laughter in his face darkened into unease as he watched Harry watching him. Tension left over from the previous evening hovered between them in the warm spring air.

The buoyant thing in Harry's chest froze in place, and he had to force his head to nod in greeting. Across the street, Draco's silver eyes were barely pinpoints, but their expression was unmistakably unyielding.

A warm breath of air crossed the back of Harry's neck, then skipped across the street to unseat a single strand of Draco's fringe. The sunlight shifted with the few cottony clouds in the sky for the few seconds that Harry watched the single, errant hair play over Draco's forehead.

Finally, Draco smoothed his fingertips across his fringe, masking a return shrug of acknowledgment.

It was only when Harry released his breath that he remembered the other dozen eyes that were watching their exchange.

"Look, Harry," began Ron through gritted teeth, "if you'd rather be with *him* -"

"If I wanted that, I'd be there," interrupted Harry, without breaking eye-contact with Draco.

One of Draco's friends made a joke, drawing Draco's attention away from Harry. The Slytherins all laughed together, then moved away down the street.

Harry looked at Ron now. It was hard to believe that they had barely been speaking, only a week earlier. He was curious where things really stood with Draco, but there was no question as to his priorities at this moment.

"What I *want* is to be with you two," he told Ron, then smirked amicably at Hermione. "Until you tell me to shove off so you can have some time alone."

Ron laughed and chucked him on the shoulder. Hermione linked an arm with each of the boys as the three of them continued down the main street toward Zonko's.

Suddenly the trio collided violently, almost knocking each other to the ground. Startled, Harry looked to Hermione, who appeared jostled and annoyed and was rubbing her nose while glaring at Ron. Oblivious, Ron was standing stock-still and staring down a little side-street.

With a wave of nearly-forgotten dread, Harry recognised it as the street where Madam Puddifoot's could be found. He dearly hoped, someday, to be able to put that place out of his mind for good. The

humiliation of his first - and only - date with Cho was a memory that Harry would love to Obliviate from his mind, if only he weren't so wary of Memory Charms.

Ron's look of shocked dismay was tinged with bubbling mirth. Harry couldn't understand what in the world had caught his attention, until he spotted a giggling couple stumbling out of the doorway of the teashop.

"It can't be. It sodding well *can't be*."

Ron continued to gape as Hermione and Harry joined him in staring toward the happy pair who had come into view. The two blissful students were smiling and kissing each other, too occupied to notice their observers.

"How long do you suppose *that's* been going on?" asked Harry of no one in particular.

"A few weeks, I think," answered Hermione from between him and Ron.

Ron and Harry both goggled at her.

"How do *you* always know everything?" spluttered Ron, while Hermione smiled one of her smug, smartest-witch-in-her-generation smiles.

"It's the 'lady-doth-protest-too-much' syndrome, isn't it?" she responded. "Notice how he was always telling stories to cut down the other girls in her House and year, but never about her?"

Harry thought back. He remembered the morning before the kiss with Draco, a story at breakfast about Pansy and a Cheering Charm gone wrong. Then the following evening at dinner, the tale of poor Morag and her allergy to Murtlaps.

"Who would've thought it, Harry?" commented Ron. "Turns out you're not the only one who thinks that Bulstrode might have some redeeming qualities."

Poor Seamus, thought Harry. The winding-up he would get in the dormitory that evening would be merciless.

A selfish little corner of Harry's mind came over all optimistic, at the same time. If a Gryffindor seventh-year were going out with a Slytherin seventh-year, Harry supposed, then perhaps their classmates would stop making such a big fuss over Harry's friendship with Draco?

The Three Broomsticks was packed with students. It had been a long day of sweets and jokes and exploring the village, as Harry and his friends had done for the past five years, but with the renewed urgency of those whose childhood was coming to a close. Thanks to the long daylight hours of late spring, the Hogsmeade outing had been extended to after supper, so everyone had had plenty of opportunity to wear themselves out. Now, with only an hour until the carriages returned to school, most of the Hogwarts contingent had retired to the pub for one last Butterbeer.

Harry, Hermione and Ron found themselves shoved in around a table toward the center of the room. They were joined by Ginny, Dean, Neville, Parvati, Padma, Lavender, and Lavender's boyfriend Michael Corner. Ginny and Harry were both studiously avoiding talking to Corner, while Ron shot murderous glares at his sister's ex-boyfriend across the cramped table.

An uncomfortably short distance away, Draco's crowd of Slytherins was spread out around a much larger table. The small group of Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Pansy, and Morag luxuriated in their ample space, throwing privileged smirks at any student who dared glare at them for their occupation of the territory. The elder Slytherins wore the expressions of disdain for all others that they'd always worn, but to Harry's practised eye, an undertone of sadness tinted their haughtiness.

Seamus and Millicent were nowhere to be seen.

"You've *got* to be joking!" exclaimed Lavender, feigning shock but failing to hide her zeal for fresh gossip. "Seamus and ... that *cow*?"

"She's not really so bad -" began Harry, but Parvati cut him off.

"Shut up, Harry. She really *is* so bad, she used to break my butterflies just to watch me cry." She caressed her current hair-ornament with delicate fingertips. "I can't believe *Seamus*, of all people -"

Lavender finished her friend's thought. "We thought *he* had some sense, anyway!"

Hermione and Ginny both sat back stiffly, the extreme offence they had taken at Lavender's words obvious in their expressions. It was clear that they felt the other girls meant the taste of *some* Gryffindor males had not been up to snuff.

Lavender and Parvati both jumped slightly, as though they'd both been pinched. Padma was shooting warning glances between her twin and her friend, having seen the expressions on Hermione's and Ginny's faces. Harry suspected she might have made some move under the table to alert Lavender and Parvati to their gaff.

Parvati's eyes went suddenly wide. "Oh, we didn't mean -"

"No, of course not," added Lavender. "Obviously, Ron and Dean both have excellent taste -"

"I mean, we think it's absolutely *wonderful* about you two getting married and everything," continued Parvati, nodding toward the Head Boy and Girl.

The two sincerely rounded pairs of eyes were met by a wall of narrowed glares. Ginny and Hermione seemed unimpressed by the apologies of the other girls.

"What did you mean, then?" asked Ginny with a forced lightness that fooled no one.

Parvati and Lavender both drew back at the dangerous calm in her tone.

"Well, we meant of course - that is -"

"You see, we were only saying -"

A quiet voice cut through the group. "You meant me, then."

All eyes swiveled toward Harry, who had spoken this last, except those of the two protesting witches. The culprits directed their gazes anywhere else at all.

"Tell me," Harry continued in the same deathly murmur, "are you referring to my being gay, or to my friendship with Draco Malfoy?"

At the mention of the name, Harry felt the sympathetic stares grow awkward and evasive. Even Hermione couldn't hide her dislike of Draco, despite having expressed her support of Harry's romantic interest in whomever he wished to fancy.

"Right," said Harry, and pushed back from the table with difficulty, bumping against students in three directions.

"Wait, Harry!" pleaded Hermione. Harry paused, only to humour his friend. "You know none of us likes him, but some of us, at least" - here she shot a quelling look at Ron - "still support your decision to be friends with him. We're *your* friends, at any rate."

"Please stay, Harry," added Ginny with quiet, but firm, sincerity.

Ron also opened his mouth as if to chime in, but Harry shook his head.

"I'll meet you all at the carriages," he stated, and ignoring the protests of his friends, walked slowly and steadily out of the pub.

With all the students still inside, the streets of Hogsmeade were very quiet. Clouds had rolled in during the early evening, and a light rain was now falling, keeping the townspeople inside their shops and houses, as well.

Harry wandered alone up the main street, enjoying the feel of the raindrops falling softly onto his face and hands. He let them cool off his temper, which had heated up so quickly at the thoughtless words of Parvati and Lavender. It wasn't as though he cared what they thought, or that he wasn't used to having people say unkind things about him. He only wanted to have some peace, after everything he'd had to do, and to be saved from having to hear the comments people made who didn't really know or understand him.

Harry tipped his face toward the heavens, feeling the rivulets slip down his cheeks onto his shoulders. He allowed the rain to leech out the ache from the unsupportive silence of that whole table of his closest friends. He stretched his arms out from his sides, inhaling the cool scent of dampness as everything about the almost-kiss the night before was cleansed from his mind.

"Are you mad? You're getting soaked."

Harry whirled around toward the voice. Draco's taunting smirk half-hid under the eaves of the post office, where he stood sheltered from the brunt of the weather. Harry smiled at him and spun slowly around in waterlogged defiance.

"You left in quite a strop, didn't you?" asked Draco with a forced lightness as he watched Harry turn.

"I thought I made my exit calmly enough," countered Harry. He stopped his motion, facing Draco, but kept his eyes closed and his head tilted back to avoid looking Draco in the eye.

"Another fight about me?"

Now Harry did look, as he realised Draco was staring at him very intensely. Even from several feet away, he felt that Draco was too close. The expression in Draco's eyes was almost as unhappy as it had been the night before, and Harry needed to put as much distance between them as possible.

"Not important, is it? We already knew what they think."

As Harry took a step back, he felt Draco's eyes raking over his face and shoulders. It was impossible not to meet them.

Draco's gaze was so direct, it burned from the shadows. "I don't want to be a problem for you, Harry."

"You're not," he responded automatically.

Draco raised an eyebrow, and waited.

Harry summoned up a smile. "The only problem, Draco, is if you don't agree to spend the last of the day with me."

Draco's smile was the first genuine one of the conversation. "Then there's no problem at all." He peered out into the dreary drizzle. "Where were you thinking we might spend it?"

Harry examined the sky. "Rain's going off. Let's get away from the shops, shall we?"

Draco eyed the clouds doubtfully, but nodded when he met Harry's eyes. "Right."

He set off, before Harry could stop him, in the direction of the Shrieking Shack. Considering their shared history, Harry thought he knew why Draco might want to go up there, but he had his own reasons for wanting to stay away.

He wasn't prepared to explain those reasons, though, so he followed his friend up the slope.

When they reached the clearing near the old house, Draco looked around himself. A few yards away was a large, muddy puddle where the rain had collected during the early-evening shower.

Draco stood staring at the puddle for quite some time, seeming to consider it, before he looked at Harry.

"Did I ever tell you about the strangest thing that happened to me here, once during Third Year?"

Harry feigned ignorance. "No, I don't think you have. What was it?"

Harry could tell Draco was only pretending to believe him, but was willing to pretend, nonetheless.

Draco continued, "Crabbe and Goyle and I had come up here to see the Shack, and we saw the Weasel - that is to say your friend Weasley - standing here alone."

Nervous, Harry maintained his silence as long as he could, until Draco's knowing glance made him stutter, "Oh - oh, yeah. I think he told me about it. How the ghosts didn't seem to like you much, either." He smirked playfully at Draco. "Threw mud in your hair, did they?"

Draco scowled. "It's not funny." His glare bore an uncanny resemblance to the hate he always used to project in their old days of animosity. "Crabbe couldn't sleep for *weeks* after that. None of us got any rest, from all his screaming."

Harry sobered. Poor Crabbe. Like so many of the other Slytherins whom Harry had always hated as a matter of course, Crabbe was turning out to have more depth than Harry had ever imagined. Part of his depth, it appeared, was a pretty sensitive disposition.

"Sorry."

Draco nodded somberly, toeing a muddy bit of soft ground near his feet.

When he returned his gaze to Harry, his expression softened, becoming almost playful. One pale eyebrow cocked itself above a silver eye. "And do you know the oddest part?"

Of course he knew, but Harry was enjoying the game, and despite his apprehension at this particular moment, the ease he felt now around Draco was an unbelievably welcome change from the tension in the Potions dungeon the night before. Plus, his father's Invisibility Cloak was a closely guarded secret, so he had to pretend not to know what Draco was about to say. He shook his head.

"The ghosts decided to scare us with the image of your head floating in midair," Draco replied lightly. "It even shocked Weasley. Up until then, he'd thought the mudslinging was a great gas, laughing so hard he could barely stand."

"Well," coughed Harry, trying not to smirk at the memory, "that *is* odd."

"The thing is," said Draco, advancing toward Harry with a determined step that caused him to fall back a few paces, "I've never seen a ghost create such a *solid* image. The spirits haunting this place must be much more powerful than any I've seen anywhere else."

"Must be," agreed Harry in a distracted mutter that continued into, "that's what they say about the Shrieking Shack, anyway ..."

Draco was starting to make him feel a bit nervous. Was he still really angry? What was he going to try and do to Harry for revenge?

One more step back, and Harry felt the grass becoming spongier under his feet. Without looking, for he didn't dare break eye-contact with his friend, he understood that Draco had backed him toward the enormous puddle he'd seen earlier.

Ah. So it was to be retribution.

"Yes, must be," echoed Draco with a dangerous softness. "Either that, or you really *were* here that day, and knew how to make yourself invisible somehow. You wouldn't have done anything like that, now, would you Harry?"

Harry shrugged casually, but was bracing himself for the attack that was about to come.

He didn't have to wait long.

Draco grabbed Harry's hand and tried to throw him into the mud puddle, but Harry was too quick: he took hold of Draco's free hand with his and threw back. Surprised, but possessed of the same Seeker reflexes as Harry, Draco planted his feet and tried again to throw Harry, who responded again in kind. Before either knew, they were spinning and laughing and turning faster and faster, never quite keeping their footing in the wet grass but never quite losing it, either.

Harry stared into Draco's face, the only clear image he could see as the rest of the world whizzed by around them. His cheeks were lit up pink with the flush of exertion, his eyes sparkling with mirth. Harry laughed out loud and let his vision narrow down to nothing but the silver of Draco's eyes and the white of his teeth. His nostrils took in the scent of the rain-wet air that drew its fingers through the curling hairs at the nape of his neck, while his hands gripped onto Draco's for dear life with the singular purpose of avoiding the inertial inevitability of flying apart into the mud.

As the sky blushed into the reds of sunset, Harry and Draco kept swirling, balanced at that razor-thin border between childhood and adulthood. Their movement was endless, beginningless, like time or

space. Like the way a planet flies around its star, always and never changing its course, January and December nothing but arbitrary distinctions that people use who need to measure a thing in order to understand it.

And in the center of it all, two heads of black and gold, poised on the edge as if time for them had stopped, or not yet started.

Harry watched the smudges of dusk darken the sky. He was still smiling, feeling his heartrate slow to normal, as the swollen summer moon edged its way above the treeline, all lopsided from being two days past full. He shrugged one shoulder a tiny bit, enough to bring the thick wool of his cloak against his neck; although it was June already, the night was cold and he was grateful for the extra layer of clothing.

He could hardly believe how few weeks had passed: the last time he'd seen a moon just this shape had been the first evening after the dreams had begun. He remembered staring out the window before he went to bed, praying to any power which might be listening that the images would not repeat themselves.

Instead, here he was.

He rolled his head to the side to see the object of his infatuation - so recently his enemy - splayed out in the same position next to him. They had finally fallen this way, after an endless while of spinning, laughed themselves into silence, and had lain here without moving so long he thought Draco might have fallen asleep.

Harry looked up at the sky again. It felt so perfect just to *be* there, near Draco, he felt they could do nothing but lie there for the rest of the weekend and he would still be thrilled. He listened, in the stillness, for the soft sounds of Draco's breathing, and slowed his own until they matched.

His ankles rocked where Draco's were tangled in them. Harry looked over again to see the silver eyes open, reflecting the shine of the moonlight. Or perhaps that was the gleam of mischief. What did Draco have in mind?

Harry kicked back, grinning at his friend.

"Oi," he said softly.

"Yeah? What?" came the lazy drawl in return.

"There's mud in your hair."

Draco smiled and propped himself up on one elbow, shifting himself until he was closer by Harry's side. With his free hand, he wiped some of the offending dirt off his own hair, and ruffled it into Harry's.

"Yours, too," he replied with a smirk.

"Git," said Harry companionably, gazing up at the fair face which looked otherworldly in the growing light.

Draco looked so beautiful when he was happy. Harry had only recently seen this side of him, the side that could feel joy for its own sake instead of at someone else's expense. With Draco leaning over him

like this, *this* was the moment Harry would have chosen for Draco to kiss him. After what had happened the previous night, though, Harry feared that Draco might never risk taking that step.

Draco's smile widened, causing Harry's heart to skip. No matter what logic told him, every fibre in Harry's being wished for those lips to touch his. If Draco kissed him in this moment, Harry might be so overwhelmed with ecstasy that he would die on the spot, and die happy.

"So?" Draco spoke at last. "What do you want to do now?"

Harry swallowed the imprudent suggestion that sprang to his lips. "Nothing," he replied instead, trying to concentrate on his contentment. "Let's just stay here."

A few bright stars twinkled overhead, each straining to catch the eye a bit more than the next.

"We'll miss the carriages back to school," protested Draco quietly.

Harry spotted another star he was sure hadn't been visible a minute earlier. He wished he'd paid more attention in Astronomy. Which was the Dog Star again?

"Just a few more minutes."

"But I really don't want to miss them." Draco's tone had gained insistence.

Harry sat halfway up, looking Draco directly in the eye. "And I really don't want to arrive in the middle of a crowd of your friends and my friends, all hating each other and hating that we're friends." *And making snide comments about what we've been doing alone all this time to get ourselves all rumpled and covered in mud.*

He lay back down, staring into the sky. "I don't feel like dealing with them now."

Draco looked away. Harry remembered what Draco had said about some of his housemates blaming him for their parents' deaths. He also remembered how happy and whole Draco had looked in the company of Slytherins earlier that day.

As if in response to Harry's thoughts, Draco said, "I had a good day today, Harry. I liked being around them again, having friends." He tipped his head toward Harry. "Besides you, I mean."

Harry's heart went warm at the acknowledgment. He nodded silently and met Draco's eyes.

"I get it," he told him softly. "You looked happy." After a moment's pause, he added, "I liked seeing you that way."

Draco smiled at him, but it quickly turned to a frown. "I wish they'd accept you. It's hard having to listen to some of the things they say, and not to be able to convince them they're wrong."

"Draco, it's okay -"

"It's *not* okay, Harry!" Draco's eyes flashed with anger which startled Harry in its suddenness. "They should be grateful, too, that you saved them from a lifetime of servitude. But they can't work it out. The only reason they're still alive is because I did it first. I protected them, and Snape protected all of us, and *you* protected *him* -" He broke off, his voice hitching. "They all owe you, but they hate you instead."

Harry let him talk. He could see how much it hurt Draco to be caught between having friends and being true to his feelings about what was right. He could empathise.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I do want you to be able to keep your other friends. I don't want you to have to choose between them and me."

What he didn't say aloud was how afraid he was that if Draco did have to make such a choice, it would be Harry himself who would lose.

Draco gave him a sort of sad half-smile. "I know," he responded, then pulled Harry up into a sitting position with a startling swiftness.

For a few seconds, their faces were close again. Harry could smell the cool dampness of the mud in Draco's hair, and the heat of his breath. It was all he could do not to grab Draco's shoulders and kiss him full on the lips. His heart was racing again from the proximity.

How could Draco not be affected the same way? Didn't he say he shared Harry's feelings? They were right there, it would take mere inches to bring Harry's hopes to fruition. He wanted it so badly his blood rang in his ears.

"I would never give this up, though," said Draco, so close that Harry could feel the warmth of his breath. "Not for anything. This has got to be one of the best days I can ever remember."

Harry could only nod in agreement. He was committing the scene to memory: the icy brightness of the moon, the music drifting up the hill from the Three Broomsticks, the earthy scent of the mud in Draco's hair. If he were struck dead in that moment, or stolen away never to see any of this again, he wanted to make sure he took with him everything about the way Draco made him feel this night.

Harry had just decided to go for it and snog the boy and hang the consequences, when Draco suddenly jumped to his feet. Completely befuddled by this turn of events, Harry scrambled upright next to him, trying to convince himself he hadn't been thinking what he had.

"Did you hear that?"

Draco's eyes were wide with alarm. Harry snapped to attention, fearing the worst danger, and whipped out his wand. Draco's gaze moved to Harry, and his expression turned to wry and somewhat condescending amusement.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked, inclining his head toward Harry's drawn wand.

A soft tone rang across the hills, from down in the village. The clock tower was chiming the hour.

"Oh," said Harry, sheepishly pocketing his wand. "Oh."

"We've missed them," Draco muttered in a tone of voice usually reserved for foul language. "We've missed the carriages back to school." He lifted his head up again to look toward the village, and his eyes shown wide in the moonlight.

"Looks that way," Harry agreed with a shrug.

Draco emitted a brief string of foul words.

Taken aback, Harry babbled empty words of reassurance like, "Don't worry, it'll be alright -"

"It *won't*. We've missed them, we can't get back!"

"But ..." Harry considered their situation for a moment. "Look, why don't we just Apparate to the gates and catch the carriages there?"

Draco shook his head miserably. "They'll have passed by now, the gates aren't that far from the meeting point."

Harry tried to see the carriage road from the village, but it was too dark and there were too many trees obscuring the view.

"Okay, then we'll do something else."

"*What*, Harry? They'll lock the gates behind the carriages, we won't be able to get in at all."

Draco's panic seemed singularly odd to Harry. After all, they were both of age and Harry had enough gold in his pocket to rent a room at the Three Broomsticks if they were really stuck in the village for the night. The moment Harry imagined spending an entire night alone with Draco, he felt himself flush deeply, all over. He was very grateful for the dark.

Right. Better to avoid that one, then.

Or they could owl someone at school to send a carriage back for them ... if they could find an owl.

"This is not good, this is very seriously not good ..."

Harry struggled to hear his thoughts over Draco's mantra of panic. With the post office closed, the Three Broomsticks was looking better. Harry had enough money for two rooms, after all. They didn't have to stay together.

"Draco, let's go back to town. I have enough gold for a couple of rooms at the Three Broomsticks. Madam Rosmerta can get a message to Dumbledore and Snape that we're alright, and we can walk back first thing in the morning."

Draco was already shaking his head. "I have to get back tonight, Harry. *Tonight*."

Harry blinked woundedly. He had said 'a couple' of rooms. Draco might be feeling uncomfortable at being alone with Harry after what had happened the night before, but things shouldn't be so bad that he'd refuse to sleep in a neighbouring room!

"What's *your* problem?" he muttered bitterly, turning away.

A hand touched his shoulder lightly, before he could take a step.

"I made a promise, Harry. After Snape found me - you know, when I almost died from the Light Protection - he made me promise I would spend every single night at Hogwarts until I leave, so he can know I'm safe."

Harry stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"I know it sounds stupid, but he was so scared after he found me, and he asked me to promise, so I did. A promise is a promise, Harry. I have to get to school tonight."

"But surely just this once -"

"No."

"But you've been angry with him! And it's an unfair promise!"

Draco looked at him for a moment with an annoyed, but thoughtful, expression.

"Has Dumbledore ever asked you to agree to something that didn't seem fair?"

"Well, yeah ..."

"And if you promised him you'd do it, would you go back on that promise?"

Harry thought about that a moment. "I suppose not. But what does that have to do -"

"Because I don't have a father, so Snape is all I have. And Dumbledore is what you have. So it's exactly the same."

Harry stared at him a moment longer, unwilling to draw a parallel between Dumbledore and Snape, however apt.

"Let me put it this way, then," pressed Draco. "There's not much honour left in the Malfoy name, but that's no excuse for me to go back on my word. I intend to keep my promise, however absurd it might sound to you."

A placatory smile pulled at the corners of Harry's mouth. "Doesn't sound a bit absurd, actually," he responded.

Draco's face contorted in frustration. "Terrific," he grumbled. "So pleased that you approve. But it doesn't exactly help our situation, does it?"

Harry tuned out Draco's distress, focusing on his own. He was running out of ideas quickly, and kept coming back to the one he fancied least of all. As Draco stood before him, staring grimly in the general direction of the locked gates, Harry's gaze was drawn inexorably behind his shoulder, toward the only option that remained to them.

He hadn't set foot in the Shrieking Shack in over a year. It had been a possible escape or attack route in the Order's plans for the final confrontation with Voldemort, and Dumbledore had shown Harry how to break through the wards and enter the house from Hogsmeade. During the lessons, Harry had thought fondly of Fred and George, who had once regaled Harry, Ron and Hermione with stories of this impenetrable shack with no way in. Of course, it was only that access had been made impossible for anyone other than Dumbledore or Lupin, for security reasons, until Harry had needed it.

Thankfully, Harry had not used that route during the battle, so the memories the Shack held most strongly were still those of Harry's first-ever visit.

Every board of the building still reminded Harry of the night he had met his godfather, had allowed himself to begin to hope for a different kind of family. It seemed to loom now, more haunted with the spectres of Harry's past than it ever had been with true ghosts. He wanted nothing less than to go inside.

Correction: he wanted only one thing less, and that was to let Draco down.

Looking at the Shack reminded Harry of the conversation he'd had with Charlie about Lupin. He thought he understood, now, why Lupin hadn't been in touch in so long. He missed him, though. Moony was the last connection Harry had to his parents.

Draco was staring at Harry now, and beginning to look impatient.

"Harry, are planning on standing around here all night? It's still breaking the promise, even if I don't sleep, you know -"

Harry lay a reassuring hand on Draco's arm. He shook his head.

"You worry too much," he tried to tease, in a voice that sounded way too high.

Before Draco could respond, Harry took his hand and started to pull him toward the dilapidated structure.

Draco, seeing where they were headed, dug in his heels. "Oh, no. No! I am *not* going in there. I - I'll get a message to Snape somehow. He'll understand."

Harry couldn't believe Draco's resolve would crumble that quickly, simply at the prospect of entering a creaky old building.

"Shut up, prat," he replied affectionately. "Do you want to get back to Hogwarts tonight, or don't you?"

Draco did shut up, but regarded Harry with a great degree of wariness.

"What are you doing, Harry?"

"Trust me," he said with a smile. And to his delight, that seemed to end the argument for Draco.

"*Lumos.*"

"Again, Harry, I beg you to tell me that you're joking."

Harry looked around the dusty disorder of the ground floor of the Shrieking Shack. It didn't look frightening to him, only very, very sad.

Nothing had changed, except for the addition of a new layer of dust. The paper was peeling a bit more, maybe, and perhaps a few new water stains had been added to the walls and ceiling, but he didn't remember those details well enough to compare. Harry recognised the torn-apart wooden chair he'd seen on his previous visit.

"I thought Malfoys didn't beg," he commented without glancing at his companion.

"Bollocks." Draco's dramatic snap lost a lot of effect due to the tremble in his voice. "Whatever my ancestors may or may not have done, I choose my own actions. Which will not, in the future, include trusting Potters."

Harry turned to look Draco in the eye. "You trust me, or you break Snape's trust in you. Your choice."

He strode across the room to the door that he remembered as the entrance to the tunnel. Sure enough, it creaked open when he tugged the handle. When he turned back to his companion, Draco's face had gone three shades paler.

"You had better know what you're doing, Potter."

"Or what, Malfoy? Your corpse will murder my corpse?"

Draco halted in the steps he'd started to take toward Harry, eyes wide.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm joking, you silly git. Now come on."

Draco scowled. "You really shouldn't call people names. It isn't nice."

"Surly, aren't we?"

"Abject terror has that effect on me."

"You really are a giant sissy, aren't you?"

"Perhaps you've already forgotten that a significant trauma from my early adolescence revolves around this building - and *your* floating head."

Harry chuckled. "Awfully sensitive of you, isn't it?"

"Congratulations, Harry," announced Draco sarcastically. "You've found the crack in the unshakable Malfoy façade. Now stop gloating and take me home."

"Silly git."

"I've *told* you it isn't nice to call people names."

"I'll remember that, Draco."

Harry smiled to himself as he led his friend into the darkness.

They'd been walking nearly twenty minutes, hunched over double to avoid hitting their heads on the ceiling of the low tunnel, before either of them spoke. Harry really couldn't blame Draco for his doubts; even though he had already been down this tunnel himself, he was starting to feel apprehensive about the journey.

Harry knew he was significantly taller than he'd been the last time, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that the tunnel was closing in on them. Nor could he shake the feeling of *déjà vu*; it was creepy how familiar this all felt, although he knew he'd never passed through this tunnel with Draco before.

Suddenly it hit him, so forcefully he almost stumbled: he had lived a moment almost exactly like this in his dream. The similarity was eerie.

Draco interrupted Harry's thoughts. "Where are we going? This place is giving me the shivers."

"It leads back to Hogwarts. This tunnel comes out on the grounds."

"But the doors of the castle will be locked already, won't they?"

Harry turned to stare at Draco, a bit disbelieving. "Are you telling me you've forgotten how to sneak back into the castle after going out onto the grounds at night?"

Draco only blinked at him.

"Well, what did you do that time in First Year, when you followed Ron and Hermione and me down to Hagrid's hut?"

Draco blinked again, adding a bit of a shrug for variety's sake.

"Or, how about all the other times you've snuck out since then?"

Draco blinked again, his head drifting slowly from left to right and back.

"You realise, of course, that you have just completely debunked the bad-boy image which you had so carefully constructed about yourself over the years?"

The Slytherin grunted derisively and fell into a sitting position on the ground.

"This is killing my back, Harry. Can we take a rest?"

By way of answer, Harry slumped down across from Draco, trying to shake the feeling that he'd dreamed all of this before. He arched his back and stretched his arms behind him, focusing on the immediate physical experience of being down here, to keep himself grounded in the present. It wasn't difficult; his back was starting to ache wickedly.

The way through this tunnel hadn't seemed so onerous when Ron's life had been in danger and Harry had been running to save him. It had gone by quickly on the trip back, as well, while Sirius had invited Harry to come live with him and Harry had begun to fantasise about life without the Dursleys.

The memory, as always, brought a sick twist to Harry's gut. It was all the stronger for happening while Harry was sitting on the very same ground he'd trod while Sirius had first explained to Harry about being his appointed guardian.

Draco must have seen the look on his face.

"How do you know about this place, anyway, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, unwilling or maybe even unable to make eye contact.

"Come on, Harry, this is not the sort of thing someone just happens to know. How did you find it?"

Harry lifted his head, but looked down the tunnel toward Hogwarts, away from Draco. He inhaled sharply, fighting against the pressure behind his eyes.

Draco sounded alarmed. "Are you alright? What's going on?"

Harry closed his eyes and took a few slow, deep breaths. When he finally trusted himself, he settled his gaze on Draco. He waited until he thought he could speak steadily, then said, "It's a very long story."

Draco examined Harry's face a moment in the darkness, then smiled encouragingly. "I have time."

"I thought you were in a hurry to get back?"

"I have to be back tonight. It doesn't matter precisely when. Or how long is your story?"

Harry tried to smile, but felt his eyes itching again. He shook his head slowly and took another deep breath. "I don't think I can."

It was very strange to see Draco's face take on the same expression Ron wore when he felt Harry was shutting him out of something.

Even his voice sounded similar: "I told you about my scar, about my parents, about how my friends are reacting, everything. I've spilled my soul, and all I know about you is what's been in the papers."

Harry quirked a smile. "Can't believe everything you read, you know."

Draco's scowl softened, replaced by a glimmer of genuine mirth. "So tell me something I *should* believe, then."

Harry leaned his head back against the cool earth of the wall. He was afraid of what might happen if he let himself talk about Sirius. They had had such a great day, he didn't want to ruin it with some messy emotional scene. He'd always been able to keep his feelings in check when talking about Sirius before, but that had always been with Ron or Hermione. It was another thing, entirely, to bare his soul to Draco and mix all his unresolved grief into his frustrated yearnings.

The only thing that made Harry tell the story was the fact that Draco was right. It was his turn to talk.

So he did. He told Draco everything, from blowing up Aunt Marge and running away from the Dursleys' house, all the way to the Department of Mysteries and Sirius falling through the archway. Draco stayed silent through the whole thing, discreetly looking away in the moments when Harry had to swipe gruffly at the dampness on his cheeks.

When he'd finished talking, Harry was exhausted. All he wanted was to curl up into a ball and take a long nap. He would get himself back to school later.

Draco was looking at him steadily. He reached out a hand and yanked Harry back to the half-standing position that was all the boys could manage in the cramped space.

"So you say there's a knot at the exit of this tunnel that will keep the Whomping Willow from knocking us senseless?"

Harry nodded mutely, grateful for the soft, comforting grip of Draco's hand on his.

He could feel his heartbeat in his fingertips.

They pushed on, awkwardly bent over and crushed together. Before long, they had reached the exit. Harry realised he didn't actually know which knot it was that would stop the Willow from whomping, but he found it in a few tries, then pulled Draco out.

The two boys sat on the damp grass for a few minutes, safely out of range of the reanimated tree, catching their breath. They were sweaty and cold, and smeared head-to-toe in dirt. Both were smiling broadly.

"Still planning on never trusting a Potter again?" Harry grinned giddily. He was trying to draw Draco's attention away from their still-clasped hands, afraid that if he noticed, the vibrant feeling of contact would disappear.

Draco lifted an eyebrow. "I may reconsider that policy. Depending on how you propose to get us back inside the castle now."

"Glad you asked."

Harry hadn't actually thought through this detail before he'd led them toward the Shrieking Shack. In retrospect, the tunnel under Honeydukes might have been preferable, but Harry hadn't wanted to risk being seen breaking into the shop, which would have closed as soon as the students left the village. Plus, without the Map in hand, he had no idea where Filch or Mrs. Norris might be prowling at that moment.

He'd had time to think about it, though, since Draco had asked, and he had a couple of possible ideas.

Harry stood, pulling Draco to his feet in the same motion. He surveyed his companion's appearance. "Alright. First of all, if anyone finds you looking like this, there's no telling what they'll think. *Scourgify*." A moment later, Draco looked as composed and presentable as always. Harry then turned the wand on himself and performed the same spell.

Without another word, Harry turned and started walking toward the castle.

Draco jogged to catch up. "Are you going to share your plan?"

Harry smiled. "The simplest solution is sometimes the best," he answered. He felt a bit as though his words sounded as obliquely as Dumbledore's were wont to do, so he clarified: "I'm going to try the main doors."

"What? You're mad -"

"Shh." Harry pulled Draco into the shadow of a tree, in sight of the entrance to the castle.

Draco obligingly lowered his voice to a whisper, but was not willing to silence his objections. "Just walk in the main doors? Even if they *are* open, we'll be caught for sure!"

"That's why I stopped," replied Harry. "I'm about to let you in on a very big secret."

"What's that?"

Harry took a deep breath. If Draco had trusted him to lead them back safely to the castle, then Harry could trust Draco with the information he was about to share.

He smiled at his nervous friend, then turned his attention to the bottom of his trunk, up in his dormitory. "*Accio Invisibility Cloak!*"

Draco stared openmouthed for the full minute that passed before the slippery material slid into Harry's waiting hands.

"You know, we *knew* you had one of these! It was the only *real* explanation for your head turning up in midair that day."

"So? You were right." Harry shrugged. "Now come here. This thing will barely cover the two of us."

Harry smiled a bit at the turn events had taken. Now that they had left the tunnel behind and returned to Hogwarts grounds, Draco was visibly more relaxed. Harry, for his part, was starting to feel more excited about being alone with Draco, and if circumstances forced them to huddle together under a single Invisibility Cloak, who was he to complain?

Draco grinned at Harry as they were pulled close together by the material. "So *this* is what it's like to be part of one of your adventures," he said.

Harry said nothing, only beamed yet more widely, as Draco's hand slipped back into his.

The gamble paid off, and the doors opened easily to allow the errant students access to the castle.

"Alright, we're in," breathed Draco in relief. A happy shiver scuttled up Harry's spine at the puff of air on his neck. "I'd better get down to the dungeons."

Harry held on before he could slip away. "Let me walk you. I don't want you getting caught between here and there."

Draco smiled and squeezed Harry's hand, then led the way toward the staircase down to Slytherin without a word.

Harry's heart was racing. Draco's palm was so warm against his, and the grip of his fingers was so strong and sure. Harry couldn't stop himself from imagining the sensation of having those hands running over his back, or threading again into the hairs at the back of his neck as their lips met for a second time. If only he could be truly sure that was what Draco wanted, Harry would make his move this very instant.

But for all the joy this closeness was bringing, Harry couldn't help thinking back to the previous night. Draco had been so upset and confused, he might not even be sure what he wanted. Harry couldn't handle another three weeks of confusion like the ones he'd just endured. He would *not* let himself kiss Draco, unless he were sure of Draco's feelings, no matter how deeply the frustration dug into him.

Finally, they came to the bit of blank wall Harry recognised as the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room. He tried to hide his knowledge of what lay behind the wall.

Draco turned to face Harry. In the torch light, under the shadows of the Cloak, Harry felt exactly the same excited agitation he had when he'd been pulled into that alcove at the other end of the corridor. Their faces were even closer than they had been that day.

"Thank you, Harry," whispered Draco, his breath feathering across Harry's mouth. "I have had a truly wonderful day."

Before Harry could answer, he felt Draco's hands take hold of his hips. Before Harry could breathe, he felt Draco very purposefully press his lips against Harry's mouth.

Harry smiled widely, parting his lips slightly to allow access for Draco's soft tongue, which he met with his own. He wrapped his arms around Draco's back, running one hand up to thread fingers into the impossibly fine strands of Draco's hair. When he tilted his head to deepen the kiss, Draco responded in kind, moving one arm more tightly around Harry's waist and leaning his body against Harry's.

The warmth of contact flooded every corner of Harry's senses, from his knees all the way up to his face, and to the very tips of his fingers. His heartbeat was deafening in his ears, and yet still allowed Harry to hear the minute sounds of happiness emerging from Draco's throat. Harry smiled and even laughed a bit as he ran his lower lip over the other boy's, meeting Draco's tongue with his as the tiny prickles of their stubble burned each other's chins.

Harry's head was swimming from the sensations. Every nerve ending shouted at the relief of being free to touch Draco, and begged for more. He inhaled sharply through his nose, sighing as Draco pulled back to brush his lips lightly over Harry's before plunging deeper again. Having been so preoccupied with the *fact* of the first kiss they'd shared, Harry had forgotten precisely how *good* it had been. Draco was an amazing kisser. Harry didn't care how narrow a basis he had for comparison: there was no way anyone could possibly be better.

Draco broke off the kiss with a firm nudge of his nose against Harry's. Harry opened his eyes to observe the broadest, most brilliant smile he had ever seen him wear.

"I'll see you tomorrow," said Draco through his grin, then pressed one more soft kiss to Harry's lips before slipping out from under the Cloak. "Now bugger off! You're not allowed to see how I get into my House from here."

Draco's tone was light and teasing, so that Harry couldn't help but laugh as he walked away. He trod more heavily than normal, so that Draco would be sure to hear his footsteps retreating and know that Harry really had left.

Harry could have floated up all the staircases from the Dungeons to Gryffindor Tower. Draco had *kissed* him. And Harry knew that he had meant it. Draco had *meant* it!

Harry was so happy he felt his joy ringing in his brain. There could be no doubt about that kiss. Things were finally going right. The night couldn't possibly be short enough until Harry could see Draco again.

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## End of Part II

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Author notes: There, now. Hope it was worth the wait?

Two parts down, one to go. Part Three will encompass chapters 11-15, after which an Epilogue will wrap things up for us. I am nothing if not obsessive-compulsive in my symmetry.

The line "as if time for them had stopped, or not yet started" (at the end of the scene where Harry and Draco try to throw each other into the mud) is not mine. I stole it, yet again, from Barbara Kingsolver's beautiful book, *Prodigal Summer*. I think I remember getting inspiration from most of the preceding paragraph from her or from another source, as well, but now I can't find it. If you recognise any part of that passage as not mine, please let me know so I can attribute it properly - plagiarism is a serious no-no in this world we call fanfiction.

The sequence of events in the last three scenes, as well as some of my choices of words, were inspired by Dashboard Confessional's song "Hands Down." The lyrics are [here](#).

In case anyone's interested ... the original draft of this chapter included a really cute bit of dialogue where Draco revealed that he had never mastered Apparition, despite years of trying, even before he was legally old enough. I took it out because although SPW does not include HBP canon, I thought it would be too disruptive to the alert reader who might say, "But what about Side-Along Apparition???"

So, out it went and a quick fix covered it up. *shrug* Should've posted this chapter a few months earlier, I suppose

No promises about a post date for the next chapter. I've learned my lesson. Not soon, I'm afraid, but please be patient. And please do let me know what you think of this one!

Part III: While You're Busy Making Other Plans

Chapter 11: Relation

The air had that sort of foggy darkness of an image that won't come into focus. Dim and shadow shifted across his heavy eyes, only enough to show that he was moving, walking forward, climbing stairs. A memory tugged at his mind until he remembered the touch of Draco's fingertips on his hip and on his jawline as they had kissed and kissed in the cold, dark corridor.

Something in his mind became alert enough to hope not all of it was a dream.

The stairs turned into a swell in the ground and he was walking uphill over grass. In the clearing brightness of the past-full moon, the liquid black glint of eyes flashed into his mind. There was an animal standing before him, close by; it blinked as if it knew him and raised its antler-crowned head so the branching prongs caught the light and shadow, reaching for him.

He reached out in return, and for a brief moment, he could actually feel the heat of a warm-blooded animal and the roughness of coarse fur when his palm met the stag's flank. The animal turned and began to walk toward the Forbidden Forest, as though intending to lead him. Harry followed.

It felt like looking into the Mirror of Erised, being so close to something he'd always missed. He was so caught up in it that he missed the moment that the stag dematerialised, leaving him alone on a rocky shore where the moon illuminated a path across the water.

Deep inside his body, something pulled forcefully toward an unseen desire, hidden behind the very edge of the horizon.

Harry was still straining to catch a glimpse of a shifting silhouette in the distance when he woke to the characteristic twilight of morning behind his bed hangings. He pushed aside the curtains to let in the full sunlight, revealing a sleepy-eyed Dean slipping into a pair of jeans after a morning shower, Seamus rolling over to bury his head under more blankets, and Neville's empty, neat bed.

With a stretch and a yawn, Harry reached across his bed and drew back the curtains on the other side. Ron's bed hangings were wide open and he was sprawled on his back, mouth gently open, covers kicked half off so that one heavy, ginger-haired leg rested on top of the blankets. His boxers had shifted down on one side to reveal the rounded corner of a hipbone, and his t-shirt rode up along the trail of red-gold that led to his navel. One arm was flung back over his eyes and his chest rose and fell steadily with each deep breath.

Harry slid out of bed, padded over, and sat on him.

Ron groaned and dropped his arm from his face in a heavy swing that knocked Harry off the bed. Their yelps and shouts of surprise broke the stillness of the quiet room.

Seamus sat bolt upright, hair even more ruffled than Harry's. "What the bloody hell ..." he began, then spotted Harry and Ron in a tangled heap of bedclothes on the floor.

His eyebrows disappeared into his fringe. He looked to Dean for confirmation or support, but Dean was doubled over laughing and was no help at all.

"And here I'd thought the 'lucky wizard' was *Malfoy*," muttered Seamus.

Harry felt his eyes fly wide in panic, but Ron didn't appear to twig. He was too busy hurling his pillow at Seamus, who quickly responded in kind. Harry ducked out of the line of fire, rolling back to the safe barrier of his own bed.

"Yeah, you'd do well to run," called Ron. "What were you on about, waking me up that way, anyhow?"

Harry shrugged and gave him what he hoped was a winning grin.

Ron retrieved the pillow Seamus had thrown, and whomped Harry soundly with it. "Well, piss off. Some of us are trying to sleep."

And some of us are still having odd dreams, noted Harry as he scrambled for a towel from his trunk and fled the dormitory, inches ahead of another pillow projectile.

It didn't take much for Hermione to convince Harry to join her in the library after lunch that afternoon. He'd learned at least something about his dreams from the Dreaming Draught assignment, after all, and this new one was very curious. It felt more *real* than even the hawk dreams, too. He'd had very strong, gut-level emotions rise up while dreaming this time, and had to know something about the images that had made him feel that way.

Consulting all the usual sources brought very little insight, though. He remembered the sea as a symbol of new beginnings, from his previous dream. The stag was an obvious reference to his father, he assumed; the book had no entry for 'stag,' but indicated that a deer could represent independence, among other meanings which his gut told him to reject. Harry made a note: new beginnings, freedom, lost parents ... there was *something* in all of this, he was sure.

When he sat down and thought it through, he found that those had been the only images in the dream. He wasn't sure why it had affected him so deeply, then; maybe it had been that feeling of longing he'd felt as he'd looked out across the ocean. He knew there was something there that he needed, perhaps this new beginning that he was more and more sure he was seeking.

A little voice in his mind suggested that his nascent relationship with Draco was the new beginning in question, but the idea left him feeling unsettled. It didn't sit quite right, didn't feel like what the dream had been trying to say, if indeed it had been trying to say anything at all. He allowed his mind to linger on thoughts of the kiss the night before, nonetheless, and his mouth curled itself into a comfortable smile.

Before long, Ron joined them, and Harry quickly reshelved the dream texts with a tap of his wand. He didn't need Ron asking any questions, especially if he'd heard what Seamus had said that morning. Harry realised he was probably being paranoid, but simply wasn't ready for Ron to find out about him and Draco.

Harry felt his heart give a little racing patter. Images of kissing Draco kept popping back into his mind, making him grin foolishly.

Ron and Hermione raised their eyebrows at him in unconscious unison, and Harry buried his glowing face in a Charms textbook.

After a bit, Ron and Hermione got back to work, but Harry was having a much more difficult time of it.

Harry was beginning to suspect, very strongly, that he was going to fail his N.E.W.T.s. It was looking increasingly likely that he would botch every last one of them spectacularly, and that that would be the end of his hopes of becoming an Auror. Ron and Hermione would go off to Auror training without him, and Harry would be lucky to get a job cleaning rooms at the Leaky Cauldron.

It wasn't that he didn't understand his subjects, or that he had forgotten any of what he'd revised in the days when he'd used time in the library as a way of hiding from the conflicts he'd had with his friends. It was that he still had quite a lot of work to do, and every time he set foot in the library to revise for the exams, something managed to distract him.

This Sunday afternoon, that 'something' was sitting across the room from him, sneaking flirtatious glances at unpredictable intervals. It was all Harry could do to keep his expression impassive, so Ron and Hermione wouldn't catch on to the unspoken communication that was going on under their noses.

After an hour of fruitless attempts at reading, Harry decided he needed a change of venue. The Gryffindor Common Room would be noisier than the library, but nothing could be as distracting as Draco's presence.

He muttered an excuse to Ron and Hermione, who looked at him curiously, but nodded. Books swept into his bag, Harry left the library.

He only made it a little way down the corridor before he stopped, drawn almost physically back toward the library. He was doomed - he couldn't concentrate on studying when Draco was in sight, but he couldn't stand to be away from him, either.

Harry leaned against a wall, supporting his weight with his arms. He looked around himself and smiled. This was the very spot where he had leaned when Draco had first spoken to him about becoming friends.

Harry's mind raced over the events of the previous evening. He still couldn't believe Draco had actually *kissed* him. It was no surprise that part of the scene had bled over into his dreams, but the result was that by morning, Harry had begun to doubt whether *any* of it had been real. Harry had spent his morning wandering the corridors, hoping to find Draco somewhere, but with no luck. They hadn't seen each other until sometime that afternoon after Ron had arrived, when Harry had looked up from his reading to see Draco watching him. There hadn't been any opportunity to talk at all.

Draco's flirtatious and searching glances, though, had confirmed Harry's hopes: not *all* of his dreams had been false.

The sound of approaching footsteps caused Harry to start. He was trying to decide whether to return to the library or continue on to Gryffindor Tower when the figure careened around the corner from the library. Draco was moving so quickly that he couldn't stop, and nearly knocked Harry over. Harry grabbed onto Draco's shoulders for balance, and the two stumbled for a moment, each struggling to keep his feet.

Before Harry had got over his surprise enough to be happy to see Draco, he had stumbled backwards into the wall, hands still grappling at Draco's shoulders, and was pinned. The smiling face from his dreams was only inches away.

"Hi," said Draco. His expression was so childlike in its bliss, Harry had to bite his own lip to keep from laughing out loud.

Harry would never actually *miss* the spoilt prat who had once worn that face, but it did amuse him a little to remember the first time they'd seen each other at Madam Malkin's, so many years ago. It would be an understatement to say that things had changed.

"Hi," he responded, looking deeply into Draco's eyes. They really were *silver*, not grey or hazel. Beautiful.

Draco's smile was so close. Harry inclined his head slightly forward. His gut did that reaching-out thing it had done in his dreams. Their mouths were now only a tiny fraction of an inch apart. He could feel his need like a physical sensation.

Draco turned his head a few degrees, barely enough to touch Harry's nose with his own. Harry nudged back gently. They both smiled again.

"Hi," repeated Draco.

Harry *did* laugh this time. "I think we covered that already, didn't we?"

Draco shrugged and pulled back a little. His smile had twisted into a small, nervous frown.

"Look, I know this is stupid of me, but I was up half the night smiling and up the other half worrying about what's next, and so I need to know." Draco's eyes bored expectantly into Harry's.

"You need to know," echoed Harry softly, only half-confident that he understood what Draco meant.

"Yes, I need to know," Draco said again, looking at Harry as though balancing on a precipice.

Harry blinked at him. He would look like an idiot if he reassured Draco that he wanted to be with him ... if that wasn't what Draco meant, at all. Draco's expression was darkening as he waited, and Harry was almost convinced enough to say something when Draco spoke again.

"I see," he said, pulling further away. "I should have known you would change your mind by morning. I mean, why would *you* want -"

"Draco, how could you think that?" interrupted Harry, openly astonished. "I haven't changed anything!" he insisted, tentatively adding, "Have you?"

He drew his head back, although he didn't have much room to manoeuvre, with Draco's warm body still pinning him deliciously to the cold, stone wall. If he wasn't careful, their closeness would soon catch the attention of certain excitable parts of his anatomy, and he was pretty sure from the conversation that the timing wasn't right for that sort of thing.

Anyway, Harry had been kissed exactly three times, now, and had never had anything more. He didn't feel remotely *ready* for 'that sort of thing.'

Draco's searching eyes softened, along with his expression. He gave a tiny shake of his head. "No, you haven't, have you?" he stated.

Harry could tell it wasn't really a question, but he answered, anyway.

"I haven't."

"Good. Neither have I," replied Draco, as his palm grazed the back of Harry's neck, bringing Harry's face down for a soft, warm kiss.

Harry relaxed, smiling. Draco's mouth tasted of heat and boy. He kissed Harry more softly than ever before, letting his lips part only slightly, enough to tease at Harry's lower lip, but no more. His lips were even smoother than Harry remembered, but his cheeks were dusted with the finest of golden stubble, too light to be visible yet still sharp enough to sting.

Harry ran the backs of his knuckles across Draco's whiskers, feeling the delicate prickles. There were so many details he hadn't noticed before. He looked forward to taking his time at memorising each one.

Draco pulled back, looking Harry very directly in the eye.

"So," he began, "does this mean we're - I mean I can see why maybe you wouldn't want, since it would be complicated, but I had the impression -"

Harry interrupted, threading his fingers into the flaxen strands at the nape of Draco's neck. "Yes, I do want," he said eagerly.

Draco looked at him without speaking for a long time, and Harry's stomach turned spiky with nerves and began to float upward toward his throat.

"I mean," he backpedalled, not quite sure how Draco really wanted to proceed, "if *you* want, that is. To be. Together. Like, um, you know."

There was a word that came to mind, but it sounded too ridiculously, embarrassingly stupid even to consider saying it aloud.

A silence stretched across a few seconds that seemed to last all of human history, and then some.

"Boyfriends?" Draco prompted, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

Harry nodded, swallowing the uneasy lump in his throat. In Draco's voice, the word wasn't stupid at all. Odd and foreign, a bit, but not at all stupid.

"Yes, like that," he confirmed tentatively. "If you want."

The silver eyes trapped Harry in their piercing gaze. That excitable part of his anatomy was starting to take notice. He took a deep breath, willing it to calm itself, but it wasn't taking orders, especially when Draco's voice dropped the octave as he spoke again.

"Oh, I want," murmured Draco in a husky whisper. "I'll show you how *much* I want."

He was reaching for Harry again when they heard footsteps approaching from the direction of the library. They sprang apart, Draco smoothing his hair to hide the signs of how Harry's hands had rumbled it. Harry smirked at the thought that his own impossible hair had *some* convenient qualities, at least.

Hermione came around the corner and stopped short. She looked at the two boys and clearly arrived at an accurate conclusion in no time at all. She span around, addressing the person who was not yet in sight behind her.

"Ron, wait! I've left one of my books on the table. Will you go and fetch it for me?"

"Hermione, you didn't leave any books," came the disembodied reply. "I saw you pick them all up."

"I'm sure I've left one!" she insisted. "Please, won't you go and look?"

"Can't you just Summon it?"

"Ron!"

"Oh, have it your way." Heavy footfalls faded back toward the library.

Harry, who had stood rooted to the spot with horror, came to life when Hermione turned toward him again. He glanced toward Draco, to find that his friend (*boyfriend*, he thought to himself with wonder) had disappeared.

It was a good job *one* of them could think quickly under pressure.

Hermione took several hurried steps toward him, clearly torn between glee and disgust.

"Then you're together?" It wasn't really a question.

Harry nodded, feeling a flush along his cheekbones.

Hermione smiled and hugged him tightly. "Oh, Harry, that's wonderful! I mean, I still don't get your taste, but I'm so happy for you!" She pulled back with a devilish smirk.

"So," she said. "Spill."

Harry gaped. He'd never had a romantic life that had amounted to anything before. He wasn't prepared to *talk* about it.

Hermione sensed her friend's discomfort and took his hand. "Alright, you don't *have* to tell me." She regarded him appraisingly. "But you *will*."

Harry tried to keep his resolve, but buckled quickly under the pressure of her gaze.

"Last night," he said. "We missed the carriages, and I brought him back through the tunnel under the Shrieking Shack, and then he kissed me goodnight."

She smiled at him softly, and thankfully, didn't comment on the tunnel or its history. She simply stayed quiet, in a manner that made it very clear that she expected to hear a bit more than he had already said.

"And it was brilliant," he added. "He *meant* it, just like I wanted. It was *real*."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but Ron's voice called from around the corner, complaining that he hadn't found anything and was hungry and he'd *told* Hermione she already had all her books and could they find Harry and all go to dinner now, please?

Harry and Hermione shared a grin. Even when some things were changing for the better, it was comforting to know that others would never change at all.

If Harry had thought everything would be settled once he and Draco had confirmed their feelings for each other, then he had forgotten to consider several other factors. One was sitting at a back table, next to Blaise Zabini. Another was lecturing sneeringly from the demonstration desk up front. In fact, the Potions classroom was *full* of complicating factors that Monday morning.

Harry imagined he might be worried about the opinions of his friends and teachers if he could think for a moment about anything but Draco. As had been all too frequently the case this spring, Harry was completely incapable of concentrating on anything else at all. Draco monopolised all of his senses, until it was impossible for any other impulse to break through.

Harry could hear his Draco's quiet breathing next to him, could see fair skin and golden hair in his peripheral vision. Every once in a while, Draco's foot would venture over to meet Harry's ankle, caressing lightly before disappearing again. The subtle musk of Draco's particular scent drifted over to Harry's nostrils, possessing his olfactory senses until Harry could taste Draco on his lips and tongue.

It was driving him utterly mad.

Worse, Harry was beginning to worry about all the things Draco had said when he'd tried to talk to him previously about their kiss a month earlier. What had happened to Draco's self-imposed mandate that he marry a witch and continue the Malfoy line? Harry couldn't really ask him to give all that up. And if he wasn't, then was this only a bit of fun before leaving school? How could he know what Draco expected from him?

As if the proximity and whirling thoughts weren't enough, Draco now felt the need to add to Harry's distraction. Probably, he couldn't concentrate any more than Harry could. He pushed a note across the desk, until it touched the scroll where Harry was taking notes:

When can I see you?

Well, that was the question of the hour, wasn't it? Harry did want to spend time alone with Draco, and not only to talk about the worries that plagued him.

He knew there were plenty of places in the castle where students had been known to find time alone with each other, but the chances of *getting to* and *returning from* those places without being discovered were almost nonexistent.

He wasn't ready to face the reactions of his housemates when they learned about the new relationship, and he suspected Draco felt the same about the Slytherins. What they had had been hard-won, but it was still fragile; it was too soon to put their fledgling relationship to the test of public scrutiny.

I don't know, he wrote back. He waited for a moment when Snape was busy scowling across the room at Ernie and Padma, then pushed the note back toward Draco.

Draco's face fell fractionally. Harry tried to concentrate on Snape's demonstration, but found that he had been thoroughly enough distracted as to have no idea of the topic of the day's lecture. He was reminded, appropriately enough, of the state of his mind during the lesson that had ended moments before Draco had first kissed him. He glanced forward at Hermione, willing her to turn around, as though her eye-contact could somehow give him a clue as to what was going on, but she was thoroughly absorbed in taking notes.

A few minutes later, the bit of parchment brushed his elbow again.

We could study tomorrow night?

'Study.' Right.

Harry smirked to himself. He knew perfectly well that it wouldn't be Potions they would be 'studying.' It was a perfect excuse, though, for them to spend time together. Harry's mind had been in such a shambles lately, that he'd forgotten he and Draco had a very reasonable motivation for meeting, and that they had frequently studied alone before, so no one would have any cause to be suspicious.

A tired sigh escaped Harry's lips. He'd only been in this relationship with Draco for about thirty-six hours, and he was already tired of the lies he would have to tell to keep it secret. He hoped it would get easier, with time. He was excited about being with Draco, but it wasn't worth losing the most important things in his life, like his closest friends.

Harry wasn't really worried about *losing* Ron over this, but he knew things between them were about to get difficult. Really, he had always thought of Ron as an all-weather friend, the kind of friend most people were never lucky enough to have. The only time their friendship had been tested before had been in the early days of the Triwizard Tournament, when Ron had mistakenly thought Harry to have willfully excluded him from a plot to outwit the Age Line. It was only when Ron felt Harry had betrayed him that he had turned away.

Harry could understand how Ron saw a friendship with Draco - Ron's worst enemy - as a betrayal on Harry's part. He couldn't imagine how Ron would react to a romantic relationship between the two, especially when Harry had so recently told him no such thing was going on. Harry knew he'd have to tell Ron soon, before the half-truth became any more of a lie. He only needed a little more time to feel ready to talk about this.

He wondered how Draco felt about fitting their relationship into his life, for that matter. Harry couldn't imagine that it would be worth Draco giving up his commitment to his family, any more than it was worth Harry losing Ron. Perhaps it was best not to get too attached.

Harry caught Draco's eye in his peripheral vision, and smiled. It wasn't Draco's fault that the situation was so impossible. And when Draco smiled in return, Harry understood that it was far too late to worry about getting attached.

As Harry picked up the bit of parchment to note his response - *Yes, let's* - a sweeping of black robes appeared immediately in front of him.

*Oh, **bugger**.*

The scrap was tugged from Harry's fingers. He looked up to find a very annoyed Potions Master staring down at him.

Snape read the note, taking an excruciatingly long time at it. Harry gritted his teeth against the inevitable: any second, Snape would start reading Harry's and Draco's words aloud, and their secret would be common knowledge among the entire class.

The second didn't come. Instead, Snape's voice sounded quiet, dangerous. "Detention. Both of you." He glanced again at the paper, twisting his lips into a sadistic little smirk. "Tomorrow night, I think."

BUGGER!

Snape glared at each of the students in turn, sparing an extra long look at the student who had once been his favourite. With narrowed eyes in response to Draco's proudly up-tilted chin, Snape swept back to the front of the room.

Don't worry, said Draco's new note, which appeared in Harry's lap moments later. *We'll find a chance soon.*

Harry reached out with his own foot, brushing it awkwardly against his boyfriend's calf. He hoped 'soon' would be soon enough.

They almost had a chance that very evening, when they passed in an otherwise deserted corridor near the library. Draco looked exhausted, bending slightly under the weight of his bookbag; Harry was rushing, already late to meet Hermione.

The race for the House Cup was close, and Hermione had warned Harry that Snape might force him to spend his detention writing an essay on the potion he'd failed to learn the previous morning due to being so intent on arranging a private rendezvous with Draco. If Harry were to arrive at Snape's office still knowing nothing about the lesson he'd disrupted, he would be guaranteeing a large deduction of points from Gryffindor.

Therefore, in addition to his N.E.W.T. preparations and a particularly hefty essay for Transfigurations, Harry would be spending his evening learning every smallest detail of a tiringly complex restorative potion which was designed to keep even mortally wounded soldiers alive until Medi wizards could transport them to a safe place for more thorough treatment.

It didn't bear thinking about the dreams he would have, after reading about a potion like that.

When Draco's pale blond hair lit up the dim corridor, though, Harry momentarily forgot about promises to Hermione and piles of homework. Even his horrific memories of the Final Battle were pushed aside. All he could think was how happy he was to see Draco and how he wished they could be sure of being uninterrupted, for at least a few moments.

These thoughts had barely passed through Harry's head when Draco grabbed him and pushed him through the door of a nearby broom cupboard, slamming the door behind them. Harry was gasping for breath, from surprise, when Draco's mouth was suddenly on his, softly and insistently demanding attention and response. Harry threaded his fingers through Draco's impossibly fine hair, finding the warmest roots at the back of his neck.

For whatever brief moments passed, he lost all track of time, letting himself sink into the blissful sensation of his skin against Draco's, even if it was only fingers and faces and necks.

"Alone at last." Draco's lips softly brushed Harry's earlobe as they murmured, then nibbled and took hold, alternately sucking and ghosting over the sensitive skin.

Harry gasped and leaned his head to give Draco better access. There was so much he didn't know about being close to someone physically, so much he'd never experienced. To his best recollection, he hadn't even initiated a kiss before, but now he found himself entertaining fantasies of slipping his fingers past buttons and zips to find new and uncharted expanses of Draco's skin.

The fantasies remained unrealised, however, as their very suggestion made him blush to the roots of his hair. Harry was eager to try further intimacy with Draco, but he was very, very shy about the idea.

Footsteps on the other side of the door startled him back to his surroundings.

"Draco, I can't stay."

Harry tried, reluctantly, to push Draco gently away, but Draco held fast.

"But we haven't any *time*."

"I know. I'm sorry. But I promised Hermione."

Draco pulled back. In the total darkness, the silence gave no hint as to its meaning.

"Does she know?" Draco asked finally.

Harry nodded, then realising Draco couldn't see him, said simply, "Yes."

"What about Weasley?"

Harry shook his head, again momentarily forgetting that nonverbal communication was impossible in the darkness.

"You haven't told him, have you?" persisted Draco, before Harry could speak.

"It's not that simple, is it?" said Harry defensively. "I'm happy we're together, but it's not going to be easy, telling Ron. I can't risk losing him."

Draco let out a sarcastic grunt. "Can't risk losing Weasley? Am I that horrible?"

"Go on, Draco, you know there's a lot of history between your families. And it's not as though you're going out of your way to proclaim our relationship to all of Slytherin."

"You're the one who's working so hard to keep this a secret, Harry. Not me."

Harry blinked, wishing he could see Draco's face and that Draco could see his.

"But what about everything you told me before? About carrying on the Malfoy family line, and all of that?"

Harry caught his breath, as he heard the words tumble out. He'd had no intention of letting those concerns slip into sound.

Draco was silent for a long moment, but his fingers had started to play with the short strands at the back of Harry's neck again. Harry leaned into the touch, enjoying every second of contact, aware that each second made him later for his meeting with Hermione.

"I'm not sure, alright?" Draco answered finally. "I used to be sure, but now I'm not. I mean, it's only been a few days, and you're talking about the rest of my life."

"You're right, I'm sorry." Harry backpedaled quickly.

"No, I get it," said Draco after another, shorter pause. "I can see why you'd wonder. Only I don't have a good answer for you." His fingertips found a sensitive place that made Harry shiver deliciously from head to toe.

He tried to respond, but only a weak whimper would pass his lips. Draco reacted quickly, pulling Harry's body more closely against his.

"Is it alright, then, Harry? Can you live a while without a good answer?"

Harry was breathing too hard to make any reasonable verbal response. He tried to nod, but Draco's lips met his and kept his head immobile for half a minute longer.

Finally, unwillingly, Harry broke away. "Look, I really am going to be late," he said apologetically.

Draco pushed the door open, allowing the light from the hallway to illuminate his soft eyes. "Go on. I'll see you in detention." He put his fingers against Harry's face, smiled, then shoved him out the door and slipped out behind him.

"Goodnight," whispered Draco, as Harry moved away. Harry stopped a moment longer, to face him. "Dream about me?" added Draco hopefully, with a smile, before he turned and walked away.

Harry stood, shell-shocked, wondering whether Draco could possibly know about his dreams.

It was a sleepy bunch of Gryffindors that nodded blearily at each other over breakfast on Tuesday morning. Harry could barely keep his eyes open, from the horrible night he'd had after finishing his homework.

He'd been right, and the revising he'd done to learn about the restorative potion had brought back scores of gruesome images from the Final Battle. He'd lain awake for hours when he'd got back from the library, afraid to sleep and face the nightmares he might find waiting in his subconscious.

Harry had thought he'd recovered from the horror of the previous summer. He had been so terribly mistaken. He was sure he'd gone mad; clearly, he wasn't ready to get into a relationship with Draco, whose family was so completely enmeshed in Harry's memories of those blood-drenched days.

But as Harry had thought of Draco, a light had come on in his mind, and a weight had lifted from his shoulders. He had thought, again, of the jagged, silvery scar that marred his boyfriend's forearm, where a horrid black brand could have been, instead. It had been Draco's bravery that had kept him alive past the end of Voldemort's influence. It had been Draco's *goodness*.

Harry smiled a bit, while eating his porridge, as he remembered the pleasant thoughts that had finally allowed him to sink into slumber. His dreams had been gentle and warm; he didn't remember any specific visual images, only the sensation of being safe and loved. He had a pretty good idea who had made him feel that way.

Harry tried to seek Draco out across the Hall, but his eyes wouldn't open far enough to focus at that distance. He took another bite of porridge, instead, smiling to himself as he listened to his dormmates' sleepy chatter around him.

"Look at this, Ron," Hermione was saying. "It's our invitation to Emma and Persephone's wedding celebration in July."

July. Harry's smile faltered a bit. Hermione and Ron would probably be away for his birthday, then. He'd been hoping they could all celebrate together, this year, since his seventeenth had been such a disaster. Molly and Arthur had really, really tried to make Harry's birthday special, but coming so soon after the Final Battle, no one had been in a festive mood. All Harry could remember of the evening was gritting his teeth and wishing to be allowed to leave the table and find a place to be alone.

"Mmm?" responded Ron groggily, looking up at Hermione through his fringe.

"Honestly, Ron," scolded Hermione lovingly as she brushed the hair off his forehead, revealing his squinting blue eyes. "You'd better get your hair cut before we go to America. You're starting to look like Harry!"

Harry stuck his tongue out at her, while Ron laughed. "At least I don't have a great, round pair of glasses," said Ron. "Then we'd have another set of twins in the family."

"Oh, Merlin, please, no!" groaned Ginny, as Harry tried to decide whether to kick Ron for the comment about his glasses, or to feel pleased about being called a member of the family.

He decided on both.

"I'm not dyeing my hair," said Harry, as Ron grimaced and rubbed his shin. "I want to make that clear."

Ron shrugged. "Your mum was a redhead, wasn't she? Close enough, in my book."

Hermione laughed. "Next you'll be telling us you're related to Susan Bones!"

"We are," said Ginny. "She's our second cousin, or third, I forget."

"Both, probably," responded Ron. "Pureblood families are so intermingled, I think Mum's related to her dad, and Dad's related to her mum. You know how it is," he continued, now addressing Harry. "You saw the -"

Ron cut himself off, realising what he'd been about to say.

Harry closed his eyes, unable, after the night he'd had, to protect himself against the pain of thinking about his godfather. He spoke very quietly. "The tapestry in Sirius's house. Yes, I remember."

A tense silence fell, as everyone slurped his or her porridge morosely. Ron munched on some kippers, clearly wishing he'd thought not to speak.

Unfortunately for Seamus, he chose that moment to arrive at the table, looking for two available seats.

Ginny, Hermione and Ron all looked mistrustfully at Millicent, who stood quietly behind her boyfriend, hoping to be accepted at the table. Dean offered a reluctant-looking, but friendly, smile. Parvati and Padma gave the couple twin glares of open hostility. Lavender matched their expression from her seat at the Ravenclaw table, where she was eating with Michael Corner.

One of the empty seats happened to be next to Harry. He turned to Millicent and smiled, inviting her to sit down.

Her face lit up. Harry couldn't help brightening in response. She was actually quite lovely when she smiled that way. Seamus flashed Harry a grateful grin as he took the seat on the far side of his girlfriend from Harry.

"Thanks," said Millicent as she settled herself into the seat. Her broad, square shoulders filled up the space between Harry and Seamus, but her smile brightened Harry's mood considerably. He couldn't imagine why the other Gryffindors didn't appear to feel the same effect.

"By the way," she continued in an undertone, inaudible to anyone else at the table, "Draco asked me to give you this."

Harry felt something nudge against his leg, under the table, and put his hand down to receive the bit of folded-up parchment she was passing him. He opened it up under the table to read:

Can you stay after detention tonight? Pansy's on patrol-duty and said she'd cover for me.

He looked round-eyed at Millicent. "Do you *know*?" he whispered, well aware that she would, now, simply from his question.

Millicent nodded once, so slightly that Harry nearly missed it. "He told Pansy and me, last night. He hasn't told anyone else. He knows you want to keep it quiet."

Harry glanced over at Hermione, about to tell Millicent that *one* more person did know, and noticed that Ron and Hermione were both eyeing them suspiciously.

Harry cleared his throat and grinned at his best friends. "You two must be excited about going to America, then," he said, gesturing at the invitation still clasped in Hermione's hand.

Ron brightened up at the mention, and looked over at the rose-coloured card again. "Awfully frilly, that, isn't it?"

Hermione scowled at him, and handed it to Ginny, who had held out her hand, saying, "Give it here, then." Ginny's brown eyes skimmed over it and she smiled wickedly. "I think it's lovely, don't you Dean?"

Dean swallowed, hard, and hurriedly passed the paper across the table to Seamus. While Ginny was cackling with mischievous mirth, Seamus handed the invitation to Millicent, who glanced at it and passed it on to Harry.

It was a bit frilly, but Harry thought it was nice. He unconsciously traced a gentle finger down the edge of the soft, heavy stationery as he read,

You are cordially invited to join in the celebration of our wedding.

Emma Louise Andrews

and

Persephone P. Williams

request the pleasure of your company on

Saturday the Third of July

at their home in Beverly, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

He looked up to make an appreciative comment, when he noticed Hermione reading a letter that must have been included with the invitation. Her brow was furrowing deeper and deeper, and she kept shooting increasingly agitated glances at Harry.

Without looking up, she grabbed Ron's sleeve. "Ron, I've just remembered I needed to tell you something about the agenda for this afternoon's prefect meeting."

Ron blinked, but let himself be dragged away from the table.

Ginny watched them leave, narrowing her eyes. "Does she think anyone actually *believes* her when she does that?" she enquired of no one in particular.

Harry shook his head, wondering a bit bitterly what the letter contained that Hermione could discuss with Ron but not with him.

As annoyed as Harry might have been about Hermione's sudden departure from breakfast that morning, he was appreciating her friendship again by evening.

Thank Merlin for Hermione, he thought, and not for the first time.

She'd been precisely correct; Harry and Draco had arrived at Snape's office at eight o'clock to find two desks, placed as far apart as the room would allow, each topped with a long, blank roll of parchment and a quill. Snape had instructed them to write thirty inches on the potion he'd taught the day before, and had sat down between them to grade essays, a malicious grin teasing the corners of his mouth.

Harry had tried, once, after a long while had passed, to meet Draco's eyes across the room. Unfortunately, Snape had looked up at that exact moment.

"There will be none of *that*," snapped the Potions Master, catching the glance between his students. "It was that type of dilly-dally that caused you two to fail to pay attention in my lesson yesterday, which is why you are here now.

"Furthermore," he continued sneeringly, "while we are on the subject, I would like to let you know, Mr. Malfoy, that I am *deeply* disappointed."

Draco tried to keep his expression proud, but Harry could see he was crushed. Snape was still the professor whom Draco most admired, the one who had saved him from bleeding to death when he had performed the Light Protection. He had to know how deeply the word 'disappointed' would cut Draco. Harry felt his temper rise. Who was Snape to tell Draco how to live his life? It wasn't as though Snape himself had had any great success at romance, if outward appearances were at all accurate.

"I'm not going to make any comment on your orientation," spoke Snape again, still addressing Draco and largely ignoring Harry. "That's your own business. I would have hoped, however, that you would have better taste."

"Better taste!" burst from Harry's mouth, but the same words came even more loudly from Draco at the same moment, so that Harry's interjection went unheard.

"Professor, Harry's the one who saved your life!" protested Draco further. "If it weren't for Harry, you'd be wandering around without a mind in your head, just like *him*."

Snape's silence in response echoed more loudly than any shout. Draco's mouth snapped shut, as though he realised he had crossed the line by comparing Snape to his father. Snape glared burning daggers at both boys, clearly trying to decide which to attack first.

Finally, he swept himself out of his chair and strode toward Draco. Harry barely heard his words in the stillness.

"We will discuss this later," he whispered angrily. "For now, you would do well to remember that I am your teacher, and that you owe me your respect. Ten points from Slytherin should help jog your memory."

Harry gaped. He'd never known Snape to remove points from his own House before, and certainly never from Draco. He tried to communicate support with his eyes, but Draco had fixed his eyes to his paper, jaw and shoulders rigid as though fighting to contain his emotions.

Snape glared in Harry's direction now, leaving him no choice but to return to his own essay.

Harry found it almost impossible to write. He knew better than to try to look at Draco again, but he wished there were some way he could communicate his concern. He could only hope Draco was faring better at the essay than he was. With an hour gone, Harry had written barely fourteen inches, and couldn't begin to imagine how he would fill up another sixteen.

Hermione's voice spoke inside his head, reminding of the tight race for the House Cup, and gently encouraging him to remember more details, so he could keep writing. The House Cup didn't interest Harry so much at the moment, concerned as he was with nurturing his relationship with his very Slytherin new boyfriend. It was important to his friends, though, and he wanted to stay in their good graces, as well.

Harry put down his quill and stretched his sore writing arm, closing his eyes to remember the material Hermione had helped him revise the night before. When he opened them, Snape was staring at him menacingly. Harry hurriedly picked up his quill and returned to writing.

By the time he had completed his thirty inches - his handwriting getting noticeably larger toward the end - Harry's shoulders were tied in knots. He sat up, reaching his arms overhead, at the very moment that the castle's clocks chimed eleven o'clock.

Draco looked up then, with strain obvious in his features. He was rolling up his parchment, which looked as though it might be long enough to be complete.

"You heard the bell," growled Snape in Harry's direction. "Potter, I expect you to return to Gryffindor Tower directly. Mr. Malfoy," he continued, turning toward Draco, "I would like a word with you."

Harry handed his scroll to Snape and slouched out of the room feeling defeated. The irony did not escape him: not so long ago, he would have gloated at Draco being in more trouble with Snape than he was.

It wasn't *funny*, though. He and Draco had had *plans*. Those plans had been the glimmer of hope beyond the dark prospects of the evening, and now Snape was sure to escort Draco back to Slytherin personally, leaving the boys no time alone.

He leaned against the wall, exhaling heavily.

It wasn't *fair*. He'd finally found something that made him truly *happy*, and he didn't have time to enjoy it! When were he and Draco ever going to find a decent amount of time alone?

Never one to give up easily, Harry moved into the shadows of that familiar alcove, dropping his bookbag at his feet. He was pleased that he'd thought to bring it, knowing he might have to sneak back to his common room later than was precisely allowed.

As he draped the Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders and over his head, Harry allowed himself to hope that he might yet be able to find some time alone with Draco.

He had to wait quite a bit longer than he'd expected. By the time Snape led Draco out of his office and down the corridor toward the entrance to the Slytherin common room, Harry had become quite worried about just how much trouble Draco was in.

Draco looked so angry, in fact, that Harry wasn't sure he would welcome his presence. He had waited so long, though, he had to try. He was confident that Draco would let him know, somehow, if he wanted to be left alone.

Harry was in luck: as Draco and Snape approached his hiding place, Harry saw that Draco was walking on the side closest to him. He hoped Draco wouldn't be so startled as to blow Harry's cover, when he made his move.

Naturally, Draco was as cool as ever, and when the invisible Harry grasped his hand, he only started slightly, and kept walking, his fingers wrapped lightly around Harry's.

"Something wrong, Mr. Malfoy?" enquired Snape, who never missed anything.

"Yes, actually, sir," replied Draco softly, half-stopping in his tracks as though he'd just remembered something and as though Harry's presence were the last thing on his mind. "I mean, in a way. It's only that I'd promised Pansy I would send a letter for her before I returned to the common room tonight."

"All right, Malfoy, give it to me and I will post it after I've seen you to your dormitory."

To Harry's surprise, Draco *did* produce a roll of parchment from his pocket and hand it to his Head of House. Apparently Harry hadn't been the only one to have planned a strategy for getting back to the dormitories after their meeting. Draco, who did not own an Invisibility Cloak, had apparently arranged a cover story, in case he'd been caught out.

If only it had worked to get them alone.

Draco scowled and squeezed Harry's fingers, gently, as the three of them walked down the corridor together toward Slytherin House.

Snape stopped at a blank stretch of stone wall, in the corridor Harry recognised as containing the entrance to Draco's common room.

"I trust you will think about what I told you," said the Head of House to his student.

Draco narrowed his eyes, but nodded. "Yes, sir," he said bitterly.

"Good," replied Snape, ignoring the tone of mutiny in Draco's expression and voice. "*Legacy*," he said to the wall, which slid open to allow Draco to enter.

At the last moment, Harry realised he would have to enter, as well, in order to find his moment with Draco. He allowed his boyfriend to drag him through the opening, as Snape scowled from the far side of the closing wall.

The Slytherin common room was exactly as Harry had remembered it: stark, cold, in the very finest of taste, and extremely unwelcoming. Draco strode purposefully toward a door in the back, right corner. None of the handful of students tried to speak to him; the younger ones looked intimidated, and a few older ones looked indifferent. Harry was sorry to see that the good humour he'd witnessed between Draco and his housemates, when they'd been in Hogsmeade together, had been short-lived.

He was glad to know that Pansy and Millicent, at least, were on Draco's side.

Harry followed Draco through the doorway, down a dark, winding staircase, and past several closed doors. Finally, at the bottom of the stairs, Draco paused.

"Harry?" he asked quietly.

"Yes?" answered Harry in an equally soft voice.

"I don't know who will be in there. I didn't see Crabbe, Goyle or Zabini upstairs in the Common Room, but sometimes they're playing cards with the sixth-years or something. If they're inside, we'll have to get you out. I don't know how we'll do it, but we'll worry about that if it happens, alright?"

"Alright," breathed Harry, feeling very foolhardy for having willingly entered the snake pit without having first planned his escape.

Draco pushed open the door, to reveal a dormitory very much like Harry's own, only colder and windowless, and of course the curtains and bedspreads on the large, four-poster beds were all a deep, emerald green. The fire in the hearth and torches on the walls did little to add cheer or warmth to the surroundings. It looked, to the last detail, like it had in his dream a few weeks earlier.

Other than the furnishings, the room was empty.

"Merlin!" exclaimed Harry, pulling off his Cloak as Draco shut and locked the door. "No wonder you Slytherins are such a depressing bunch!"

"What do you mean?" asked Draco, his expression guarded.

Harry noticed, and walked over to him, putting his arms around Draco's waist. It felt amazingly good to be able to do that, after over two days of almost complete separation.

"Not the coziest décor, is it?" he asked softly, as Draco leaned into his embrace.

"To each his own," murmured Draco against Harry's neck, his lips softly brushing the pulse-point.

Harry pulled back slightly, looking Draco in the eyes. "Are you okay?" he asked. "About Snape, and everything?"

"Don't," said Draco brusquely, but there was a sad tenderness in his eyes. "I only want to think about you right now."

Harry drew Draco close again, running his fingers through the flaxen silk of Draco's hair and sighing happily. Everything that had happened since their moment in the corridor Sunday afternoon simply ceased to matter.

"Draco," Harry said, and took a firm grip of the nape of Draco's neck in his right hand.

Draco tilted his head back in Harry's palm, meeting his boyfriend's gaze. "Harry?" he answered, a bit challengingly.

Without further preface, Harry kissed Draco.

*There, he thought. **Now** I've initiated a kiss!*

He smiled against Draco's lips, feeling the soft, firm muscles parting to drink Harry in. Still smiling, Harry pressed his hand against the back of Draco's neck, deepening their connection as he slid his tongue between Draco's teeth.

Draco was still the best kisser Harry could imagine, but Harry was learning.

Draco had wrapped his arms around Harry's back, one hand snaking down toward Harry's waist, the other angling upward into the roots of Harry's hair. Harry was engulfed by Draco, possessed by him, and the very idea made him dizzy with delight. He couldn't imagine there had ever been a time when he'd wanted to spend any moment doing anything else.

Harry felt Draco's lips curve against his and pull away, letting a laugh escape Draco's throat.

"Why are you smiling?" asked Draco, who was doing so, himself.

"Was I?" answered Harry, in a way that really wasn't an answer.

"Yes, you were." Draco's top hand had withdrawn to the front of Harry's body, and gave a light push to his right shoulder. "You haven't stopped smiling since you started kissing me."

"Is that a problem?"

Draco grinned at him. Harry tightened his arms around Draco's waist, enjoying the view. He didn't think he'd ever seen Draco *grin* before. He liked it.

"That depends on *why* you were smiling," insisted Draco, but his playful expression belied the doubt in his words.

Harry raised a hand to brush the fringe away from Draco's forehead, caressing the skin and hair he passed over on the way. "I'm smiling because I'm with you. Why else would I be?"

Draco shrugged. "Is it pathetic of me to need to hear you say that?" His expression drew slightly tense, almost vulnerable.

"Draco." Harry took his boyfriend's face in both of his hands. "I'm smiling because I'm with you."

And to emphasise his point, he kissed him again.

Harry could feel Draco smiling against his lips now, as they pulled each other even closer into their renewed kiss. He opened his mouth softly, letting Draco in, sliding his tongue along the tongue that entered his mouth, matching movement for movement, caress for caress, sigh for sigh.

Draco's hands were at Harry's collar now, pushing his school robes from his shoulders, loosening his tie. Harry followed the example, helping Draco out of the unnecessary extra garments. He wrapped his arms around Draco's shoulders again, feeling the heat of his body through the thin layers of shirt and t-shirt. In return, he could feel Draco's hands pressing against his sides, separated from his skin by so little material.

Harry sighed and pulled Draco closer still, so that their chests were pushed up against one another. The buttons on Draco's shirt were digging into his sternum. With a rush of awareness, Harry realised that Draco's buttons weren't the only things exerting pressure against him.

He felt his face go hot and red so fast he was afraid he would burn Draco. The bulge in Draco's trousers was matched by a similar shape in Harry's own. Up until now, this type of physical reaction had always been a reason to be embarrassed or awkward, but Harry realised with a jolt that now that they were together, they had the option of *doing something* about it.

Harry's mind had barely begun to swim with the implications of the hardness that pressed against him, when another sensation startled him, causing him to jump back with a yelp.

"Ow!" gasped Draco, whose finger had got caught under Harry's shirttail and wrenched at an uncomfortable angle. "What was that?"

"Sorry," muttered Harry, the flush in his face now due more to humiliation than excitement. "I'm sorry."

Draco's annoyance was turning to concern, as he took in Harry's posture. Bringing his injured hand to his mouth reflexively, Draco reached out with the other to soothe his boyfriend.

"Harry? What happened?" he asked, more gently, although he still sounded a tiny bit petulant. "Are you alright?"

"It's nothing," replied Harry, leaning into Draco's touch against his face. He couldn't meet his eyes.

"Then what?"

"Look, it's only ..." Harry paused, embarrassed to continue. "I haven't ever *done* much before. This is sort of new. So I might have panicked a bit."

Draco looked confused, and Harry wished he were self-assured enough to be more specific: that Draco's fingers venturing inside and under his shirt and t-shirt were the first time he could remember that *anyone* had ever touched any part of his bare skin other than his face or hands.

Perhaps Madam Pomfrey had prodded his arm that time she'd had to give him Skele-Gro, but that had been completely different from having his bare stomach caressed by a would-be lover.

Draco's hand guided Harry's gaze up to meet his own. "Really?" he asked. "I'd thought you would have had plenty of opportunity. I mean, you've had a lot of admirers."

Harry shook his head, bringing his hand up to take Draco's. "I saw the way people looked at me, Draco. They didn't want *me*. They wanted the hero from the pages of the Daily Prophet."

"So you didn't -?"

"No. I didn't."

"Well, you must have had *some* experience, haven't you?"

Harry backed away from Draco, annoyed with his questions. "One kiss, alright? Before you, I'd had exactly one kiss, in my entire life."

Draco looked stunned. "But you're so *good* at it," he said, with an evident astonishment that made Harry laugh.

"I suppose I'm a fast learner," he replied, stepping closer to Draco again.

Draco opened his mouth as though to make a smart retort, then appeared to think the better of it, and reached for Harry again. Harry took hold of his hands, locking Draco's eyes with his own.

"But that doesn't mean I *want* to learn fast, at least not yet," he continued. "I think I need to take this slow. Can you do that?"

Draco rolled his eyes, but his smile was gentle. "Of course, Harry," he murmured. "Only I can't promise to control myself around you *all* the time."

When Harry looked at Draco questioningly, Draco met his eyes and laughed lightly.

"You're *hot*, Harry. When I'm with you, self-control isn't the first thing on my mind."

Harry flushed very deeply at that and backed up to sit on the edge of Draco's bed. "Alright, then," he said quietly, looking away shyly.

Draco moved to sit next to Harry on the bed. "I think," he said, removing Harry's glasses and placing them on his night stand, "that we should start right here." His light touch to Harry's shoulder guided them both into a horizontal position on the bed. He wrapped him up in his arms and simply held him, breath feathering across Harry's cheek.

Harry was beginning to relax into the feeling of Draco's body lying next to his, when a rattling noise came from the door.

"Draco?" sounded Goyle's voice. "What's going on? Are you in there?"

Draco and Harry stared at each other for a second before springing into action. Harry shoved his glasses back onto his face. He grabbed his robes and bookbag from the floor, stuffing one into the other, then threw his Cloak over himself and everything he was carrying. As he did, a splash of colour caught his eye from behind Draco's wardrobe. He hadn't noticed before because its green

blended so well with all the other shades in the room. There was something familiar about it, though.

Before Harry could think, Draco was grabbing him and pushing him toward the door.

"Alright, alright," Draco grumbled, perfectly imitating the manner of someone who had accidentally fallen asleep and was unappreciative of being awakened. He threw the door open to reveal Goyle and Crabbe, both, carrying their bookbags and a handful each of cakes from the kitchens.

"Where have you two been?" he demanded, as though he'd been waiting impatiently and not at all trying to steal time alone with his secret boyfriend.

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a look. "Library and kitchens, what'dja think?" responded Crabbe, raising each hand in turn to demonstrate the evidence of their evening.

"Is Pansy back yet? I need to talk to her."

"Don't think so," answered Goyle with a shrug. "Isn't she patrolling until midnight?"

Draco checked his watch, angling his wrist so Harry could see, as well. It was five minutes before the hour. Perfect.

"I'm going to go up and wait for her," he told the other boys. "I'll be back in a while."

Without another word, he swept out the door and into the corridor, Harry keeping close behind him.

It was pitch black in the stairway, so neither could see the other when Draco turned again to gather Harry into his arms.

"This is so strange," he commented. "I can feel you against me, but I can't see anything at all."

"I can't see anything, either," Harry pointed out. "It's pitch black in here."

Draco held him a moment longer without speaking, and then whispered into his ear. "When Pansy walks into the common room, I'll distract her long enough for her to leave the door open so you can get out. We won't have long if other people are still up, though."

Harry found Draco's lips in the darkness, and pressed his briefly against them, feeling the slide of the Invisibility Cloak between them. "Thank you," he said.

Draco held Harry tight for a moment before releasing him. "Let's get you out of here," he said.

When Harry slipped through the portrait hole, he knew to expect that the common room might be occupied. He couldn't risk being caught out so late, though, so he took his chances that his entrance might be noticed.

Unfortunately, Hermione and Ron were waiting up expressly for him. Having the Head Boy and Girl for your best friends could get awkward at times.

"Where have you been?" asked Ron, making a surprisingly accurate grab at pulling the Cloak off of Harry.

"Detention with Snape," evaded Harry as he retrieved the fabric from his very annoyed-looking best mate. "He kept us late."

"Past midnight?" demanded Ron, but to Harry's relief, he looked more indignant than suspicious. Hermione, of course was a different story.

Harry muttered something unintelligible.

"Hang on," added Ron. "If you were only coming back from detention, why were you wearing the Cloak?"

Harry's mind caught hold of the first plausible image it could find: the cakes in Crabbe's and Goyle's hands. "I was hungry after, so I snuck to the kitchens for a quick snack."

Hermione clearly hadn't believed a single word, but kept mercifully quiet on the subject. She did, however, remind Harry of the importance of not losing any House points. "You ought to be more careful," she scolded.

Harry cut his eyes toward Ron, remembering what his best friend had seen in the mirror of Erised back in First Year. He felt badly, then, thinking of how close he'd come to letting Ron down. He promised himself then, no matter what happened with Draco, no matter how loyal he felt to his very Slytherin new boyfriend, he would make sure to help Ron win the House Cup for Gryffindor.

"Sorry," he told them both, sincerely. "Listen, I'm knackered. If I promise to follow the rules from now on, can I go up to bed?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Harry, we didn't wait up for you to scold you about being late," said Hermione, looking even more serious than before. She brought her hand out of her pocket. It was clutching a folded page of paper.

Harry tried to remember where he'd seen it before.

"I don't know what it means," Hermione was saying, as she opened it to reveal close-spaced writing covering one entire side, "so that's why I didn't want to say anything at breakfast this morning. But I talked to Ron, and we both think you should see this - even if we don't know if it's anything."

"If *what* is anything, Hermione?" asked Harry, bewildered. He couldn't fathom what a letter to Hermione from her aunt could *possibly* have to do with him. "Ron?"

Ron screwed up his face, clearly unsure how to explain. "It's ... I don't know, Harry," he said. "You need to read it yourself." His eyes were beseeching.

Harry took the page in his hand, then, and began to read. His heart stopped somewhere in the middle of the third paragraph.

Dear Hermione,

Many congratulations on your engagement, as well! I'd had no idea that you and Ron were so serious. I'm thrilled that you've found someone who makes you so happy. Can't wait to meet him.

As for your request, ... well, you know that we're planning a very small ceremony, but normally I'd say that there's always room for one more. The thing is, in this case ... I'm hesitating, because I don't know how to explain it: Persephone reacted very oddly when I mentioned your friend Harry. I've known her fifteen years and I've never seen her so startled.

I can't ask her why - she changes the subject whenever I try. There's a funny coincidence, in that Persephone's middle name is Potter, but that's a common name, right? Only, I don't know anything at all about P.'s family back in England, if there is any, and she never talks about her childhood at all. I'd ask her mother, who lives here in Salem, but she has always been a very secretive and nervous woman, and I can't imagine getting her to talk about the past.

I don't suppose your friend Harry might have a long-lost cousin in America? Sounds sort of ridiculous, doesn't it? But I simply can't think of what could have caused Persephone to react quite so strongly upon hearing his name, unless it were something like that.

I await your reply, and remain

*Your affectionate aunt,
Emma*

"But ..." Harry could barely get the words out. "My father's family is dead. Everyone's always told me that all the Potters are dead."

Ron was looking at him searchingly. "It *is* possible, though, right Harry? If she were a distant cousin or something? Could Persephone be a Potter who lived, and no one ever knew?"

Harry was shaking his head, but he wasn't sure whether it was a denial or an attempt to keep the lights from going all funny in his eyes. He didn't know how he managed to take enough air to answer:

"No. It couldn't be. Someone would have told me."

As he spoke, he felt that place inside his chest or his gut do that reaching-out thing, as though it weren't listening to his words for a single moment.

THANK YOU!!!!!!

Future chapters will hopefully happen at more frequent intervals, to make up for all of the waiting I've made you lot do! (And because MagicofIsis is going to smack me if I don't get this thing out of WIP status soon.)

The title of Part III comes from my very favourite quotation ever, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." I've seen it attributed to various sources, and I choose John Lennon's song 'Beautiful Boy.'

When I began this story, more than two years ago, I was not yet aware that the timeline of the HPverse is set in time with ours (Harry's First Year corresponds with 1991-92, etc.), so I made my own choice. You may remember that, in Chapter 6, Hermione learns that her aunt had just been married to her longtime partner, because of a new Massachusetts law. That law went into effect in May of 2004 and is happily still going strong.