What If?

by Eviesreality

Summary

This is an alternative timeline fic, based on Harry and Draco meeting slightly differently in first year and therefore not immediately having prejudices about each other. It follows the canon pretty closely, though (obviously) there are several major differences. The fic alternates between Draco and Harry’s Points of view.

Notes

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Chapter One

Draco hadn’t shown it, but the fact that he was actually going to Hogwarts had filled him with excitement ever since he had received his letter earlier that year. Not that it had come as a surprise - he knew he would be attending the school. But having the letter in his hands made the reality of his future very real. Having been home schooled, Draco's only interaction with other people his age had been the boring 'play dates' his parents occasionally organised. Part of him was slightly apprehensive, if not scared, of the apparently cutthroat Slytherin house (for he would be in Slytherin - he had to be), but the other half was excited. For the first time in his life, he would be around people his age. And while Slytherins weren't exactly the friendliest of people, at least they were like him.

Draco took a deep breath and walked purposefully onto the Hogwarts Express after saying goodbye to his parents, pulling his trunk behind him. The train hummed with energy as hundreds of students battled their way to their respective carriages. He had only ever seen so many people at the yearly Christmas Ball at Malfoy Manor, but the feeling of this crowd was very different. Instead of the reserved - almost suspicious - way the guests carried themselves, this crowd pulsed with excitement. The friendly hopefulness of the train was tangible as magic in the air, and it filled him with a happiness he wasn't used to feeling.

The Slytherins always sat towards the back of the train, according to Draco's father. The carriage would no doubt contain many children who had been raised similarly to him, including the closest thing Draco had to a best friend - Blaise Zabinni. However, after considering a moment, Draco decided not to visit the Slytherins just yet. He probably wouldn't have the time to be alone with his thoughts for some time (considering he would be in a dorm with lots of other people until the Christmas holidays), so instead of heading to the expected carriage, Draco found the compartment with the fewest people within to sit in, at least for a while. The best he could see was a compartment containing two boys who looked to be his age, one ginger and freckled, one with a mess of black hair and glasses. The latter had just burst out laughing at something the ginger said. Draco knocked on the door hesitantly, before pushing it open and asking quietly:

"Uh, do you guys mind if I sit in this carriage?"

0o0oHarry0o0o

"No, not at all," said Harry smilingly, studying the boy as he closed the door quietly and sat down lightly on Ron's side, a good distance from him. He was striking in a way, maybe because of his bright hair, and he carried himself proudly, with his chin up and his back straight. He didn't say anything as he sat down, so after a few seconds, Ron concluded his story.

"So, anyway, to cut a long story short, the twins told Percy that they would jinx him because of it. No one took them seriously, but we should have because next day he woke up with his head swollen to at least three times its usual size! We could barely get him in the car to bring him to St Mungo's." This made Harry laugh again, before realising that, once again, he didn't understand something.

"Wait, what's St Mungo's?"

"Just a wizard hospital." Ron shrugged. "Sorry, I thought you would know."

Harry was very aware of how little he knew about the Wizarding World, and felt relieved that Ron didn't make fun of him for it. There was now a break in the conversation, during which time Harry resolved to engage the blond boy in conversation. He knew how it felt to be left out, and he didn't want the other boy to feel like that.
"So, you excited to go to Hogwarts?"

It took a second before the boy realised that Harry was talking to him. He looked vaguely surprised, but replied steadily;

"Yeah, I guess. Bit nervous. I was homeschooled, so I don't really know how this sort of school works."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. I was raised in the Muggle World, so I don't really know much about magic or anything."

A flash of wariness crossed the boy's face. "So... you're muggle born?"

"No, Just muggle raised."

The boy looked relieved, but whatever he was about to say was lost when a girl and a boy suddenly appeared outside their carriage and the girl stuck her head around the door. "Has anyone seen a toad?" She asked, in an articulate sounding accent. "Neville's lost one."

The boy behind her, who must have been Neville, looked very upset. His face had gone a funny shade of red in his distress.

"Sorry," said Ron "no toads here,"

"Well if anyone sees him, do tell us. Neville doesn't want to lose him. Do you, Neville?."

The boys got back to talking, and Harry soon found himself laughing along with the other two, feeling oddly included by them. It wasn't a sensation he was used to. At some point, the girl - apparently called Hermione - burst in once more and decided to fix Harry's glasses to show that she could do magic properly. It wasn't that Harry was ungrateful, but she was very precocious. The boys ate sweets from the trolley as the sky outside darkened, and before anyone knew it, the train was pulling in at the station. As the boys gathered their trunks and donned their robes, it occurred to Harry that he hadn't actually found out the other boy's name. So he asked.

"I'm Draco Malfoy," The boy said, making it sound like he thought the name should mean something to Harry and Ron. "You?"

"Ron Weasley," said Ron, but despite his shaking Draco's hand, Harry noticed a change in Ron's tone. He sounded colder.

"Harry Potter. Nice to meet you". Harry went to shake Draco's hand, but it was pulled swiftly from reach. Draco suddenly looked very guarded, and said carefully,

"You're not actually Harry Potter, are you?"

"He is!" Ron nodded excitedly. "Show him your scar, Harry,"

Harry pushed back his hair to reveal the lightning scar on his forehead, and Draco gawped for a second, looking a little scared. Then he straightened his back and lifted his chin a little.

"I'm sorry Potter, Weasley, but I don't think its possible for me to be friends with you. My father would never allow it. But it was nice talking to both of you." Draco then picked up his trunks and swept out of the carriage. Harry and Ron looked at each other in bewilderment.

"What the hell did he mean by that?" Asked Ron. Harry just shook his head.
The feast was amazing, and Harry often caught himself transfixed, staring at the stormy bewitched ceiling of the hall, and the floating candles which never burned out. He had watched Draco being sorted into Slytherin with a sense of disappointment, before getting sorted into Gryffindor himself, alongside Ron, Hermione, and the boy called Neville (who had found his toad, apparently), and was halfway through a conversation with Fred and George when he noticed that Draco seemed to be staring at him, though he looked away when Harry looked over at him and engaged the dark-haired girl beside him in conversation. At this point, Harry was beginning to think that Draco might be a little crazy.

As the food magically disappeared from the plates, leaving them spotless, a very old wizard, who's pure white hair and beard brushed the floor, stood up and began to talk in a kind but authoritative-sounding voice. "To all our new first years," He began, arms outstretched in an open gesture, "welcome. To our returning students, welcome back. Now, before I allow you all to go to your sleeping quarters, I would like to remind you all that the forbidden forest is out of bounds. We do not want a repeat of the shenanigans of last year," Harry saw Ron's older twin brothers exchange glances. "Also out of bounds, as of this year, is the third-floor corridor, unless you wish to die a painful death." The old wizard's face looked seriously down at them for a moment, and Harry felt as though each of them had been examined individually in the brief pause. Then, a smile broke across the wrinkled skin, and the feeling was gone. "Thank you, sleep tight!"

Harry and Ron, as well as many of the other first years, looked at each other worriedly. However, none of the other students seemed phased. Apparently, imminent death was something you grew used to at Hogwarts. Harry, Ron and the other first years followed one of Ron's brothers, Percy, to the Gryffindor dorm, and soon found themselves in their new four-posters. Harry lay in the bed next to Ron talking quietly through the curtains. They discussed the feast and the threat about the third-floor corridor before the conversation turned to Draco. Harry was still confused, but Ron didn't seem bothered.

"To be honest, it doesn't surprise me." He said sleepily. "He seemed nice at first, but he's a Malfoy, and everyone knows that Malfoys are one of the most stuck up pureblood families in our world. My dad always complains about his dad, because he causes so many problems for dad's department in the ministry. And now he's been sorted into Slytherin. I think it's a sign that we shouldn't hang around him anyway."

"He seemed really nice on the train," Said Harry sadly, "Funny, too."

"yeah, well. Sometimes people are disappointing. I'll tell you what wasn't disappointing, though,"

"What?"

"The food. Best feast ever."

0o0oDraco0o0o

Down in the Slytherin dorm, Draco couldn't sleep. This wasn't a strange occurrence, however - Draco had struggled with insomnia since he was very young, and hadn't even slept well as a baby. He was thinking about the two boys he'd met on the train - Harry and Ron. Honestly, could his luck be any worse? Usually, he wouldn't even have to think about being friends with people like that, but now, a sliver of doubt had found its way into his mind. They had seemed so nice. He was sure he had done the right thing, though. His father could be rather... severe... when Draco did something he didn't like. And surely fraternising with the boy who'd brought about the Dark Lord's downfall would be one of those things?
All his life, Draco’s only experience with other children was with stuck up, spoilt kids. They never let their guard down or spoke freely, and neither did he. It simply wasn’t *the done thing*. He thought that was just the way it was. But Harry and Ron put him at ease, to the point where he found himself talking about his personal life like it was nothing. Usually, he never felt like he could trust someone after only a few hours of knowing each other, but Harry and Ron were different, and it confused him.

But none of that mattered. He was heir to the Malfoy family, descended from the purest blood you could find anywhere in Britain. He didn’t care about trust. He cared about control, and power. That was what Malfoys cared about.

*Maybe, he thought, if I tell myself that enough, I'll start to believe it.*
"We have Transfiguration first with the Ravenclaws, then potions with Slytherin, then break," read Ron over breakfast. "Then Charms with Hufflepuff, Flying with Slytherin, Defense against the Dark Arts with Slytherin again, Herbology with the Slytherins-"

"Why do we have so many classes with Slytherin?" Asked Harry, annoyed, looking at his own timetable. "Five out of nine classes are with Slytherin, three with Ravenclaw, and only one with Hufflepuff."

"That's just how it is, mate," Said Fred, "It might be different next year."

"Yeah, we had that same sort of timetable last year," Said George, "But this year we're mostly with Hufflepuff."

Harry didn't know much about the Slytherins, or any of the houses for that matter, but he knew that most people considered them to be the 'bad house' due to its dark history. Apparently, Voldemort himself had been in Slytherin. But Draco had seemed nice enough - maybe people were exaggerating?

"As I was saying," Continued Ron, "We finish with Astronomy. But instead of going straight to class, we have dinner then wait until it's a bit dark outside before going up to the astronomy tower."

"What do we do until dinner?"

Ron shrugged "Muck about I guess, same as we would after a normal school day."

Snape's potions class was held in the musty, damp dungeons, illuminated only by candles and cauldron fires. The air seemed thick as Draco walked to the back of the class with the rest of the Slytherins and took his seat there. His godfather's class was one of his favourites, though he didn't imagine he would be paying much attention - he already knew all of what they would cover this year. Draco had made his first potion - a cough draught, aged seven, and had been hooked on potion-making ever since. he made countless potions with the potions kit he had received as a Christmas gift from his mother, perfecting each recipe before testing them out on the house elves. This meant that this class would probably be a bore. He would have to sit through hundreds of lessons that he had taught himself years ago.

Snape burst dramatically into the class, cloak billowing behind him, and took his place on the slightly raised area at the front. He surveyed the class for a moment before beginning to talk, lecturing them on the "subtle art of potion-making". It didn't take long before he spied Harry, sitting next to Ron at the front of the class. A crooked smile came across his face, though it didn't meet his eyes. "Ah, Mr Potter. Our new... celebrity." Draco watched with the rest of the Slytherins as Snape began to fire questions at Harry, none of which he could answer (Draco could, though), and taking points from Gryffindor. Though Draco knew it wasn't fair to ask a boy who hadn't had any magical education to answer difficult questions, he snickered along with the rest of the Slytherins. Conformity was, unfortunately, a necessary part of the house.

Eventually, Snape seemed to get bored of taking ten points from Gryffindor and began to actually teach the class. There was to be no practical potion making today, only theory, all of which Draco knew. He began to doodle idly on his parchment, drawing Harry purely because he was directly in
front of him. Draco liked drawing, though he wasn't very good yet. However, he was good enough that he was getting weird looks, and quickly scribbled out the sketch.

"Were you just drawing Potter?" laughed Pansy Parkinson, a girl who Draco had known since they were both toddlers. She could be pretty, with a very pointed nose and pitch-black hair styled in a shoulder-grazing bob, but the fact was that she was too cruel to be beautiful. Everything about her was sharp, from her nose to her words.

"No!" Draco quickly hid the drawing with a piece of parchment. "Well, kind of. I was just drawing what was in front of me because I'm bored. I already know all this stuff. Gryffindor is definitely going to hold us back."

"Yeah, this is really easy stuff." She said, sniffily. "And you know what's worse? That stupid Granger girl who thinks she knows everything, even though she's just a mudblood."

Draco made a non-committal noise and went back to staring unseeing at the blackboard. Granger might be a little precocious, but it was impressive how much she had taught herself in so little time. And who cared that she was a mudblood?

Draco's gaze fell on Harry and Ron, who were talking quietly while half paying attention to Snape. Didn't they realise that talking would just get them in trouble? Sure enough, Snape's gaze fell upon them and he sneered.

"Malfoy, please swap seats with Weasley. Maybe that will teach them to shut up when I'm talking. And ten points from Gryffindor for interrupting."

Malfoy groaned as he gathered up his stuff, but in reality, he didn't care that much. It wasn't like he was going to miss Pansy's conversation. Ron, on the other hand, looked thunderous as he trudged over to take the seat next to Pansy, while Draco sat down lightly next to Harry. He received a smile from Him as he sat down, which he didn't return. He didn't need some Slytherin snitching to their parents that Draco Malfoy was befriending Harry Potter. His father would probably kill him. However, when he noticed Harry struggling to answer the questions on the board, he still explained the answers. There was no harm in helping him catch up, right?

After potions, there was a brief break during which time Draco hung out with some of the other higher-ranking Slytherins. He was beginning to realise how far his father's influence reached, as he could see the other Slytherins already respected him, influenced by their parent's respect - or fear - of his father. However, to stay at the top of the food chain, you need to show no weaknesses. The Slytherin hierarchy was the same: show anything less than raw self-preservation, and you were instantly prey. Sell out a fellow Slytherin or ally, and you would be hunted. This was a game Draco played expertly: his emotions always veiled; his demeanour proud and strong, and he displayed fierce loyalty to those he felt deserved it. This was second nature to him; he had been raised in this way of being.

After break, they had an engaging Transfigurations lesson with the Hufflepuffs, followed by flying with the Gryffindors and the formidable Madam Hooch. Draco already knew how to fly and had resigned himself to yet another boring class, but before he knew it, things began to get interesting. Neville, idiot he was, efficiently lost control of his broom and before anyone had the chance to do anything he was on the ground with a broken arm. The Gryffindors looked on worriedly as the Slytherins snickered. However, no one except Draco saw Neville's Remembrall lying disregarded on the ground, and no one noticed Draco as bent and discreetly picked it up.

"I'm taking Longbottom to the infirmary," Stated Madame Hooch in her usual no-nonsense tone, holding Neville's shoulder as she strode towards the school. "I want your feet firmly on the ground
while I'm gone. If I catch anyone flying, you'll be expelled faster than you can say Quidditch."

As soon as she and Longbottom had disappeared into the school building, Draco turned to the other students. "Longbottom seems to have dropped his little toy," He said in a snide voice "Shame. If he had it, he might have remembered to fall on his fat arse!" The Slytherins all laughed appreciatively.

"Give it here, Malfoy!" Cut Harry, but Draco enjoyed the positive attention he was receiving from his housemates. He couldn't back down now.

"If you want it so badly, come and get it!" Draco hopped onto his broom and sped off, the laughter of the Slytherins following him. When he reached a good height he turned to see Harry close on his tail.

"Give it back Malfoy, or I'll knock you off your broom!"

"Is that so?" sneered Draco, and dodged as Harry made a grab for the Remembrall. "Have it your way then." He threw the Remembrall as far as he could and watched, impressed, as Harry went streaking after it. As Harry neared the wall he flinched, expecting to see him go smashing into the wall alongside the Remembrall. However, what he actually saw was Harry making an incredible catch before stopping barely inches away from the school building. Draco let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding and watched Harry descend into a throng of cheering Gryffindors.

Then all of a sudden, Harry was being led back into the school by Professor McGonagall.

Well, shit.

0o0o

Harry hadn't been seen since the 'Remembrall Incident', and the amount of hatred directed at Draco by the Gryffindors was actually borderline Slytherin. Even kids in the older years were giving him dirty looks. Weasley must have spoken to his brothers. They must think Potter had been expelled, and maybe he had. Draco ignored the feeling of guilt and focused instead on the positive side: his move against the Gryffindors had secured him his correct place in the Slytherin world: the top of the social ladder. Wherever he went, his housemates congratulated him, and even the burly kids in the years above him gave him respectful nods. However, this attitude didn't appear to have spread to his Godfather, who called him out of his Herbology class during sixth period.

"Excuse me, Professor Sprout? May I borrow Malfoy for a moment?"

When Malfoy got out of the greenhouse, he and Snape took a short walk. In this time, Snape told him a number of things several times: how stupid he was, how immature he was, how he could have been expelled, and how angry his father would be when he received the letter from Dumbledore. He finished by informing Draco that he was to report to his office after school that day for detention.

"It's not my choice whether or not you have detention, Draco. McGonagall insisted. The best I could do was to convince her to let you have it with me instead of with her. And by the way, Potter is now on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

Needless to say, Draco wasn't. His face burned as he re-entered the greenhouse. Blaise raised an eyebrow at him. Draco ignored the look and got back to propagating his lurchweed specimen.

He had messed up within the first week. How could he have been so stupid? And now his father would find out, and then...

Blinking hard, Draco concentrated on gardening.
"Oi, Potter!"

Harry turned to see that Draco was storming towards him, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"What do you want, Draco?"

"That's Malfoy to you, Potter," Draco spat. "Do you know how much trouble I'm in because of you?"

"It's hardly my fault you decided to steal Neville's Remembrall is it?" Harry said defensively, still not sure what was going on.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Like you would know."

Ron came up beside Harry. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? It doesn't even make sense," Malfoy looked at Ron meanly, before turning back to Harry.

"Tell you what Potter? Let's sort this out properly. Meet me in the trophy room at midnight tonight, and we'll duel."

"What?" Harry spluttered. "You wish Malfoy. See you at midnight."

"Scared, Potter?" Draco sneered. Angrily, Harry glared at him.

"You wish, Malfoy. See you at midnight."

Draco watched Harry and Ron walk away with a sense of satisfaction before turning around and making his way to Filch's office. Of course, he wouldn't turn up to some childish duel. But Filch would.
Chapter Three

Life at Hogwarts began to fall into a routine over the next few weeks. After what had become known widely as the 'Remembrall Incident', Harry had fallen in love with quidditch, and the Gryffindor quidditch team had accepted him without batting an eye. Their friendship was especially strengthened when he won their first match of the year. The feeling of belonging was still alien to Harry. After feeling worthless for his whole life, the feeling of fitting in and being cared for was almost disconcerting. But it felt amazing not being hated and made fun of wherever he went.

Harry's least favourite part of school was Malfoy. Gone was Draco, the boy he met on the train, with his easy conversation and satirical humour. Any last shred of hope he had for his and Draco's friendship disappeared when Draco had set him up to be caught out of bed after curfew because of that stupid duel. Not only had Filch almost caught Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they had managed (in their luck) to stumble upon a gigantic three-headed dog with an anger problem. Harry wasn't certain why a school would have a monster chained up inside it, but he wasn't going to ask.

Now, all Malfoy did was make fun of anyone who wasn't Slytherin, and strut around with his cronies as if he ran the school. It didn't help that Snape had devised a seating plan in potions, and he now was forced to sit next to Malfoy for entire fifty-minute lessons. While Malfoy had given helped him on the first day, everything had changed after the 'Remembrall Incident'. Malfoy spent the entire period making fun of Harry for his 'incompetence'. To make matters worse, whenever Harry retaliated Snape took points off of Gryffindor.

However, Malfoy couldn't make Harry feel too bad. He was the happiest he had ever been in his life.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Father,

School is going well. You will be glad to hear that I am top of the class in most of my subjects, especially potions (as you know, I have already taught myself all the potions we will cover this year). My fellow Slytherins respect me, especially after the incident with Potter and the remembrall, which you have no doubt heard about already. I apologise for my indiscretion in relation to this event; rest assured that I will not get caught doing something like this again.

As you know, Harry Potter is in my year at school. It may amuse you to know that he is a close friend of Ronald Weasley – I suppose blood traitors seek each other out, even if they do not realize it. It may also amuse you to know that he is insufferably bad at potions, which I know because I am doomed to sit next to him in the class. However, he is not bad at flying, and as a result of the 'Remembrall Incident', has been accepted as seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Unfortunately, the Gryffindors beat Slytherin in the first match of the year. But it was hardly fair - he has a Nimbus 2000!

Yours,

Draco
Harry and Ron trudged towards the dungeons for first lesson, both dreading the upcoming fifty minutes. Even despite Snape, the class could have been interesting if the seating plan wasn't what it was. But unfortunately, Harry was forced to endure Malfoy while Ron bore the precocious Hermione. In fact, not one person in the class seemed happy with the arrangements, and the result was a pissed off mess. Add that to the fact that Draco used his gift with potions to make Harry feel utterly useless, and the result was torture. There were few places Harry hated more than Potions.

The lesson passed slowly. Malfoy, as usual, used Harry as a servant while they brewed the Anti-Acne Potion, and forced him to do only the boringly simple menial tasks while he got to actually make the potion. They talked very little, apart from the occasional jibe from Malfoy outlining something Harry had done wrong. By the time the lesson had finally finished, the potion was perfect and Harry was in a mood. He only grunted at Ron as they made their way to their second lesson: Charms.

Draco watched Weasley and Potter make their way to Hagrid's hut after school, and set off after them as soon as they were inside. He got there in about ten minutes, and quietly stood next to the open window, listening intently.

"But I just can't bear for him to be all on his own! What if the other dragons are mean to 'im?"

_Idiotic buffoon_, thought Draco. As if dragons had feelings like humans did.

"I'm sure he'll be fine, Hagrid," came Weasley's voice through the window. "Charlie's really good with dragons, he'll look after him. He's even given us a date for collecting him, it's all sorted out. Harry and I'll meet him at the astronomy tower at midnight next Saturday, and Charlie can fly him back with his friends."

"It's for the best, Hagrid." Said Potter. "I mean, what could you do once Norbert gets really big, huh? You might get fired, and Norbert might be killed."

So they _were_ sending him away. Draco was surprised to hear Hagrid's sobs through the window. Really, who cared that much about a dragon? Hagrid spoke between sobs;

"You're sure 'e'll be okay? They'll... they'll look after 'im?"

"Yeah, they will Hagrid. We promise."

At this point, Draco sensed that the conversation was drawing to a close. He began to retreat towards the castle, a plan already forming in his mind.

"Just _what_ do you think you're doing, Malfoy?!"

The angry voice of Professor McGonagall cut through the dark air. Harry and Ron froze in an alcove, hiding in the shadows, willing Norbert to stay still in his case. Darkness pressed in on them as they held their breath and listened.

"You don't understand Professor," Came Malfoy's voice, sounding panicked. "Harry Potter's
coming, he's got a dragon-"

"I've never heard such nonsense! Twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around out of hours, telling blatant lies! You, boy, are coming with me. We'll see what Professor Snape makes of this."

McGonagall sounded severely pissed off and practically dragged Malfoy down the corridor. Harry was relieved that it was Malfoy on the receiving end, not him. The boys only moved from their hiding place when they could no longer hear McGonagall and Malfoy.

"Hah!" laughed Ron "I can't believe Malfoy's in detention over us!"

"Shh," hushed Harry, though he was grinning too. "We can still get caught."

The boys managed to make it up the spiral staircase to astronomy tower, sighing as they put Norbert down and shaking out their stiff arms. Star littered the night sky outside, and the two boys sat on the windowsill of one of the arched windows, talking quietly while they looked out for Charlie and his friends. After what seemed like an oddly long time - though it could only have been about twenty minutes - the shapes of about ten people became discernible in the night. They grew gradually larger, and the boys opened the window to allow them space to enter. Charlie's friends were a lively bunch, and showed the boys an interesting harness they had rigged up to carry Norbert back to Albania. The boys managed to get Norbert, in his case, fastened to the harness and attached to the brooms. The whole thing took about half an hour, and soon they were watching Norbert retreat into the night.

The boys slowly made their way back down the spiral staircase, not being as careful about keeping their voices now because of the triumph they were already feeling. A weight had disappeared from their shoulders, and they were feeling unstoppable. At least, they were until a malicious voice came from the shadows.

"Well, Well, Well, we are in trouble,"

It was Filch.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco watched with disdain as Professor McGonagall tore into Potter and Weasley. The two boys sat staring at the floor in the same place Malfoy had found himself a few minutes earlier. They said little, and looked scared. Neville sat crying in the corner, having been found out of bed as well. Apparently, he had set out to warn the boys about the Draco's plan to catch them, but instead had been caught himself. McGonagall paused for breath, considering forms of punishment, before stating, still sounding furious:

"All four of you shall be given detention, and I'm taking fifty points off. Fifty points each! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!"

The night lasted forever. After what felt like an incredibly long time, all four boys were allowed back to their dormitories with instructions to meet Filch in the entrance hall at nine pm tomorrow evening for detention. However, if it was bad for Draco, it was worse for the Gryffindor boys. Draco didn't feel kindly towards any of them, especially now, but still. It must feel terrible to lose one hundred and fifty points for your house in one night. He shuddered to think what would happen to him if he was in their shoes.

Draco silently made his way to his dorm in the dungeons, changed, and got into bed feeling pissed off with the world. His fellow Slytherins were sure to be angry with him, but once he twisted it to make it look like he lost Gryffindor one hundred and fifty points, they would probably feel much
more sympathetic. Still, he wasn't looking forward to detention. He wondered what kind of sadistic task they would be forced to carry out, and dreaded having to spend more time with Potter and Weasley than was necessary. Some part of Draco still felt a little sad that he couldn't be friends with the two boys, who he'd had such a good time with on the train. But he tried not to think about his feelings. He was a Slytherin and a Malfoy; therefore duty came first, then society. Feelings came about tenth on the list. That was just the way it was. Unfortunately, that didn't stop him from feeling lonely.

Draco had thought that school would be an escape from the constant guardedness he had to maintain at home, but here, as it turned out, it was just as bad. He didn't know how it was in the other houses, but Slytherin was even more cutthroat than he had thought. It was wearing him out: the constant front he had to put up, the way he pretended to be. He thought back to the sorting, when the hat had briefly pondered making Malfoy a Ravenclaw before shouting *Slytherin!* into the hall. Ravenclaw might have been nice - they seemed to get along with each other pretty genuinely... But that didn't matter. He was here, in Slytherin, and he was doing fine. Better than that, he was doing excellently. He was in control, he had status, he was respected. That was what mattered.
Harry spent the whole of the next day worrying about his upcoming detention, and from Ron's stiff, distracted movements, he could tell he felt the same way. It wasn't that Harry was scared of the detention - it was the anger of the other Gryffindors. Even Fred and George weren't talking to them. After getting his first taste of what it was like to have friends, it was a bitter blow to have it ripped away so quickly. Why hadn't they just put the bloody cloak on?

Unfortunately, the more Harry dreaded it, the faster the day seemed to go. Before he knew it, dinner was over the sun was sinking behind ominous clouds. He and Ron prepared to leave in silence, and despite thinking about nothing else all day, still managed to be late. Malfoy sneered at them as they approached the front doors.

"Nice time keeping, Gryffindors." He jeered. "Maybe that Remembrall would have come in handy tonight."

Neville looked at them reproachfully, fear obvious in every movement he made. "Sorry," Harry mouthed. Neville looked away.

"Very clever, boys," Filch muttered as he led them across the grounds, "Chose a nice, cold night for a wander through the grounds." Filch kept a continuous stream of threats going as they walked, putting all the boys on edge, but when Harry realised that they were heading to Hagrid's hut he relaxed a little. He was sure Hagrid wouldn't make them do anything too bad...

As they neared the cabin, Hagrid stepped out of the door with Fang at his heels. Filch greeted him with a nod, and said, loudly,

"I hope you make the little buggers suffer, Hagrid."

Hagrid shook his head as he watched Filch's shuffling figure retreat towards the school.

"Poor old bastard," He said to himself. Then, turning to the boys "Well, what're you waiting for? Let's go." He began to stride towards the forest with Fang galloping at his heels.

"You surely don't mean for us to go in there," Malfoy attempted to sneer, but the quaver in his voice betrayed his fear. "There's dangerous stuff in there, maybe we should-"

"If you didn't want to go in the forest," Said Hagrid impatiently, "You shouldn't've done stupid things what're against the rules."

Malfoy muttered something about his father as they began to walk into the forest, Which Harry didn't quite catch. While they walked, Hagrid filled them in on what they would be doing. Apparently, something was attacking the unicorns and draining their blood. Hagrid shook his head sadly as he spoke.

"Never seen anything like it," He sighed. "To kill a unicorn..."

The forest got darker as they walked deeper in until, even by the light of Hagrid's lamp, the world seemed a spectrum of grey and dark blue. The splashes of unicorn blood were the only bright things in the forest. The eeriest thing about the forest was the way sounds appeared shockingly suddenly - first, there would be complete, dead silence, and suddenly a sound would loom into being without warning, before vanishing and leaving an empty, echoing absence behind it. Harry saw Malfoy jump a little as a wolf (or werewolf?) howled in the distance, the lonely sound creeping around them and
sending shivers through their spines. Finally, Hagrid slowed to a stop and thought for a moment.

"Right," He said, finally, "I think we should split up. Now Harry, Ron, I would usually put you two together, but this is supposed to be a punishment, not an adventure. Ron, Neville, you stick with me, please. Harry and Draco, you guys take Fang. Follow the trail of unicorn blood, and if you come across anything suspicious, send red sparks into the air. I'll come over. Don't yell unless you get attacked, or you'll scare the creature away."

"Is that a bad thing?" Asked Neville shakily.

00oDraco00o

Trying not to show his fear, Draco trailed after Harry through the murky depths of the forest, concentrating on stopping his hands from shaking, and trying not to think about the horror stories the older Slytherins often told about students who had supposedly died horrible deaths in the forest. After the deafening silence of the forest had filled their ears for several minutes, Potter took a deep breath.

"Why couldn't we have been friends?" He sighed, quietly.

Draco was instantly on guard. "What?"

"I don't get it," Harry said, sounding increasingly frustrated. "We were friends on the train. We got on really well. And then as soon as you found out who I was, you hated me."

Draco sighed. "It's complicated, Potter. It's not personal; it's because of who we are. I'm a Slytherin; you're a Gryffindor. I'm a pureblood; you're a blood traitor. Don't you see? My father would never allow me to be friends with you. It's just the way things are."

"Why are you so scared of what your father thinks?"

*It's not what he thinks*, Draco thought to himself, *it's what he does*. He remained silent.

"Can't we at least be nice to each other?" Harry said with exasperation. "That first potions lesson you helped me out. But now you just make fun of me for not understanding. We don't have to be best friends or anything, but at least we could... I don't know... Be civilised? Your father, he doesn't need to know."

They walked on in silence for a while before, at length, Draco answered.

"Why don't you hate me?"

"Why would I hate you?" Asked Potter, seeming surprised.

Draco laughed mirthlessly. "Because I would hate you if our positions were reversed."

"Maybe I prefer to forgive people."

Draco didn't say anything and they continued to walk through the forest. He was confused. On the one hand, there was the fact that he genuinely liked Potter. On the other, there was his father, his house, his duty as a Malfoy. Draco didn't like to imagine what his father would do if he heard... But what if, like Potter said, his father didn't find out? It wasn't like they were going to be best friends.

The silence stretched between the boys as Draco argued back and fourth. He didn't know if the conclusion he came to was the right one.
"Potter." he stopped walking, indicating Potter do the same. Then he took a deep breath. "I'm sorry about the way I've treated you and your friends." He continued. "We can't be friends outside of class; it's too much to risk. However, I think that it couldn't hurt to just be civil like you said. So, shake?"

Potter – or Harry? – grinned and reached out his hand, but just as they were about to shake, a noise made them jump. It sounded like something was slithering. Slowly, Harry moved in front of Draco and approached the source of the noise, Draco close behind.

A unicorn lay on its side in a small clearing, blood dripping thick and slow from multiple lacerations in its side. Its legs stuck out at odd angles and its mane spread pearly white over the ground. It was the most beautiful and sad thing Draco had ever seen. Then, from a dark area behind the unicorn, the noise came again. A stooped figure came crawling out from the shadows towards the unicorn, and lowered its face to one of the cuts on its side. Slowly, it began to lick the blood from the wound.

Bile rose in Draco's throat and without meaning to, he screamed. The creature's head jerked up, blood dripping from its mouth, and stared at the two boys. Fang bolted from the scene, barking loudly. The creature stood up and came towards the two boys swiftly. Harry reacted first, grabbing Draco and pulling him away from the creature, but not fast enough. The creature was upon them, and seemed just about to attack when suddenly the sound of hooves came from behind the two boys, and a large creature leapt around them, colliding with the creature and sending it sprawling away from Draco and Harry.

"Argh!" cried Harry, and Draco turned to see him kneeling on the ground, hands over his scar.

"Harry? What's wrong? Are you ok?" Draco knelt beside him, at a loss for what to do.

"My... scar... feels like it's burning," It sounded like every word Harry spoke was a struggle, and all Draco could do was watch. He stood up, keeping one hand on Harry's shoulder, and turned to see that the creature had disappeared into the night, and in its place stood a centaur.

"Are you alright?" Asked the creature in a worried voice.

"I- I think so. I don't know about Harry, though,"

"My name is Firenze," Said the centaur, as he walked over to Harry. "Mr Potter? Are you ok?"

Harry slowly brought his hand down from his forehead and looked up at the centaur. In a shaky voice, he said "Yeah. Yeah, I'm ok. Thank you." As Harry came to himself, Draco swiftly removed his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"What was that?" Asked Draco, hearing the fear still in his voice.

"A dark creature. Very dark. I trust you know that it has been killing the unicorns?" The boys nodded. Firenze lowered his head in sadness. "Such evil I have never known. To kill something so pure..." He paused and seemed to gather himself before continuing. "Can either of you contact Hagrid?"

Harry, who was now leaning against a tree next to Draco, looked confused. "How did you know we were with Hagrid?"

"Deduction. Can you contact him?"

"I got it. Red Sparks." Draco lifted his wand and sent a shower of red sparks into the air. He watched them shimmer against the darkness of the night, before leaning against Harry's tree to wait and looking down at the ground. In doing so he noticed a cut on Harry's hand. "You want me to heal that
for you? I've got my wand out just now."

Harry looked down at his hand in surprise. "Must have happened when my scar started hurting and I fell down. You know healing spells?"

Draco smiled. "Benefit of being home schooled - you know stuff others don't. Give me your hand." He gently held Harry's hand up and said "Episkey," clearly. Both boys watched as the skin began to seal and the blood ran back under the surface.

"Cool spell," Said Harry, examining the healed skin.

"It only works on very minor injuries. I wonder where Hagrid is? Reckon I should make more sparks?"

"They'll be here soon," Said Firenze, making the boys jump. They had forgotten he was there. "I can hear them faintly."

Harry seemed to remember something. "Hey, Draco, could you maybe apologise to Ron too?"

Draco sighed. Then, reluctantly, he agreed.

0o0oHarry0o0o


"Something was drinking the unicorn's blood, and then it tried to attack us, and then Firenze came and chased it off, and Harry's scar started hurting," Draco said in a rush. He still sounded scared. Harry felt oddly calm.

"My scar's fine. I'm fine." Harry looked at the unicorn, so sad and beautiful and pure, lying on its side. "Whatever killed it must have been incredibly evil."

Hagrid and Firenze shared a look. They both looked solemn and scared. "Thank you for saving the kids, Firenze," Said Hagrid, gruffly. As he turned back to the unicorn, Harry saw a tear run down Hagrid's cheek. The giant stood with his head bowed for a minute, as if paying homage to the dead creature. Then he turned and addressed the group. "Alright, guys. Let's get moving. I want us out of this forest as quickly as possible." As they began to leave the clearing, Harry turned to Firenze.

"Thank you. You risked your life for us."

Firenze looked down at Harry gravely and put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Mr Potter. And you," He looked at Draco, "Be careful too," Firenze turned and gazed up at the sky. "Mars shines brightly tonight."

On the walk back to the castle, Harry could hear Draco talking to Ron quietly. It sounded like they were ok, though Ron seemed reluctant to forgive Malfoy. But something continued to confuse Harry. Why did Draco's father have such a big grudge against Harry? He hadn't ever even met the man.

And why had his scar hurt so badly?
Chapter Six

It was good being back on good terms with Harry and Ron. Draco hadn't realised how draining it was to be snide, but as it turned out, it was much less effort to just be nice. Though Ron still clearly distrusted him, Harry seemed to forgive very easily. The two now enjoyed Potions much more, and Draco was helping Harry catch up on the subject when he could. Outside of potions, he had no contact with either of them, but it felt good to know that there was no bad air between them. He couldn't tell the other Slytherins to stop having a go at them, but he didn't take part in the abuse anymore.

Draco currently sat in the Great Hall, surveying the Halloween feast laid out before him. It was impressive, even to a Malfoy. Food plates were dotted with sweets, pumpkin heads were being used as bowls, live bats flew haphazardly above them. The atmosphere was great - giddy and excited. A thousand kids high on sugar perfectly set the mood. At the Manor, they occasionally had a Halloween feast, though on a smaller scale than this. Usually, they reserved Halloween for closer friends and people with whom his father wanted to 'deal'. Draco never knew exactly what his father did, but it seemed to involve a lot of negotiation with powerful wizards. Across from Draco at the table Pansy was, of course, complaining about some aspect of the feast, following the unwritten Slytherin rule: even if it's good, complain about it.

"This feast is so tacky," She said sniffily. "At home, we have real skeletons. But don't ask where we get them." The surrounding students laughed, more out of habit than humour.

"We enchant pumpkins to sing Halloween songs, instead of using them as gross bowls." Was Blaise Zabinni's input. Blaise had dark hair and skin, and he was good company due to his easy conversation and a good sense of humour. Their mothers were very good friends so, of course, Draco had practically grown up with Blaise. But Draco struggled to really see the other Slytherins as friends. They were more like allies. However, if he'd had to pick the person closest to being his best friend, it would have been Blaise.

Draco participated in the conversation occasionally, but his mind was elsewhere. He had an odd feeling that something was about to happen, though he wasn't sure what. There was a sense of time being suspended in the hall; as though the feast was a waiting room to something greater. He watched the food turn to dessert in front of him, and his friends appreciatively attacking the mountains of sweets, ice cream, truffles, and other delicacies. Draco sucked on a mint and began to phase out, as he often did, following his thoughts hither and thither as the mood took him. If anyone asked him what he thought about during this time, he could never answer them; the memory was gone as soon as he came back to himself. Muggles referred to it as 'daydreaming', a word that Draco had always been rather taken with. Unfortunately, Draco wasn't able to stay in this state of mind long, and he was soon jolted from his thoughts by a cry coming from the middle of the hall.

"Troll! In the dungeons!" The entire student congregation looked up to see Professor Quirrel, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, standing in the middle of the hall dazedly. Draco just about heard him mutter "Thought you ought to know" before he collapsed, out cold, on the floor. A few seconds of silence ensued, wherein the students looked at each other confusedly. Then, as the words sunk in, pandemonium.

"Order!" roared Dumbledore. The congregation ordered themselves. "Please, do not panic. Now, students shall be escorted to their dormitories by the prefects of their house. Teachers will come with me to investigate this 'troll'."

Before anyone knew what was going on, Draco was being herded along with his fellow Slytherins
towards the exit of the Great Hall. There was a great deal of frightened whispering, and many of the Slytherins pushed each other in an effort to get into the corridors. Draco, of course, was very frightened too. He had met a troll once when accompanying his father on a business trip (the purpose of which was to teach Draco something about his father's work) and had almost been killed by it. It hadn't been fun, and his instinct was to take cover and allow someone else to take care of the problem. As he walked towards the dorms, something caught his eyes. Harry and Ron had detached themselves from the Gryffindor group and were whispering hurriedly. Then, very suddenly, they set off in the direction of the dungeons, along a different path to his group. A knot of worry tied itself in his stomach and for a second he considered following them but chickened out. He just hoped they didn't do anything stupid.

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"You did something stupid, didn't you?" Asked Draco, as Harry slid into his potions seat beside him.

"What?"

"I saw you and Ron sneaking off when the troll was loose last night. You did something stupid?"

"What? You must have been imagining things." Draco raised an eyebrow and Harry wavered, and sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll tell you. But pinky promise you won't tell anyone."

Draco scoffed. "What the hell is a pinky promise?"

Harry sighed. "It's a muggle thing. Look, we hold pinkies," Harry held up his pinky and Draco held it with his own, mystified. "And then you say that you promise not to tell anyone what I'm about to tell you."

"What do the pinkies do?"

"Get broken if someone breaks the promise."

"What the hell?" Draco spluttered. "Muggles are crazy!"

"Just say it, Draco." Harry continued, witheringly.

"Fine. I promise not to tell anyone what you're about to tell me."

"Awesome," Harry said, dropping his pinkie. "Now I can tell you."

"You know, Slytherins don't break promises, so it wasn't really necessary to do the whole... uh, pinkie... thing."

Harry just laughed and told Draco to be quiet. He then proceeded to tell Draco a completely unbelievable tale in which he and Ron battled a troll and used only 'Wingardium Leviosa' to knock it out, thus saving Hermione Granger from imminent death and earning them each five points. Draco laughed when Harry finished.

"Okay, Potter, very funny. Now tell me what actually happened."

Harry got increasingly frustrated trying to convince Draco that he was telling the truth. Eventually, this lost him his alleged 'five points' as Snape took them back off. However, Draco did admit that Hermione seemed to be much better friends with the boys now: he had seen her walking with them into the great hall that morning. Still, it was amusing to wind Harry up. He was even going slightly pink from frustration. Yes, this was much better than being enemies.
"Bollocks!" Swore Harry as the potion bubbled and turned bright fluorescent pink.

"Really Potter, it's not that complicated." Draco stirred the potion counterclockwise three times, and it turned teal, the colour the instructions had detailed.

"How do you do that?" Muttered Harry, busying himself again with chopping up some small red berries.

"Chop them smaller, Potter,"

"Chop them smaller, Potter. Do this, Potter, do that, Potter." Mimicked Harry.

"I do not sound like that," Said Draco indignantly.

"I do not sound like that," Mimicked Harry, and winced as Draco kicked him under the table.
Chapter Eight

It was the last day of term, and all anyone could think about was the upcoming Christmas holidays. Harry and Ron sat at the back of the Transfigurations class and half-watched lazily as Professor McGonagall transfigured a beetle into a button and back again while Hermione, the only student paying attention, muttered the incantations along with Professor McGonnagall, and practiced the wand movements under the table.

"This isn't a particularly hard spell," Finished McGonagall, "but it is good practice for the more advanced Transfiguring we will be starting next term. I want you to practice this with your beetles until you can get it easily."

Seamus was chosen to hand out the stag beetles to the class, earning some squeals from the more squeamish girls. Hermione, of course, got the spell first time and produced a pretty little blue button, before swiftly turning it back into a beetle, whereas Harry's still had a couple of legs the first few times he did it, but he managed it in the end and produced a tortoiseshell button. Ron's button crawled around the table, avoiding the wand for all it was worth, though with each try the button lost a leg until, eventually, Ron had created a little red button. Once all three had mastered the spell they set about discussing their plans for the holiday. At least, Ron and Harry listened to Hermione talking about her plans. They would both be staying at Hogwarts, but Hermione was going skiing with her parents - apparently a yearly tradition in their family. Ron couldn't quite get his head around the concept of skiing, saying it was clearly just a pointless muggle sport, and Hermione was saying that it was very fun and a great form of exercise and "Not at all boring, Ronald!"

Harry wasn't sure what to expect from Christmas at Hogwarts, especially as he barely knew how Christmas worked in the first place. It had always been a miserable time of year for him at the Dursleys. Usually, he received things like tissues, or socks, or even nothing at all, and then had to watch Dudley opening his hundreds of presents, sharing in the love that should have been abundant at Christmas, but never quite seemed to reach Harry. He had no idea what Christmas was like in the magical world, but surely anything would be better than the Dursleys. Anyway, Ron was excited, so surely he should be too? Maybe he would even get presents this year...

After Transfigurations, there came Defense Against The Dark Arts with Professor Quirrell. Harry happened to be paired with Draco to practice Protego, the shield charm, and between spells, they talked about Draco's holiday plans (apparently, holidays were all people talked about in the run up to one). Draco complained that he was going to get 'incredibly bored' at home, where there was nothing to do except read, and draw, and talk to his father about things like business and politics – boring stuff. The only good part of Christmas, in Draco's opinion, was getting presents, and that only occupied one day.

"You know," Harry was thinking aloud "You could always write if you're bored. I never receive letters, it might be fun."

Draco shrugged. "I guess if I get very bored I'll consider it an option."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked indignantly.

"Well no offense mate, but writing letters isn't the exactly the most engaging pastime."

"Probably more engaging than politics with your father."

"Touché."
"So you'll write?"

"Yeah, alright. I'll send you a letter with a return address so you can write back."

Draco alighted from the train to see his parents waiting side by side at the side of the platform. Lucius was wearing a billowing tailored cloak, his hand on the cane he carried everywhere, with the silver snake's head in place of a handle. Narcissa Malfoy stood next to him but slightly apart. She was a tall, well-groomed woman with sleek silver hair reaching halfway down her back in perfect, straight strands, and was currently talking to Rose Zabbini (Blaise's mother), a very stylish dark-skinned woman who nearly matched Lucius in height, and gave the impression of being taller through her large, well-kept afro. She was wearing a gold coloured silk shirt and big gold hoop earings. Draco loved Blaise's mother, and had done since he was a child, because she was the sort of person who was a pleasure to be around. She had the same laid-back attitude and sense of humour as her son, and liked to sneak Draco homemade treats whenever she visited, especially if his father wasn't feeding him (a form of punishments that could sometimes see Draco's hips and ribs growing scarily prominent, and hurt even though Draco knew he deserved it).

Draco often wondered why Rose Zabbini had been sorted into Slytherin, but he supposed the Sorting Hat knew better than he did. She had been married seven times but her current husband was a short man with short hair, stouter and darker than his wife, who was rarely seen in anything but a suit. His name was Sorrel. Blaise's father, Eric, had died in the same was as the other five husbands: suddenly, mysteriously, and with all their money left to Rose in their wills. Sorrel wasn't with Rose at the moment, so Draco guessed he was still at the Ministry, where he worked as the head of the International Magical Trading Standards Body.

"Draco, darling!" His mother embraced him quickly, and began fussing over him as usual. His father simply shook his hand. Next to them, Blaise embraced his mother tightly, before the two said their goodbyes and made their way out of the station, shortly followed by the Malfoys.

The ride home was only vaguely awkward. The conversation went something like this:

"I do think you've grown Draco, you look like quite the gentleman!"

"Thank you, Mother,"

"And is school ok?"

"Yes, school's fine."

"Are you keeping up with your work?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

"Yes, it is."

It wasn't exactly engaging. His father said little. In fact, Draco's father only really spoke to him to correct him, instruct him, or to chastise him. He never said anything positive, instead choosing to only ever make comments as to what could be improved. It had been more difficult when he had been very young. Growing up, he had constantly strived to make Lucius proud of him, and his continued failure to do so had left him feeling that there was something wrong with him: that he would never be good enough. It was a bitter feeling which he would carry with him forever.
"You called, father?"

Draco stood in his father's study, waiting to hear why he had been called there. He had been at the Manor a whole week, but this was the first time his father had requested to see him.

The office was made of expensive polished wood, and was full but not cluttered, with three walls covered in bookshelves; and the fourth hung with a large painting of Draco, Lucius, and Narcissa. In the centre of the room there was a large mahogany writing desk, at which his father sat now, finishing a letter he was writing. Draco stood in front of the desk and waited until his father had finished what he was doing, knowing that it was Lucius's custom make people wait for him, and at length, Lucius stood and walked over to where the family eagle owl stood on a perch. He attached the letter to the owl's leg, then made the bird hop onto his arm to be carried outside. All this time Draco stood and waited.

"Walk with me, Draco," Commanded his father, and together they exited the room.

"Tell me," Lucius asked presently, "How goes Hogwarts? In detail."

"It goes well, father. I understand all the classwork; in a lot of subjects I am actually ahead of the curriculum thanks to you and mother's teaching."

"And the other Slytherins? They respect you?"

"Yes, father, especially since I caused a Gryffindor some problems involving a Remembrall, if you recall I told you about it in my letter?"

"Ah yes. You got into trouble for it, but that can't be helped now. Be more careful next time. Now, you said in your letter that Harry Potter is in your school year."

"He is,"

"And?"

"I met him on the train, along with the son of Arthur Weasley. The two are close friends. We talked for some time before I realised who he was, and in truth, we got on well. However, when I realised that he was Harry Potter I told him we couldn't be friends-"

"Why on earth did you do that?!" Lucius Malfoy turned and stood in front of Draco, suddenly looking thunderous.

"W- well," Stuttered Draco, surprised by his father's anger, "I thought you wouldn't approve, seeing as he, well, all the stuff with the Dark Lord," Draco looked at the floor as he spoke, not making eye contact, "I thought he went against your beliefs, and besides, the other Slytherins would see me as a traitor if I were friends with a Gryffindor,"

"Draco," Said his father, in a voice of suppressed rage, "Do you realise what good publicity it would be if you were friends with the savior of the Wizarding World? Do you even comprehend the benefits of having strong allies in high places? Have I taught you nothing?"

"I- I just thought-"

"You thought wrong!" Lucius had a way of towering over Draco when he was angry, making Draco feel tiny and vulnerable. He was doing it now. "Draco, look at me." Draco winced at the revulsion in
Lucius's voice as he said his name, and raised his eyes to meet his father's cold gaze. Lucius removed the glove he was wearing, and Draco felt a crack across his cheek as his father hit him. The pain was sharp and he screwed up his eyes to stop them watering. Crying always made it worse, and shows of weakness always made Lucius angrier.

"Draco, I want you to become friends with Potter. Tell your housemates that it is an investment and that I advised you to do so. They will leave you alone. Now get out of my sight. I have a letter to send."

"Father."

"Now, Draco. Leave."

A/N: I posted the wrong chapter for chapter eight, sorry about that! Here's the correction, enjoy.
Dear Harry,

You remember I said that my father didn’t want us to be friends? I was wrong. He is very much okay with us being friends. Not that it will make much difference anyway, but there you go.

I’m writing as you suggested - because I am bored out of my mind. There really is nothing to do here. However, some good has come of this holiday: Christmas presents! And guess what I got? A snake! She’s beautiful, dark green with black spots down her back and these amazing yellow eyes. She’s very small right now, about as big as my hand (fingers and palm), but when she’s grown she’ll be slightly longer than my arm. I’ve called her Manimi. You get anything good?

I was writing with Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabbini (fellow Slytherins, I think you know them?). Blaise got a new broom – the Nimbus 1700 – and he’s pissed off because he wanted the 2000 model. Pansy got a kitten. Enough said.

So, not that I care, but how is your Christmas going? Did that muggle family send you anything?

Anyway, I’m going to re-read Charles Dickens’ ‘A Christmas Carol’. For a muggle, he wrote some excellent stuff. Just don’t tell my father I was reading muggle novels.

Regards,

Draco

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Draco,

Manimi sounds really cool. Will you take her to school with you? I’d love to have a pet snake, but I love my owl just the same. Her name is Hedwig; Hagrid got her for me as a birthday present.

For Christmas, I got a few presents. The best was an invisibility cloak! I don’t know who sent me it, but they said my father had left it to me, but given to them to look after. It’s amazing, and it works really well. Plus, there’s enough space for more than one person under it! I also got a Weasley jumper from Ron’s mum, which was really nice of her to make.

The muggles sent me socks. I know it sounds bad, but last year they gave me one singular tissue (I had a cold). This is the first year I have ever got proper Christmas presents.

You read Dickens? Ponce.

-Harry

A/N: I posted this as chapter eight accidentally. I have now uploaded the correct chapter eight, and I recommend that you re-read it to understand what is going on.
"Come on, Draco!"

"Ok, ok! Just stop hurrying, can't you? It's hard to walk under this cloak. What did you want to show me so badly?"

Draco and Harry came to a stop in a small room. There was no furniture, apart from a full-length mirror, which had the sort of distressed air that all old mirrors do, standing proudly in the centre of the room.

"So?" Asked Draco, confused. "It's just a mirror."

"No, its not." Harry walked forward to stand in front of the mirror. "It's called the Mirror of Erised. When you stand in front of it, it shows you the thing you most desire. You can't see, but when I look at it, I see myself with my parents. I wanted to show you, I've already shown Ron and Hermione. Go on, stand here."

Draco, still confused, walked to where Harry had been standing. "Harry, I don't-" Draco stopped speaking and stared into the mirror. His father stood behind him, beaming down at him. His own reflection looked up at his father, and they smiled at each other.

"What do you see?" Harry asked quietly, but Draco could only stare at his reflection. His father looked so proud, so happy. And then, Draco realised. His father was looking at him with love. It was an expression that Draco had never seen on his father's face.

It felt as though something inside of him would break.

"Draco?"

"Let's go."

"Why?"

"Let's go."

Draco held his breath as they walked back to their respective dorms, simply nodding at the perplexed Harry when he said goodnight. When he finally reached the Slytherin dorm, he got into his four-poster (being careful not to wake Manimi, who was coiled next to his pillow fast asleep), and cast a silencing charm over himself.

Then, and only then, did Draco allow the tears to flow, as the pain he had felt for years came to the surface, throbbing in his chest.

0o0o0Harry0o0o

"You did what?"

"I showed him the mirror," Harry replied calmly.

"Why? Why would you show him something so secret? And now he knows about the invisibility cloak!" Ron appeared to be in shock.

Hermione closed the book she was reading to join the conversation, which Harry recognised as a bad
sign. Hermione very rarely closed her books. "Why did you do it, Harry?" She asked. "What makes you think you can trust him when he's proved himself untrustworthy several times?"

Harry ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "I don't know, Hermione. I didn't want to show anyone else in Gryffindor, but I wanted someone else to know, like getting a second opinion. He was just the first person I thought of."

"I don't trust him," Stated Ron. "I know he apologised to you, but I don't think that cancels out the other stuff he's done. The remembrall thing, for example? Setting you up to get caught by Filch?"

"He apologised, Ron. And he hasn't done anything like that since then." Harry tried to keep the defensive tone from his voice.

"Still, that doesn't mean you can show him your invisibility cloak, or the mirror. I trust Parvati, but that doesn't mean I'm going to tell her all my secrets, does it?" Hermione, as always, made annoyingly logical points. Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Look. I understand where you guys are coming from. But I did what I did and it can't be changed now. I'm sure he won't tell anyone. Let's just go to bed, please? It's getting late."
Chapter Eleven

As the pupils got back into the swing of school after Christmas, the weeks began to fall away. Before anyone knew it, it was May, and only a few weeks remained of the spring term. Unlike most of his friends, however, Harry was not at all excited for the holiday. There were two reasons for this: the first and most obvious being the Dursleys, whom he would have to live with again; and the second was the fact that he still hadn't stopped Snape from stealing... whatever it was he was trying to steal: the thing guarded by the three-headed dog on the third floor. Their last hope was to trust that Hagrid was well informed, and attempt to prevent Snape from stealing the stone that very night. Snape would travel past the three-headed dog and past the trap door, and they would be there to stop him. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything Harry could do about the Dursleys.

Draco, of course, knew nothing of the trapdoor or the three-headed dog, but this didn't make the summer holidays any happier a prospect for him. He knew that all the summer holidays would bring would be the anger of his father, the quiet hopelessness of his mother, and homework assignments. The mere thought of having to be near his father constantly made him feel ill and, though he loved his mother, she tended to stay quietly in her room. The thought of going back to his 'home' made him feel claustrophobic, despite its spacious rooms and high ceilings.

0o0oHarry0o0o

Harry's hands shook as he took the potion Hermione gave him. "You're sure this is the right one?"

"Positive," replied Hermione, "And my one will bring me back through the other door. I'll make sure Ron is ok, you take care of Snape." Hermione paused. "I- I'm so sorry I can't help you with this. There's only enough potion for one person."

"Don't worry about it Hermione, it isn't your fault. Just go and make sure Ron's okay."

Hermione hugged Harry, holding on for longer than usual before pulling away and wiping a tear from her eye. "Good luck, Harry." Then she was gone, engulfed – though not burned – by the flames leading back to the room with the knocked out mountain troll, through which Ron lay surrounded by gigantic chessmen, blood running from his forehead and into his hair. Harry watched her go, then took a deep breath, downed the oily, rotten-tasting potion, and strode through the flames.

What he saw surprised him. It was not Snape, but Professor Quirrel, who stood in the centre of the room. He was standing in front of a mirror – no, not a mirror - the Mirror of Erised. As Harry entered the room, he turned.

"Ah, Harry. We were wondering when you would join us."

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco ran through the school, not caring that people saw him, not stopping until he came to the hospital wing. Madame Pomfrey looked alarmed and annoyed as he skidded noisily into the room, his pulse pounding through his ears.

"Is Harry Potter here? Is he okay? There's people saying he's dead, is he? Surely he isn't dead? He can't b-"

"Malfy, please, calm down!" Madame Pomfrey looked vaguely worried. She was probably considering giving him an anxiety potion. "Potter is very much alive. He was hurt badly and is currently sleeping, but he will live. Now please, calm yourself. You look quite unwell."
Malfoy felt the knot in his chest loosen slightly, and the fear that Harry had died began to release its hold. "Can I see him?" He asked, still breathless. Madame Pomfrey looked as if she were about to refuse, but then something in her expression softened.

"You may see him for a few minutes only, provided you keep quiet. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger are being treated, too. They are in potion-induced sleep while they heal." She then led Draco over to one of three beds hidden behind clinical curtains, told him to please be quiet, and left.

Draco stared at Harry, who was sleeping peacefully on the hospital bed. He hadn't realised how much he cared about the boy until he had heard the Slytherins discussing his rumoured death in the common room. On hearing this, Draco had stood up, excused himself, calmly walked out of the door, and then ran full pelt across the school to reach the hospital ward, only realising that this was unusual halfway through it. Timidly, Draco reached out a hand and touched Harry's shoulder.

"You know, Potter, it's your own stupid fault for going up against You-Know-Bloody-Who. You're an idiot, Potter. You scared me half to death." He said, shakily, with a vague attempt at his well-practised sneer. He paused, then, in a quieter voice, added, "Get well soon, Harry. I'll miss you in potions."

Before Draco knew it, he was being bustled out of the hospital wing by Madam Pomfrey.

At least he's alive.

End Of Part One
Harry felt a now-familiar rush as he boarded the Hogwarts Express – the feeling of returning home after a long holiday. It was now his fourth time riding the train to Hogwarts, following a summer at The Burrow and an intense Quidditch World Cup, and the train was a mass of life as students moved continuously as a murmuration of starlings or a shoal of fish might do. Sounds and bodies pressed in from all sides as he, Ron, and Hermione pushed through the masses, finally escaping into an empty carriage as the train began to move out of the station. Mrs Weasley and Charlie found their way to the window of the carriage and managed to exchange a few parting words before the train peeled away from the platform, and they became tiny dots before disappearing from sight. Once they began to pick up speed the trio lapsed into easy conversation, and were presently joined by Dean and Seamus, followed by Neville. Of course, it wasn't long before the conversation turned to the Quidditch World Cup, which all present, save Neville, had attended. Neville didn't take part in most of the Quidditch talk, but as the conversation turned to the aftermath of the game, he began to gain interest.

"So you were all there? What happened? I heard that You-Know-Who came back, but there've been all sorts of rumours. My Gran says that the papers can't be trusted with telling the truth."

"Well, she's right. They exaggerated everything in the Prophet." Seamus began, "Dean and I were with me Mam in a tent on the other side of the campsite, so luckily we weren't right in the middle of it. But we could see fire and stuff, and hear some of the screams."

"We were right in the thick of it," Said Ron, shuddering theatrically. "My Dad woke us up in the middle of the night and told us to go to the forest, and on the way there we actually saw the Death-Eaters. They were setting tents on fire and things like that, and they had this muggle family suspended."

"It was really awful," Cut in Hermione "They were playing about with the family, making the kids spin around upside-down and things. It made me feel sick to watch it... and just because they were muggles."

"We got to the forest along with my brothers and sister, but we lost them for a while. Then Malfoy comes along, and guess what he said?" Ron paused for effect "He as good as told us his Dad was part of the Death-Eaters group."

"Seriously?" Neville sounded even more scared than usual at the mention of Malfoy.

"Yeah. Anyway, the slimy git..."

Harry had tuned out of the conversation at the mention of Draco, seeing as it was something of a touchy subject. All through their second year it had been fine, and Draco had treated Harry's friends politely as he'd said he would. But through third year Draco had become steadily rudder, and even mean, to the point where Harry's friends simply refused to understand that he just wasn't like that with Harry, and Harry had been forced to accept that Draco seemed to have become, to put it mildly, an arse.

When Harry had confronted Draco, he had become moody and muttered something about "His father" and "Seeming too friendly", and then continued to make the potion they had been set without another word. The argument this had caused had kept them silent and sullen towards each other for
several weeks, until they had eventually began to talk again. Despite his friends' strong dislike of the Slytherin, it was just easier to be on good terms with him. But Harry wouldn't put up with Draco's jibes, especially not when they were directed at his friends, and this had resulted in a rocky half-friendship. It was complicated, and Harry generally chose not to partake in conversations about him.

"Ron," Said Dean suddenly, pulling Harry from his thoughts, "What the hell is up with your owl?"

Pig was, as usual, incredibly overexcited. The tiny owl flapped around his cage and made a surprising amount of noise for such a small animal. Ron groaned. "That's Pigwidgeon. We call him Pig. He's a bit mental." Ron grabbed his horrible new dress robes and threw them over Pig's cage to muffle the tweeting noise.

"Weasley, what are those." A drawling voice came from the compartment door, and the group turned to see Draco, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, standing in the entrance. "Wait, don't tell me you were actually thinking of wearing them!"

Wow, Draco got tall over the summer, thought Harry. However, what he said was:

"Piss off, Malfoy."

"Nice to see you too, Potter." He surveyed the carriage. "So. Anyone think they're going to enter?"

"Enter what, Malfoy?" Growled Ron.

"Wait, so you mean you don't know?" Asked Draco, feigning surprise. "Well, I suppose your father isn't important enough to be told these things. My Father found out ages ago, I think he may even have been the first to know." Draco continued pompously. "Of course, he told me right away."

"Told you what?"

Draco just smiled and began to leave. "I suppose you'll find out eventually. Nice robes, Weasley."

Only Harry caught the wink Draco sent him on his way out.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco made his way back to his carriage, laughing with Crabbe and Goyle about the Gryffindors' lack of knowledge. Of course Draco felt bad about taunting the Gryffindors – he always did – but he didn't show this as he sat down next to Pansy and threw his arm over her shoulders. It wasn't how he felt, but how his father and peers felt, that mattered. And if they thought he had been fraternising, there would be consequences. As his father had put it - it was one thing to be on good terms, but another to genuinely be friends with Gryffindors. Draco forced himself not to think about the summer before third year, when his father had found out that he had dared to be genuinely nice to the Gryffindors. The unfairness of his father's inconsistency angered Draco to the point that he had actually retaliated when his father had hit him, had shouted, asking what on earth Lucius wanted him to do. This had been a bad idea. Draco winced, and returned to the conversation.

"I think there's going to be some sort of flying challenge." Said Pansy. "The champions will have to complete something on a broom."

"My mum says the tournament will be as much about logic and planning as about skill with practical magic." Said Blaise. "There'll be mind games, no doubt about that."

"What do you think, Draco?"
Draco shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe something to do with the Forbidden Forest?" He hadn't really given the tasks much thought.

"Whatever it is, it's worth the prize. Ten thousand galleons!"

"As if you need ten thousand galleons, Blaise. Your family would see that as pocket change."

"You can talk, Pans."

0000

Draco watched idly as the new first years were sorted into their houses, clapping only when a kid was sorted into Slytherin. It wasn't that he didn't care, but he found watching the sorting pretty boring, and always had. He watched a newly sorted Gryffindor - Dennis Creevey - ogling Harry's scar with awe written across his face, noting Harry's expression of resigned annoyance, before realising that the last student had just been sorted, and tucking into the food that appeared. He ate hungrily; there hadn't been much food going his way over the summer. Even Blaise had noticed that he had lost weight. He planned to put some of it back on, because when he looked in the mirror he got the unwelcome feeling of not recognising oneself, and the thin boy with sickly skin who stared back at him was a constant reminder of that Summer's events.

Eventually, the feast came to an end and, as usual, Dumbledore rose and tapped his glass lightly with a spoon to get the students' attention.

"Good evening, and a warm welcome to all our new first years. As usual, I have a few announcements to make before you all retire to your dorms. Mr Filch has asked me to remind you that fizzing whizbies are now banned, due to an unfortunate event which occurred last year." Draco noticed that the Weasley twins found this particularly funny and shared knowing looks, "Also, for any first years who do not know, and anyone else who may have forgotten, curfew is nine pm sharp. Any student caught out of bounds will be punished severely." Again, the twins shared amused looks.

"Finally and most importantly," continued Dumbledore, "I am excited to inform you that this year, Quidditch is going to be replaced by-"

Pandemonium broke loose across the hall as students furiously objected to the cancellation of Quidditch. Draco was amongst them, yelling at Dumbledore despite the fact that his voice was lost in the cacophony. How dare Dumbledore even think to cancel Quidditch? How dare he take something so important away from them? Dumbledore seemed to prepare to shout over the commotion, but as he opened his mouth a loud bang came from the back of the hall. The students whipped around to see that the doors to the great hall had been opened, and a man stood silhouetted against the darkness outside. As the Great Hall suddenly fell very quiet, he began to walk between the house tables towards the front of the hall. He looked very odd: stooped, limping, and with a face that looked to be carved from wood. His nose looked as if it had been broken several times. It seemed to take him a very long time to reach the teachers' table, but when he finally arrived he walked straight to Dumbledore. The two exchanged a few whispered sentences before Dumbledore straightened his back and again addressed the congregation.

"Students of Hogwarts, I would like to introduce you to your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher: Mad-Eye Moody." Whispering sounded across the hall but before Draco could consult Blaise on the development, Dumbledore's voice came again. "As I was saying, Quidditch will not be taking place this year." Dumbledore raised his voice to be heard over the students. "This is because, for the first time in recent history, we will be hosting the Triwizard tournament." A pause. "For those of you who have not heard of the tournament, allow me to explain. Three magic institutions will each choose one student to take part in three tasks; each of which will test the student's magical prowess, courage, and ability to think in the presence of danger. The winner of the tournament shall receive
glory for their school, and ten thousand galleons in prize money. The tournament shall involve Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons, and will commence in October. Finally, please note that only students over the age of seventeen may enter. Now, I'm sure you all cannot wait to discuss this in your respective common rooms, so I bid you goodnight."

That night Draco lay awake in bed, the now full-grown Manimi finding her familiar place coiled over Draco's shoulder. Draco couldn't speak parseltongue, but he knew Manimi could understand him when he spoke because Harry, who could speak to the snake, had told him so. He often confided her, telling her the secrets he usually didn't dare voice, and fully confident that she would keep them - for who would she tell? The snake was very attached to Draco, sometimes slinking into his satchel and letting Draco carry her around the school with him. Draco guessed that Manimi liked the warmth of the schoolbag, and luckily the snake was only about five feet long; small enough to fit into it.

Having cast a silencing charm over his bed long ago, Draco talked freely to the half-asleep snake as he lay in bed. He told her about the unexpected age limit on the Triwizard tournament, pondered who the other school champions would be, and stated his sadness that Quidditch would be cancelled this year.

"But that doesn't mean I can't go flying, Manimi. I can still do that whenever I want. I'll miss the competition, though. Are you tired of me talking? I'm sorry. I'll give you some peace now, though."

Draco disliked taking potions or medicine for his insomnia, as they made him feel even more groggy and crabby the following day than if he hadn't taken anything. He preferred just staring at the ceiling, talking to Manimi, drawing, or even just taking a minute to himself for once. Anyway, his sleep was often punctuated by nightmares of his father, monstrous re-enactments of some of the worst 'punishments' he had suffered. Most frequent was the flashback to a more violent episode he had undergone when he was only nine years old. It was the cause of the twisted scar on his stomach, the reason why he never changed with the rest of the boys, the reason behind the silencing charm over his bunk. After waking up screaming once or twice, he figured it might benefit everyone if he shut himself up.

When Draco didn't have nightmares, his dreams were relatively normal. He had about three hours of sleep a night, which could usually be counted on to get him through the next day well enough. Especially now that he knew a spell to cover the bags under his eyes. His mother, a fellow insomniac, had taught him several 'Pick-Me-Up' spells, which he used regularly. On really bad nights, though, Draco sat with a sketchbook and tried to forget about the nightmare he had just had by drawing. He drew Manimi, or the things in his head, or sometimes the nightmares he had. He had never shown anyone the sketchbooks he kept within the hole in his mattress, hidden via a concealment charm. They were his, and only his. The one thing he could control in his controlled life.
Draco made his way begrudgingly to potions for his first lesson, feeling the weight of Manimi in his bag as he shifted the satchel from shoulder to shoulder. He was dreading having to sit next to Harry after the argument they'd had on the train - Harry was understanding, but there was only so much abuse towards his friends that he could take without a fight. Gryffindors weren't exactly the types to allow insults towards their friends.

"Draco," Acknowledged Harry sleepily, as he slid into the seat next to Draco's, early to class for once.

"Harry," Draco began nervously, "Hey, I was- well, I wanted to say, about the train, you know I didn't really have a-"

"A choice?" Interrupted Harry. "You never do, do you?" He sighed, making a show of getting his potions equipment out of his bag. "Look, Draco. I don't want to get off on the wrong foot but I can't do anything about it if you're mean to my friends. It was difficult enough last year, and I can't really be bothered to argue with you again. I know there's some things you can't help, but I can't let you do whatever you want."

"I don't want to do any of it! I can't convince my friends not to do this stuff."

"But I think you can," Said Harry, turning his green eyes upon him. "You can tell them that your father wants you to stop or something - that seemed to work before. Look, forget about it. Let's just get on with potions, okay?"

During the awkward moments that followed, Draco pulled his bag onto his lap and opened it to get out his things for the upcoming lesson. Manimi, who had been resting at the bottom of the bag, uncoiled and raised her head out of the bag, tongue tasting the air.

"Manimi! I haven't spoken to her in ages!" Harry sat up and peered into the bag, seeming to momentarily forget that he was annoyed with Draco as he hissed softly at the snake. As always, at the sound of parseltongue, the hairs on Draco's back stood on end. He forced himself not to feel jealous of Harry's ability to talk to Manimi.

"What's she saying?" he asked, curiosity eventually getting the better of him.

"Just asking how I am, telling me about her summer, you know. Normal catching up stuff." Harry paused. "She says you had a nightmare last night. Are you okay?"

Draco felt his face go red. "I'm fine, Harry. Manimi?" The snake looked up at him, "I told you not to tell anyone about the nightmares or... You know you're not supposed to tell."

"She's worried about you, Draco. She thinks-"

"I don't care, she's wrong. I'm fine. Manimi, please don't tell Harry those things. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to go away now." Draco closed the bag again, having removed all he would need for the lesson, and put it behind his chair. Manimi would probably just fall asleep. Harry, however, was looking at him worriedly and Draco's insides seemed to twist a little, though he didn't know why. He went even redder and broke eye contact with Harry.

"Draco-" Harry began, but was interrupted by the classroom door banging open.
Snape billowed into the class and rapped his wand on one of the desks. "Silence." He said, before striding back to the blackboard. "Now that you have been here a week, I think it is time to give you all your first assignment. As you all know, your O.W.L.s will take place next year, and during the theory exam you may well be asked to give a detailed account of the Polyjuice Potion." Snape paused to survey the class, most of whom were half asleep. "Polyjuice potion takes a week at least to prepare, and another month to brew, and as I would prefer not to lose an entire month of lessons on one potion I have decided that this will be brewed as homework." Groans emitted from around the room. "You will each work with the person you sit next to at your desks to create the Polyjuice Potion outside of class, with the end goal being to transform one of you into the other. You will have two months to complete the potion: one for preparation and one for brewing.

"It is up to you to find out how to make this potion. You will receive no help from me, except permission to visit the restricted section. You must research and make this potion on by yourselves. The pair who makes the best potion will receive thirty points each to their respective houses. Any questions? Good. Now, let us begin the lesson."

The boys didn't talk much for the rest of the lesson, instead choosing to listen to Snape's lecture on the properties of Bicorn Horn. Draco had read a lot about Polyjuice Potion, and as with most common potions, knew most of the ingredients already. He had never made the potion before, though, because it took so long and he hadn't felt the need to spend so much time on it. He concentrated on taking notes on the Bicorn Horn, knowing it was a component of Polyjuice, and ignored the scared feeling that had settled in his stomach when Harry had turned those worried eyes on him, of a rabbit trapped in the headlights.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"So, where should we meet?"

"Huh?"

"To make the potion? Do you know any good places?" Harry wondered if Draco was feeling okay. He had been distracted since the beginning of class, and when Harry had asked him if he was okay he had looked almost scared. He, on the other hand, was just feeling frustrated. Why should he have to spend more time with Draco (or should he be Malfoy now?) than was absolutely necessary? and for two whole months? He groaned inwardly.

"Uh, actually I did have an idea." Draco broke through Harry's thoughts. "See, there are these spare rooms near the dungeons, mainly used for Slytherin family visits and things like that. Obviously, there's a Malfoy room, and we could make the potion there? Or somewhere else, if you want." He added quickly.

Harry tried to smile, "That sounds fine. When should we start the potion?"

"Tomorrow? We could meet after classes, before dinner, to plan how we're going to get all the stuff we need and things like that?"

"Sure. Meet you there?"

0o0oDraco0o0o

That evening, down in the Slytherin common room, many kids sat on armchairs and sofas and chatted long into the night as was a custom in Slytherin House. The meagre light emanating from the windows cast green shadows into the fourth year dorm, waterweeds twisting towards the barely-visible moon. At first, it had felt disconcerting to be sleeping under the lake, but now Draco found
the weeds, the fish, and the occasional tentacles almost homely. He lay in his four-poster, Manimi's head resting on his chest, and talked quietly to her as usual. He knew he wouldn't get to sleep until the other Slytherins went to bed because they were too noisy, which could be anytime from midnight to two in the morning, but he had excused himself early for the simple pleasure of being alone. A spot had appeared on his forehead, seemingly unfazed by the anti-acne potions Draco often made for himself, and he was in a bad mood from it. He rubbed it absently and then tried to relax. It was a shame silencing spells didn't block outward noise, and only stopped the people outside from hearing you.

Draco's mind wandered, as it always did, back to the place it frequented so often these days: the question of what was wrong with him. Draco had first noticed it earlier this year when he and Blaise had been discussing girls. Blaise, Draco knew, had had a crush on Pansy since their second year. Blaise talked about it with Draco often, and today was no different. But, as it turned out, something was different. Blaise had been discussing Pansy's legs – which he usually did, he was obsessed with them – when Draco had begun to look at Blaise - really looked - and, for the first time, began to notice him. Blaise was the sort of guy who had it easy with girls (apart from Pansy, it seemed), with his humor and his jawline, and his charmingly aloof nature. But suddenly, it wasn't just the girls. Draco didn't have a crush on Blaise, but something changed on that day. He noticed things about guys that he hadn't before: Theodore Nott's back when he was getting changed; Blaise's jawline; and most disturbing of all, Harry. Not Harry's anything, just... Harry.

It scared Draco. It terrified him. He tried not to think of what his father would do to him if he found out, and as for the Slytherin boys, they would most likely make his life a complete misery too. Draco didn't know why he was different, or what made him like that. He knew that there were two Gryffindor boys who everyone thought were together, and he knew that they had been bullied for it last year. But Draco didn't know what it was that made people different, that made him different. He was sure it was something bad. There must be something wrong in his mind – maybe he was going mad?

But anyway, it didn't matter who he liked; he would probably have an arranged marriage with some other pureblood girl when it came down to it. The idea of having to marry some girl he had never met made him angry, indignant at the lack of choice he had in his life. He wanted to do something he loved, to marry someone he loved - if anyone could ever find in themselves to love him, which he doubted they would. But he couldn't: his life had been planned for him since the day he was born, he hadn't any choice in what would happen. Not that anyone cared.

As he finished talking, Manimi raised her head and pushed it gently against his. It was her way of saying that she was there, and that she, at least, was listening. That comforted him somewhat. Someone cared, and Draco was sure that whatever happened, she would never leave him.
The password to the Malfoy guest-room was *l Lunga*. It comprised of one large bedroom complete with a sofa, a writing desk, a king-sized bed, and a small bathroom. The room was draped tastefully in the Slytherin colours, and the Malfoy crest was visible hanging above the bed. Draco let them both in before letting Manimi out of his bag, and sitting down on the sofa, gesturing for Harry to do the same. He then took from his bag a quill and a parchment notebook and crossed his legs to get comfortable.

"Hello, Harry," hissed Manimi, and Harry smiled at her.

"How's things?"

"Sleepless as always, in his case," She replied, bobbing her head in Draco's direction. "But I'm not supposed to tell you that. You know, there's the most insufferable family of grass snakes living in the grounds, you would not believe-

"Harry? We need to decide how to go about making the potion." Draco's voice cut in, and Manimi fell silent. "Do you know much about it?"

Harry laughed a little. "I don't just know about it, I've used it. Ron, Hermione and I made some in second year."

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Not that I'm not impressed, but why did you need to?"

Harry didn't meet Draco's eyes. He didn't exactly want to admit that it was to sneak into the Slytherin dorm and find out if Draco was the Heir of Slytherin. He got the feeling it might not be welcome information. "Just... Uh... nothing. No good reason. Anyway, it was mostly Hermione who made it. She and Ron are going to have an easy time."

Draco's eyebrow stayed raised in suspicion, but he didn't ask any more questions. "In that case, we've got some advantage on the others. Better yet, I have a copy of Moste Potente Potions, which you can usually only get in the restricted section. I copied the recipe and instructions down here," He lifted the notebook, "So the biggest problem we have is getting hold of the trickier ingredients. I should be able to owl home for a few of them, though. Here.

Harry took the notebook and scanned Draco's small, neat cursive

**Part 1, step one**

*Add 3 measures of fluxweed to the cauldron (must have been picked on a full moon).*

*Add 2 bundles of knotgrass to the cauldron.*

*Stir 3 times, clockwise.*

*Wave your wand then let potion brew for 80 minutes (for a Pewter Cauldron. A Brass Cauldron will only require 68, and a copper one only 60.)*

**Part 1, step two-**

"Bloody hell, this is going to take ages." Harry groaned, and Draco nodded.
"Which is why we need to begin as soon as possible." Draco handed Harry another list. "These are the ingredients I want you to get. I already have stewed Lacewing flies, knotgrass, and leeches, and our hair is on our heads. That leaves only three ingredients – horn of bicorn, fluxweed, and boomslang skin. I need you to get the bicorn horn. I can ask my mother to send the skin and the fluxweed from my stores at home, so those won't be a problem.

"Wow, you've really done your homework, Draco." Harry raised his eyebrows, impressed. Draco shrugged.

"I like potions. I have to confess, I'm actually quite excited to make this."

"Swat."

"Call it what you want, I'm still better at it than you. I want to use my cauldron for this, seeing as it's copper, and that should decrease the brewing time. I'll start stewing the lacewing flies tomorrow, and I'll get the fluxweed sometime next Tuesday, as mother has to pick them by the full moon. Can you get the horn by then, so that we can start step one, part one?"

"Yeah, sure. And thanks for doing all this work already. I feel like I'm not going to need to do much to make this potion."

"Like I said," said Draco, shrugging again, "I like potions. Anyway, I think that's really all we needed to talk about today unless there's something else you want to ask?"

"Yeah, actually. What do you think about the Triwizard tournament?"

Draco sighed. "You know, Potter, we have discussed this multiple times already."

"I know, but I was wondering, who do you think the Hogwarts champion will be?"

He shrugged and pushed a hand through his hair, which was beginning to hang over his face a little, escaping its usual slicked-back style. "I don't know. Probably one of you Gryffindors. You guys like glory, right?"

"Would you enter if you could?"

Draco shook his head, then thought for a minute before nodding it. "If it was my choice, no. But my Father wanted me to at least enter, if possible. Luckily I won't have to now. How about you?"

"I wouldn't. I've had enough of danger, thank you very much."

Draco sat up. "Speaking of danger, what happened at the end of last year? I heard you fought off Sirius Black and a whole bunch of dementors. I didn't see you the next day so I couldn't ask about it, and I didn't think it was a good idea to ask in a letter or in the middle of potions."

Harry's defences began to spring up, but he forced himself to remain calm. "I didn't fight Sirius Black. I fought dementors. It doesn't matter, it's not as heroic as people make it sound."

Draco was quiet for a moment. Manimi finished exploring the room and slithered onto the sofa between them. He noticed the way Draco watched the snake, with so much love that he forgot momentarily to be the Malfoy Heir, and instead became a normal boy with a pet whom he loved. Manimi curled herself over Draco's shoulders and around his neck and looked around at both of them.

Draco looked up from Manimi and caught Harry looking. He started and looked away quickly, then
got up. "Well, if that's everything? Do we need to meet tomorrow?"

Draco stayed seated. "I'll start brewing the lacewings tomorrow, but you don't need to come down here for that. Just get the stuff I told you to, and meet me here next Tuesday. Then we can start making the potion."

"Take care, Harry," Manimi hissed as Harry left the room.
Draco sat cross-legged on the ground opposite Harry in the Malfoy guest room and watched the potion turn dark green as he added fluxweed to the cauldron. Harry chucked in the knotgrass and waved his wand over the fizzing liquid, which sent up a puff of acrid blue smoke between them before bubbling down to a simmer. The two of them had been sitting there for the last half hour trying to perfect Part One, Step Two of the polyjuice potion, having gone down to the room after dinner. It surprised Draco that Harry seemed to have almost found making the potion fun. But then again, a playfight with a blast-ended skrewt would be fun compared to what Harry had been going through at school recently, what with the anger he had faced from his fellow students ever since being chosen to compete in the Triwizard.

"Now what?" asked Harry.

Draco checked his watch. "We have to wait for sixty minutes, then we can do step two. We'll finish the final two steps tomorrow."

"Should we leave and come back in an hour?"

He shook his head. "You have to be really precise about the timing with this potion, and I don't want to risk being late. But if you want, you can go. There only needs to be one of us here to take the potion off the heat."

Harry considered for a minute, then surprised Draco when he said decidedly "I'll stay. Keep you company."

Draco was taken aback, unsure why Harry would want to be around someone he was barely even friends with, but smiled. "Thanks."

The silence began to stretch and become awkward as Draco grappled for something to say, now that he couldn't just concentrate on making the potion. Nothing came to mind. Luckily, Harry broke the silence before it became deafening.

"What do you think of Professor Moody's class?"

"Moody?" Draco shuddered a little. "He creeps me out! Remember the first class we had with him, where he talked about the unforgivable curses?" Harry nodded. "He made that spider jump on my head! It was horrible!" Draco felt a nervy, jumpy sensation in his stomach that had nothing to do with the memory of the spider as he watched Harry throw his head back and laugh loudly.

"I remember!" He said, grinning. "You had the funniest expression on your face!"

"Shut up, Potter!" Draco tried to sound angry, but he couldn't help grinning back at Harry. He had a very contagious laugh. "It scared the life out of me! I don't like his teaching methods at all,"

"Yeah, I can tell." Harry laughed again, and then pulled a very comically scared face. "Help, help me! Professor Moody's put a horrible monster on my head!" He cried in a stupidly high voice, "You wait 'till my father hears about this!"

"I do not sound like that!" Draco leant forwards over the cauldron to push Harry, and all of a sudden found them - for want of a better phrase - play fighting on the ground next to the cauldron. He went red, thinking how childish this was, but it was fun somehow and Draco was having trouble fighting Harry off because he was laughing so much. Then, despite his wriggling and struggling, he found
himself pinned down with Harry holding his hands against the floor above his head, his knee
pressing down on Draco's stomach, which performed that now-familiar leap as if it were trying to
jump out of his body. Then, as they looked at each other, Draco saw Harry's face flush bright red.
He quickly rolled off of Draco and went back to his original seat next to the potion, which had
somehow stayed upright during all this. Draco pushed himself up and grinned. "You know I let you
win, right?"

Harry's face was still quite red, but he smiled through it. "Sure you did, Draco. I totally didn't just
win because I'm stronger, faster, and agiler than you, and you're simply a mortal weakling."

"Shut up!"

"Sorry, princess," Harry smirked. "I promise I'll never mention your puny demeanor again." Despite
himself, Draco laughed with Harry. As they caught their breath, Harry seemed to remember
something. "Hey, where's Manimi? You brought her last time."

"She just stayed in the dorm today. Didn't feel like coming, I dunno why..." Draco didn't mention the
fact that he had asked her not to come because he was terrified that she would tell Harry about his
father starving him in the holidays, or the nightmares that seemed to be getting worse, or anything to
do with how badly he was doing at the moment.

"Oh, right. Tell her I said hi?" asked Harry, happily unaware of what was going through Draco's
mind.

"Sure."

The silence that followed wasn't awkward this time. It was friendly. Draco always found it
disconcerting how at-ease he felt around Harry, completely different to how he was around Pansy
and his other Slytherin friends (with the possible exception of Blaise. It was beginning to dawn on
Draco that there were only four people in the world whom he truly trusted – his mother; Manimi;
Blaise; and, most surprisingly, Harry Potter. He didn't know when it had happened, but it had. The
feeling was a chaotic neutral: not bad or good, but troublesome just the same.

The evening continued to pass, the silence interspersed with bouts of conversation. All too soon,
Draco found the last step of Part One complete, and the boys dispersed to their separate dormitories,
leaving the potion to bubble overnight.

0o0oHarry0o0o

Harry was confused. Why had he felt like that when he and Draco had play fought? Why had it
made him go red, and feel embarrassed? What was it about Draco – another boy, for Merlin's sake! –
That had made him feel the same as he felt when he saw Cho Chang? It seemed each question
spawned two more, and Harry resolved not to think about it. He was a teenager. Everything was
everywhere. It was normal to feel weird things that didn't make sense – right?

The fire was dying down in the Gryffindor common room as Harry sat chatting with Ron, and
Hermione in their usual comfortable armchairs. The pair were making good progress on their own
potion and were at a similar stage to Harry and Draco. Harry suspected they were enjoying their time
alone together, but didn't ask about it. He doubted either of them had figured out what was going on
between them.

Hermione was the first to go to bed, leaving the two boys in front of the embers as she usually did on
school nights. As they sat together in companionable silence, Harry was struck by a thought.
"Ron," He began a little hesitantly, "what do you think of people being gay? You know, like, liking the same gender?"

Ron looked surprised. "Blimey, Harry. Bit off topic."

"We weren't talking about anything else, and it just occurred to me that I have no idea what the Wizarding World thinks about it."

Ron considered a minute. "When I first found out about it, I thought it was a bit off, you know? It grossed me out, the idea of two blokes being together like that. I mean, it still makes me feel a bit weird to think of two guys together-" He paused and shook himself a little, like a horse shaking off a fly. "But I guess I got used to it." He continued, "And anyway, Ginny pointed something out recently which I thought was pretty interesting: statistically, there is probably at least one gay bloke in my family. So I don't really have the option to be homophobic, do I?"

Harry hadn't thought about that. He had heard somewhere that one in ten people were gay, so it did make sense that at least one Weasley would be. Ron, he noticed, was giving him a slightly weird look.

"Uh, Harry?"

"Hm?"

"If you need to tell me anything, just, uh,"

Harry shook his head quickly. "That wasn't why I asked. I was only wondering, you know," Harry hoped he didn't sound defensive, while simultaneously wondering why he felt the need to be defensive. It wasn't as if he was gay or anything like that.

"...Okay." Ron was still looking at him strangely, but he appeared to have decided not to pursue the topic. "Anyway, when were you planning to go to bed? I'm pretty tired."
The opposing schools began to arrive at Hogwarts in the beginning of October. The first was Beaubatons, who arrived in a huge flying chariot pulled by five beautiful white Pegasi. The entire student congregation had stood in the grounds to watch them land, gaped in awe at the formidable Madame Maxime, and then in wonder at the students. A gorgeous blonde girl, who must have been several years older than them, had instantly caught Ron’s eye, as well as several other boys. He had watched her as if in a daze, mouth slightly ajar, until Hermione had eventually had enough, and told him sternly to sort himself out. Next, Durmstrang arrived in a majestic old battleship, which rose from the lake headed by its headmaster: Igor Karkaroff, and, to the student’s excitement, Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Sneaker. When the students had realised it really was him they had become almost frantic, and Harry had even heard a girl ask her friends “do you think he'll sign my hat in lipstick?” after which the group had briefly tussled, fighting over the makeup.

Once the foreign students had settled in, all the schools gathered in the Great Hall, which had been furiously cleaned and decorated in welcome. The floor was several shades lighter than it was usually, having had the dirt that had been stamped into it by generations of students rigorously removes, and the tables gleamed with a shine to match the counter tops in Aunt Petunia’s kitchen. As they walked into the Hall, Harry noticed that a great, golden - Harry didn’t quite know how to describe it – box of some sort had been placed in the centre of the front of the hall. It must have been almost seven feet tall, and as they neared it, Harry could make out precious stones adorning the sides of it. Dumbledore stood at his chair at the teacher’s table and waited patiently for all the students to be seated before beginning to speak.

"Welcome, welcome," said Dumbledore, arms outstretched in greeting. "Welcome to all our guests. I trust you have settled in well, and I hope that you will find Hogwarts to be a comfortable and friendly home over the next year and that you may all enjoy our company. Now, you must be hungry after your travelling. Please, eat up!"

The feast appeared, as always, on the plates in front of the students, eliciting sharp intakes of breath from several of the Beaubatons girls. The house elves had truly outdone themselves in the presence of guests, and the feast was the grandest Harry had yet seen. However, despite the overwhelming scent of good food, Harry’s mind, and many of the other student’s, was still on the golden case at the front of the hall.

"Hey, Ron, Hermione? What do you reckon that is?" Harry gestured towards the case. Ron seemed not to hear Harry. He was staring at the Ravenclaw table, where the Beaubatons were eating. Hermione rolled her eyes at him and spoke to Harry.

"Well, it's probably something to do with the Triwizard Tournament, looking at the timing and all."

"So, what? Something to do with the tasks?"

"I don't know everything, Harry. I expect we'll find out soon, though."

Sure enough, when the feast was over and everyone was sufficiently stuffed, Dumbledore stood once again and walked towards the golden case.

"I'm sure many of you will have been wondering what this contraption is, and I feel it is now time that I put you all out of your misery. I am certain you have all also pondered the method we shall use to select the champion from each school." Whispers from the students seemed to indicate yes. "Well, I proudly introduce you to our perfect, unbiased judge, the selector of the Triwizard Champions: the
Dumbledore raised his wand and lightly tapped the case on its summit, then stood back with his usual knowing smile. The students watched in amazement as the gold seemed to melt and fall away, revealing a large stone cup, the Goblet of Fire, standing on a stone base. Dumbledore waited until the gold had completely disintegrated before once again tapping the goblet. His face was suddenly illuminated blue by a glowing fire, magically springing from the depths of the chalice. Several students gasped.

Dumbledore once again addressed the congregation. "Those students who wish to enter need only write their name and school on a piece of paper, and place it in the Goblet. But beware, you must not do so lightly! To enter your name is to sign a binding magical contract, and if you are selected as champion, there will be no backing out, no forsaking the games. You must compete, for better or worse."

"Wicked," Fred and George said in unison down the table.

"You should all already be aware that only those of you who are over the age of seventeen can take part. To ensure this rule is not broken, I will personally draw an age line around the Goblet, to prevent younger students from entering."

Several students grumbled at this, Fred and George being the loudest to protest, but Dumbledore held up his hands for the students quieted, he continued. "We have two guests here to judge the competition, two men who organised this game and made it a reality. Please give a warm welcome to Mister Bartemius Crouch and Mister Ludo Bagman."

Two men walked onto the stage to loud applause. One was short and round, with a boyish air to him, while the other was thin with neatly combed hair and a small moustache. Harry recognised them: he had met them both at the Quidditch World Cup. Both men thanked Dumbledore, before each saying a few words. Crouch impressed upon them the safety measures that would be taken, and Bagman simply beamed and said how fun it would all be.

By the time they got back to their dormitories, everyone was exhausted. Seamus sat cross-legged on Dean's bed as usual, and the two of them spoke in low voices, probably discussing the Tournament. No one knew if they were together or not, but their togetherness had earned them much taunting from the Slytherins last year. The Gryffindor boys knew that the dorm was the only place they could... whatever they were, and left them alone. They were used to it by now. Eventually, Seamus returned (albeit reluctantly) to his own poster, and the Gryffindor dorm fell into silence broken only by Harry and Ron's hushed conversation.

"So, what d'you reckon, Harry? If you could, would you compete?"

Harry shook his head. "Nah, you?"


"Well, I'd rather you than me." Stated Harry. "I've had enough danger, thank you very much."

"Still, just imagine lifting that cup over your head, in front of the whole school. Imagine the girls! They'd be tripping over themselves for you!"

"Goodnight, Ron." Laughed Harry, before turning over and closing his eyes. In his mind, he saw himself lifting the cup, just as Ron had said, and saw, in the crowd, Cho Chang beaming at him,
admiration in her eyes. Sleepily, Harry grinned.

Draco’s heart skipped a beat as Dumbledore called the name, charred piece of paper clutched between his bony fingers.

"Harry Potter?"

People whispered frantically and heads turned, looking for Harry. Draco didn't hear them, he was thinking too hard. Why would Harry enter the competition? How could there be four champions in the Triwizard? Unbidden, anger rose in Draco's mind. Of course Potter would be the one to enter underage. Again, Dumbledore's voice rang out over the crowd.

"Harry Potter?"

Draco saw Granger give Harry a small push, prompting him to walk slowly and shakily to the top of the hall, past Dumbledore, and into the small room leading off to the back of the room. The whispering continued, but the teachers said nothing. They didn't appear to know what to do. Finally, Dumbledore exchanged a few words with McGonagall and then again addressed the students.

"The Goblet of Fire has made its decision, and a binding magical contract has been made between it and the champions. They will compete in the upcoming three tasks and face many kinds of danger in an effort to bring glory to their school, but only one shall win. Good luck to each house, and I bid all of you a very good night."

That night the Slytherins all sat in the common room, illuminated by gaslight, discussing the events of the evening. The general consensus, after the initial anger, was that this was a good thing. They could watch Diggory win the cup and bring them glory, and have the added fun of watching Potter get hurt (or, if Pansy got her wish, killed painfully). Draco, of course, went along with it as he always did. He couldn't let on that he cared about Harry; else the Slytherins might think him a blood traitor. They were still under the impression that the only reason for Draco being nice to Harry was because his father wished it, and Draco wasn't about to give them any reason to doubt it. Though he was tired, Draco sat up with Pansy and Blaise until late at night, Manimi coiled in her usual spot around his neck, her weight comforting and familiar on his shoulders. By the time they eventually retired to their dormitories Draco could barely keep his eyes open, but his mind kept spinning tiredly, thoughts blocking the sleep he always craved. Angry, Draco rose from his bed an hour after lying down and walked into the bathroom, resolving to take some potion for once and just sleep, despite how groggy he would feel the next morning. He tipped the bottle back and drank it all in one go, before tottering back to his bed and collapsing, asleep as soon as he touched the pillow.

Harry said nothing. Draco said nothing back. He didn't know if there was anything to say. They wrote down the notes on the board, Harry in his legible but messy writing, Draco in practised swirls and level letters. It wasn't until it was almost the end of the lesson that Harry suddenly started to speak.

"I didn't put my name in, you know. I didn't want this."

Draco looked at him. "Harry, I know you think I'll hate you for it, but I don't mind. I mean, it was a bit poncey of you, but--"

"No, you don't get it," Harry said, irritably. "I didn't do it. I don't want to compete, and I don't want
or need the winnings."

"Look, Harry, I'm sorry. But I don't see how you could be chosen without you entering your name."

"Neither do I! You think I want this... This attention? I wanted this year, just this one year, to be quiet. I wasn't going to be the centre of attention; I could just be normal for once. My best friend is ignoring me. He doesn't believe me. Everyone's giving me daggers wherever I go, the other schools don't trust me. Hermione is the only person that believes me. What's worse, I don't even know why I'm telling you any of this, because why would you care?!"

Draco stared at Harry, surprised at the outburst. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Finally, Draco turned to Harry again.

"You asked if I would help you with potions?"

Caught off guard by the off-topic question, Harry simply nodded.

"We can start today, if you'd like? It's not like you can hang out with Weasley or anything, it'll take your mind off things."

The offer appeared to take the wind out of Harry's sails and he had lost the angry look he had had a minute ago. "Okay. Bit random, but sure. How about after school ends, usual place?"

Draco smiled. "Got it."

0o0oHarry0o0o

When Harry entered the Slytherin guest room he saw that Draco had pushed the desk into the middle of the room and set out a textbook, parchment, and quills on the table.

"Wow, you've put some effort into this," Harry noted. Draco laughed a little.

"I like teaching people things, I do it a lot with the other Slytherins. Now, we need to find out what you know and what you don't, so I'm going to go through the first year potions textbook,"

Harry groaned. "Remind me why I signed up for this?"

Draco laughed again. "Because if you're ever going to pass potions well enough to be an Auror, you're going to need all the help you can get?"

"Fair enough. How did you know I wanted to be an Auror?"

"Educated guess."

"You're good at those," Observed Harry. "What should I do?"

"Just sit down, I'll ask you some questions and we'll find out how thick you are."

"How fun," Harry said, sarcastically, as he sat down in a chair across from Draco at the desk. "Hey Manimi," he added when the snake slinked over to him from the floor.

"Harry. Always a pleasure," The snake hissed in return.

Harry took a deep breath and steadied himself. He had already promised himself that he wouldn't let on how badly the other students were getting to him. Though he was careful not to show it, Harry was feeling like shit. All day people had been shunning him, either expressing their anger by
ignoring him or by openly taunting him. Scarhead, Potty, countless other names rung in his ears, but worse was the stark indifference he was receiving from Ron. He hoped this might take his mind off things, but he wasn't sure it could. At least Hermione hadn't questioned it when she told her to he wanted some 'time alone', and simply gone to spend time with Ron.

The 'lesson' went well enough, with Draco asking questions and making notes on the parchment to evaluate Harry, who was surprised to see himself cheering up slightly at the menial repetitiveness of the task. When Draco finished, he placed the parchment on the desk and looked up at him.

"Well, Potter. I think I've found the source of the problem"

"And?"

"You appear to have forgotten more than half of the core potions we learned in first year. It's not surprising you can't make potions when you don't even understand what effects half the ingredients have."

"He just wrote 'he's an idiot' across the top of the page, you know," Manimi noted, in a tone that made it sound like she was laughing despite the fact snakes can't laugh.

"Hey, don't write that!"

"Write what? Manimi! Stop telling on me, it's really rude!"

"And writing 'he's an idiot' isn't rude at all," Harry said, rolling his eyes. Usually, he didn't mind that sort of thing – found it funny, even, but today he had had enough of people calling him names. Clearly, Draco had noticed Harry's change in mood, and he flushed a little.

"Sorry, Harry. I know you've probably had a shit day."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "You got that right."

"Well, If it makes you feel any better, I thought about what you said. And I believe you. I believe that you didn't put your own name in there. You don't seem like the sort of person to seek attention like that."

Harry looked up, surprised. Manimi gave a small shake of her head, exasperated

"Of course you didn't put your name in," she said, "I love Draco but he can be very stupid sometimes. As if you would try to get attention like that."

"How do you know me so well?" Asked Harry in parseltongue. It always confused him how accurate the snake's observations were.

"He talks about you a lot, I practically knew you before I met you. Once I did it didn't take long to get to understand how you worked."

Harry felt a little stunned, but Draco interrupted his thoughts before they got out of hand.

"Harry? You okay?"

Shaking himself mentally, Harry answered. "Yeah, I'm fine. Anyway, not that this hasn't been riveting, but are we finished or..."

"Yeah, that enough for today. I'll organise the next lesson when I can, if you still want to go ahead with them?"
"Yeah, that would be good. And thanks, Draco. You don't have to do this."

Draco shrugged as he began to gather his stuff. "I don't mind. Like I said, I like teaching. Anyway, I think you're going to need something to take your mind off things over the next few weeks. Plus, there's only two weeks left until the Polyjuice potion is ready, and we'll need to meet soon to check on it."

"Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten about that." The potion had been stewing inconspicuously in the corner of the room for about two weeks now. "Well, thank you. I'll see you in potions?"

"See you."
"I don't know!" Draco jumped as Harry leapt up angrily, causing his chair to topple over behind him, and walked over to sit down heavily on the sofa, visibly fuming. Draco sat in stunned silence for a moment and watched Harry breathing heavily, arms crossed. It was their third potions session together, and Harry had been working on some questions that Draco had put together. They weren't particularly difficult, but Draco got the feeling they weren't the reason for the sudden outburst. He spoke tentatively.

"Uuh, Harry, are you-"

"No, I'm not bloody alright." His voice was bitter and loud in the small room. "I'm failing potions, I can't even wrap my head around the simplest concepts because I'm so stupid, and everyone in the school hates me because of something I didn't do. Not that that even matters, seeing as I'm going to be eaten by a dirty great dragon in two weeks time!"

"I- Dragons? You never told me it was dragons!"

"Yeah, well, it is. They're going to put me in a ring, I suppose, and watch me get burned alive for their amusement. Guess that'll give your Slytherins a laugh, at least." He laughed mirthlessly. "Give the whole school a laugh. Merlin, Ron'll be in hysterics. Did I mention that, by the way? My 'best friend' hates me. For something I didn't do."

Draco stood up and walked over to the sofa, sat down by Harry, and ran a hand through his hair. Dragons. That was bad. He had noticed Harry's increasing moodiness and stress in the build-up to the first task, and now, with barely a week to go, he couldn't even imagine what he must be going through.

Manimi had, by this point, heard the commotion and snaked over from where she had been coiled in Draco's schoolbag asleep. She rose up onto Harry's lap and brought her head up to look at him. He hissed something at her in parseltongue. The language was unlike any other Draco had heard and, as always, it had him transfixed. It seemed to wrap itself around the listener, to pull and push, ebb and flow around and inside the mind of the beholder. Despite himself, Draco was distracted from Harry's shocking news by the conversation he was witnessing, and found himself watching Harry's lips as he hissed softly, the anger gone from his voice. There was something alluring in the way he spoke, the strange patterns of his voice and the language he spoke, and the softness in his gaze as he listened to Manimi's reply.

"Draco? Are you okay?"

A matching set of green eyes were turned to him, as boy and snake looked at him. They had clearly finished their conversation, but he hadn't noticed it end. He must have been staring at Harry. He blinked and looked away, hating his face for going red.

"What did Manimi say?"

Harry shrugged. "She calmed me down. She's good at that." He smiled at the snake, who pushed her head against his as she often did with Draco. It was her way of showing affection. Draco tried not to feel jealous. Harry continued. "I'm sorry for going a bit mental there. It's just, I've been a bit stressed recently."

"Really?" Said Draco, sarcastically, turning to sit cross-legged on the sofa, "I hadn't noticed. You
"Ha ha." Harry leant back and clasped his hands over his head. Manimi slinked onto Draco's lap and coiled herself into her usual 'pile'. He stroked along her scaly back absent-mindedly.

"You're not stupid, Harry. You're very talented. Just because you're struggling with potions doesn't define your overall ability, and anyway, it would be hard for anyone to do well in any subject if they were in your position. Even I would have trouble concentrating."

Harry looked at him. "You know, that's almost exactly what Manimi told me a minute ago."

"Well, she's right." Draco thought for a moment, thinking of what he could do to take Harry's mind off of things. Then he had an idea. "Come with me. We're going flying."

"What? We can't!"

"We can, actually. There are spare brooms in my dorm, I'll go get them."

"It's freezing outside, and dark, and it's curfew in twenty minutes."

"Go get your cloak, we can sneak in afterwards." Draco had removed Manimi from his lap and was already making his way to the door. He paused and looked back at Harry. "Come on, mate. You need it."

000oHarry000o

"Remind me again why I'm doing this."

Draco turned to look at him. "Because you are a stressed emotional wreck and flying always calms you down. You're probably partially stressed because of the lack of Quidditch, now I come to think of it."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "How did you know that flying calms me down?"

"Because it's obvious."

"You are so similar to Manimi. You guys are weirdly… intuitive."

Draco looked at him with a funny expression. "Thanks. Shall we?"

They stood away from the lake, not as far away as the Whomping Willow, but far enough from the castle that they wouldn't be seen in the darkness. On the lake, they could make out the Durmstrang ship in the darkness, a few of its windows illuminated by faint yellow light. Draco was the first to take off, his *Nimbus 2001* streaking through the air and his hair pulled free from its neat style by the wind. Harry heard him give a bark of laughter as he climbed into the night air. Grudgingly, he gave up the pretense of not wanting to go flying as he watched Draco, feeling the sky practically pulling him upwards, a-leapted onto his *Firebolt*. The wind rushed through him as he rolled upwards into the darkness, and he gave a whoop of laughter. Up here, he was weightless. The worries and misgivings, the angry stares, and terror of the tasks, were all whipped away by the rushing and left, forgotten, on the ground below.

After he got over the initial rush of flying again, he circled back to where Draco sat hovering on his own *Nimbus 2001*, watching Harry with a big grin on his face.

"Let's race!" Harry cried.
"How?"

"Follow me."

Harry sped through the air and hovered over a tree that stood apart from the others at the edge of the forest, Draco hot on his tail.

"See that tree over there? The dead one? Away from the edge of the forest?"

"Uh huh?"

"Race to that tree and back?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You have a faster broom, Potter. It isn't exactly fair."

"Fine, I'll give you a head start. On three?"

On Harry's count, Draco sped off, and after half a second Harry followed, leaning low over the broom, and realising how much he had missed the icy fingers of the wind in his hair, and the thrill of the speed. Draco was about twenty meters in front of Harry, but he was gaining. As they reached the old tree, Draco made a turn and began to head back. Harry, however, thought that making a wide loop turn would slow him down and pulled the handle of his broom sharply upwards. As he began to ascend into a loop-the-loop, he twisted around so that he was no longer upside down and bent over his broom, now gaining fast on Draco.

He passed over the home tree a split second before Draco, shouting triumphantly and punching the air above his head. Draco pouted, but Harry could tell he was biting back a smile.

"You cheat, Potter! your broom's faster than mine and you barely gave me a head start!"

"You're just a sore loser, Malfoy. I won fair and square."

"That's a lie and you know it. But I'll let you think that if it helps you sleep at night. They paused for a minute, then Draco looked upwards. "How far up d'you reckon we can fly?"

"Towards the sky? I dunno. Let's see?"

Together, they flew upwards until they were high above the castle, and the Durmstrang ship looked like an inkblot on the lake. Harry felt adrenaline pump through his veins as he looked down from the giddying height. Draco hovered next to him.

"Want to go higher?"

"Uh, actually," Harry said with a shaky laugh, "I think I'm fine here. Bit high up."

Draco laughed. "You're scared of heights?"

"No!" Harry exclaimed. "But there's only so much one can take… we are really high up."

Silence and the sound of wind washed around them. Then Draco said, in a hushed voice; "Harry? Harry, look at the stars."

Harry, who had been looking down at the castle, turned his gaze upwards. A vast blackness stretched around them in every direction, the crescent moon a mere sliver, crisp and clear-cut, and scattered like glitter through the darkness were the stars. Harry had never seen so many. Here, away from the light pollution, high in the thin air above the castle, they were so many and perfectly clear
Harry's breath caught in his throat.

He looked beautiful.

Harry shook himself and cleared his throat. Those weren't thoughts he should be having. His mind scrambled for something else to distract him, to stop him from thinking about Draco. His face flushed red and he tried (and failed) not to look at Draco. He needed to break the spell, and to get away from the sky that was casting it. And then an idea came to him, and a wry smile came to his face.

"Hey, Draco?"

"Yeah?" Draco turned to him slowly, as if he had to pull himself away from the view.

"What would you do if I… Fell!" Harry yelled the last word and went into a steep dive, vertical and spiralling towards the ground with terrifying speed. Draco screamed behind him, and Harry stifled a laugh. The wind seemed almost to rip at his skin and Harry's fingers were turning blue as he gripped the broom's handle. He waited until the last minute before pulling up, only thirty meters or so away from the ground. He was panting from the drop, adrenaline making him shaky.

"Harry!" Draco sped towards him, stopping less than a foot away from him. "What the hell was that!"

"You scream like a girl," Harry laughed.

Draco didn't laugh. "You nearly gave me a heart attack, I'm not surprised I screamed."

Harry grinned, but when he saw that Draco still looked a little haggard, he relented.

"Sorry for scaring you Draco. It was just a joke."

Draco looked like he was about to say something, but then changed his mind, and shook his head a little. "Just, don't do that again, okay?"

They stayed in the air for another twenty minutes or so, but when they noticed that Draco's hands had turned purple with cold, they decided to call it a night. Under the invisibility cloak, with brooms clutched to their chests, they made their way back to the castle.

000oDraco0o0o

"Thanks, Draco. You were right, I did need that."

They stood outside the Slytherin common room, Harry having walked Draco there under the invisibility cloak so that he wouldn't be caught. Draco shivered a little, still feeling the lingering effects of the cold air, even in the well-heated castle.

"No worries. But if we do that again, remind me to bring my gloves."

Harry grinned. "I bet your gloves are made of silk. I'm right, aren't I? Wait, I am? Oh, Merlin, I can't believe it. Draco Malfoy has silken gloves for his royal hands- stop hitting me!"

The first thing Draco did when he got into the common room was to go straight to the bathroom and – after locking the door and placing a silencing charm – run himself a hot bath with all his favourite
oils and a potion for relaxation. It might be eleven o'clock, but he didn't care.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"Where have you been? I was really worried about you!" Hermione threw down the book she had been reading (after dog-earring her page) and walked over, arms crossed.

"I told you I was going on a walk, remember?"

"No one goes on a walk in the dark for over two hours, Harry!" She looked at him, upset, then turned and retrieved her book from her armchair. "I'm going to bed."

"Hermione, I'm sorry," but she was gone before he had the chance to explain. He would have to talk to her in the morning.

Harry sat up for a long time after she left, cross-legged in front of the fire. He was thinking about Draco. On the one hand, his friends hated him, and he could be a stuck up prick. On the other hand, he was funny, and easy going, and was going out of his way to help Harry with potions, and to cheer him up when he felt like giving in. And what did it matter if his friends hated him, really? Ron had deserted him, the other boys didn't trust him, and Hermione... Well, Hermione was just Hermione.

So, he's a friend, said the voice in his head. What's so confusing about that?

It's confusing because he's not just a friend. It's different. It's complicated.

And it was different. Harry didn't look at Hermione and catch his breath, despite how pretty she was. He didn't find himself fascinated by Ron. It wasn't how he felt about Cho, despite the similarities. No, this was something else entirely. And he didn't know what.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Unknown to Harry, Draco was having a similar dilemma in his Dorm. He had got out of the bath at midnight, and mercifully his dorm-mates had gone to sleep early for once. Now he sat on his bed, sketching Harry flying. It wasn't turning out right: he couldn't get it to look like him, and his expression was all wrong. Frustrated, he threw the sketchbook down and slumped across his pillows sleepily, narrowly missing Manimi who was coiled next to him.

Why does he have to be so hard to draw? Ponce.

"I don't like it when you and Harry talk Parseltongue. Know why, Manimi? Because I like it too much, and I get all... caught up in him, in Harry, when he speaks it. I know that doesn't make any sense, but neither does anything right now." He sighed. Then, in a voice that was almost a whisper, added, "I don't think I can be gay. I think as a matter of survival I need to be straight. The other Slytherins, apart, possibly, from Blaise, would kill me, my father would definitely kill me, and I'm not exaggerating, he might actually kill me," Draco wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. "I don't know, Manimi. Maybe this is a phase. But it isn't normal to notice other guys like this, and I don't understand what to do." He stopped and took several shuddering breaths, trying to keep himself together.

When sleep did find Draco, it was ragged like tired breathing, and filled with the half-formed pain of flashbacks. He got up the next day feeling more tired than when he went to bed.
'Potter Stinks' badges bombarded Draco as he made his way to the empty seats in the stands, followed closely by about five of his Slytherin cronies, as well as Blaise and Pansy. The air buzzed with the noise of three schools' worth of teenagers as they all eagerly awaited the tournament's start. Draco tried not to bite his nails in worry, as he had been doing obsessively for the past few days. The only time he'd spoken to Harry was in Snape's class (They hadn't had any more potions recently, Harry was too busy), and Harry had barely grunted a reply.

"I'm betting Potter dies!" Pansy's screechingly excited voice almost hurt Draco's ears as he forced himself to laugh along with the other Slytherins, who were all intoxicated with anticipation. Over on the other side of the stands, Draco could make out Granger and Weasley standing together in the stands, looking ashen-faced and worried. Despite his anger at Weasley for deserting Harry, Draco felt an odd urge to join them.

At last, Bagman bounced onto a platform in front of the judge's table and began to talk in a magically magnified voice. Draco heard him as if through water. *Dragons... champions... danger...* Draco was beginning to feel a little sick. Blaise nudged him.

"You okay? You're looking a little ill."

Forcing himself into his sarcastic, sneering voice, he said "Thanks. Ill was the look I was going for,"

As the first champion fought their dragon, Draco began to feel positively faint. The dragons were so vicious, so big compared to the tiny figure of Cedric down in the arena. And if the seventeen-year-old was struggling, how could fourteen-year-old Harry even hope to succeed? And of course, Draco's fear was worsened by the voice of his father in his mind telling him he shouldn't care, that it wasn't normal behavior to care, that he was a freak because he was worried about this Gryffindor boy who shouldn't even matter.

The competition passed in a blur, and Draco didn't know if he wanted time to slow down or speed up. In the end, he didn't get the choice. Harry was walking into the arena, a mere smudge against the vast, scaly form of the Hungarian Horntail. Draco held his breath with everyone else as they watched to see what would happen next and the stadium filled with an eerie, suspended silence. The dragon had seen Harry by this time and had whipped its long, wicked face round to look at him. Suddenly there came an earsplitting roar and a bout of flames ate up the air only a few feet from where Harry stood. People seemed to wake up, beginning to shout encouragements to both Harry and the dragon. Draco realized he still had to play his part as the Slytherin Prince and, reluctantly, began to shout encouragements with Blaise and Pansy.

"Come on dragon! Is that really the best you can do?!!" He made himself grin and laugh, but his eyes never left Harry, who wasn't doing anything. *Why wasn't he doing anything?* Then, as Draco watched, Harry lifted his wand and made a movement with it, shouting something into the air which was instantly lost in the pressing noise of the stadium. Draco stopped shouting and concentrated on the boy, but still, nothing happened.

"Look!" cried Pansy, in ecstasy, "Potter can't even cast a spell to help himself!" She cackled with laughter, along with Crabbe and Goyle who guffawed loudly. "He's going to die for sure this time!"

The sick feeling grew, but still Draco forced himself to laugh along with the others, eyes still fixed upon the figure in the stadium. The dragon was hunched low, belly crawling towards Harry. A low rumbling growl filled the stadium, making the chairs vibrate, and the watching crowd quieted. Harry
threw himself behind a boulder just as the flames filled the air behind him, and heat washed over
them.

Draco couldn't stop himself anymore. "Harry! Do something you idiot!"

Blaise turned to him with a very odd expression. "Draco, did you just call-
"

But Draco wasn't listening, he was laughing, watching the broom soar over people's heads into the
stadium. Harry was out from behind the boulder... he had leapt onto the broom... he was airborne!
Blaise was no longer looking at him, but was transfixed as he was on the boy on the broom, soaring
effortlessly high into the air. As he watched, Draco was certain he saw Harry laugh.

But it wasn't over yet. Harry still had to get the golden egg. As Draco wondered how he was going
to do it, Harry stopped flying upwards and stopped just out of reach of the dragon. There he hovered,
floating this way and that, taunting the dragon who was, by this time, was completely focused on
him. *Come on, Harry seemed to be urging the dragon, take the bait.*

"Oh my god," Said Draco faintly. "He's teasing a dragon."

"Idiot's actually going to get himself killed this time," Said Blaise, and Draco was surprised to hear a
note of worry in his friend's usually calculated voice.

Time seemed to slow to a grinding halt as Harry led the dragon in what seemed almost to be some
sort of dance. The only sounds were the blood in his ears, the wind, and always, the low growl of the
beast in the ring. It could only have been half a minute, but it felt like hours of agonizing waiting as
the dragon's head slowly turned this way and that, following Harry's movements through the air.

*And then what? He'll outfly the dragon? Surely even he couldn't...*

And then it happened. In the blink of an eye, the dragon began to move, and Harry became a whirl
of colour as he went into a spectacular dive... He dodged the dragon... He was nearing the eggs...
And then he was flying off the pitch, golden egg in hand, and the stands were exploding.

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The Slytherin Common Room was awash with noise as Blaise and Draco sat in regal-looking
armchairs by the fire, which was, as always, glowing with a green-tinted yellow light, Manimi
resting near the flames enjoying the warmth. The boys talked conspiratorially about the tournament,
Pansy having retired to bed for an early night ("The excitement... so tiring... Must write to Mama...").

"I mean, Krum didn't even think to fly, did he? And he's a Champion Seeker,"

"But of course Potter flew, he loves doing that sort of extravagant thing, doesn't he? That's probably
why he entered. The attention, I mean."

"Yeah, maybe." Said Draco slowly, trying to decide whether or not he could voice any vaguely pro-
Potter ideas to his closest friend, or if he would sound too un-Slytherin. In the end, he decided to test
the waters.

"It's just, you know how I do those Potions study things with Potter?"

Blaise nodded. "Because your dad wants you to, how does he put it?" Blaise adopted a noble,
arrogant air. "Have friends in high places."

Draco grinned. "Exactly. Anyway, obviously I observe him in those study sessions, you know, keep
friends close and enemies closer and all that, and you know, I'm not really sure," Draco trailed off, unsure of whether or not to continue.

"Not sure. . . ?" Blaise prompted.

"Well," Draco stalled. "It's just, well, I'm not really sure if he did put his name in the Goblet." He said quietly. Blaise did not, as Draco had expected, make fun of him or become angry with him. He simply leaned back into his armchair and considered what Draco had said. Draco silently thanked Merlin that Blaise was intelligent enough not to blindly follow the other Slytherins in every way, and became very interested in his nails as he waited for Blaise to break the silence. Finally, he looked at Draco with dark, guarded eyes and said, slowly,

"Draco, I don't think you should do these potions lessons with Potter anymore."

Manimi slowly turned her bright eyes on them and watched them from beside the fire. Draco answered carefully. "What makes you say that?"

"Draco, I don't care what he's like as a person. He could be a saint for all I care. But you can't be friends with him."

"I'm not-"

"I'm sure you aren't. But you're not not friends with him, are you?"

Draco shook his head, exasperated. "I've told you a hundred times, Blaise, I'm not doing this out of choice. Back in our first year, my father told me I had to gain his trust. In third year he told me not to be friendly to the Gryffindors, else it would seem suspicious. He makes no sense, but who am I to question him? And if I have to do potions lessons with him for this to work, and for my father to be satisfied, then who am I to question it? It's not my choice, Blaise."

"It never is, is it?" Said Blaise quietly; eerily mirroring the words Harry had spoken to him that first day back. Then Blaise checked his watch. "Past one. I'm going to bed." He paused, looking at Draco, and then said with a resigned air. "Look, you do what you want, okay? But just... Just remember who you are, and where the two of you stand, okay?"

Not long after that, Draco followed Blaise to the dorm and eventually settled down into an uneasy sleep, his clenched fists the only outward sign of the dreams that haunted him.
"You did it!" Draco was grinning from ear to ear as they sat down to in the potions class the day after the tournament. "You beat the dragon!"

Harry felt the blood flood his cheeks and tried not to grin too much. His insides twisted at the sight of Draco’s smile. "Well," he said sheepishly, pushing a hand through his hair. "I got hurt, and anyway I had help, it's not like I-"

"Potter, I swear to God, if you say one more modest sentence I'll kick you. You did it! You should be proud! I brought Manimi with me. Thought she might like to congratulate you for herself."

Out of the bag slid Manimi, who instantly reared up on the desk and looked at Harry. "Well done, Harry!" for a snake, she sounded rather excited. "Draco was very worried, but we're both glad you pulled through. I mean, I knew you would, but it is nice to be sure."

Harry laughed. "Thanks, Manimi. How are you?"

"Splendid. I found a mouse earlier. The food Draco gives me isn't bad, but it does feel good to hunt. Anyway, there's Professor Snape. I should go now. Congratulations again, Harry."

"By the way, the Polyjuice potion is complete. I'm handing it tomorrow." Draco said this offhand, but it surprised Harry.

"I'd forgotten about that."

"I know. I didn't want to bother you with it, seeing as you were already really stressed, so I just got it done, and it should be completed tonight. I expect we'll get extra points for completing it early."

"Thanks," Began Harry, but before he could continue, Snape had rapped his wand on Harry's desk, and he reluctantly turned his attention to the board.

By the end of the lesson they had organised a potions study lesson, though Harry suspected they wouldn't get much done. Draco had a hundred questions to ask and it was difficult to have a full conversation without Snape turning to make a snide remark to Harry. For some reason, Harry saw Zabini twist in his seat a couple of times when they talked and catch Draco's eyes, giving him a look that seemed to chastise, But maybe he had imagined it.

The rest of the day Harry spent talking to Ron, and after so long not talking to him, it felt amazing to speak freely again. Time passed quickly now that the First Task wasn't there to weigh him down, and before he knew it, it was dinnertime. Harry noticed that some people seemed much more open to conversation with him than before. Obviously, it wasn't only Ron who had changed his mind after witnessing the first task.

Despite Ron's protests, Harry went to the Slytherin Guest Room after dinner (though Ron didn’t know that - he thought Harry just wanted time to think about the golden egg). Draco and Manimi were there before him and Draco was half sitting, half lying on the sofa with Manimi. He got up as Harry entered the room.

"Okay, first things first." He said, and Harry got the impression that he had already planned what he was going to say, "What in the name of Merlin does Weasley mean by it? One minute he treats you like dirt, the next you're best friends again. Did he even apologise? How dare he be so mean before the task, and then go back to being best buddies once he thought you had a chance!"
"Hey, Draco- hey, let me talk! He did apologise, and I said it was fine, okay? He knows he's been an idiot, and anyway, he's my best friend. I don't want to be petty, I'm just glad he's talking to me again."

"He hurt you! He-" Draco stopped and steadied himself. "How can you just let him back in when he made you feel so bad?"

"Because he's my best friend. He made a mistake and he apologised. That's all I needed."
Draco crossed his arms. "It was wrong of him. He should have been there for you."


Draco studied him for a minute in silence. From the sofa, Manimi hissed to Harry.

"He's been fuming about this ever since he saw you guys together at lunch. Overprotective, if you ask me. You have every right to choose your own friends. You know what's best for you."

"What's she saying? Asked Draco curiously, as he always was when Manimi spoke to Harry.

"She says she thinks you're overprotective, and that I know what's best for me."

Draco looked at Manimi and the snake looked at him. Then he sighed a little, and nodded. "Oh, all right. Sorry, I shouldn't underestimate your judgment."

"Don't be," smiled Harry. "It's quite flattering to have someone stand up for me."

Draco's cheeks coloured slightly, but he returned Harry's smile. "Anyway, another thing – how's the injury, I saw the dragon got you with its tail."

Harry shrugged and sat down on the sofa. "It's not bad, and Madame Pomfrey fixed me up okay."

They continued to talk, though the topic of their conversation soon gravitated away from the task, and was instead pulled back and fourth through whatever theme came to their mind. Manimi occasionally commented, but seemed content, as usual, to simply listen. Eventually, Harry checked his watch and realised that they had been talking for more than an hour, and that Ron and Hermione would be expecting him back in the Gryffindor common room by now. He stood.

"I probably have to get going now. But I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Okay," Said Draco, reluctantly. "I guess they'll be wondering where I've got to too. But this was good, we should do it again."

"Yeah, we should." Said Harry, picking the invisibility cloak off the ground where he'd dropped it.

They left the room together, Harry under the invisibility cloak in case any Slytherins happened to be in the vicinity. They weren't.

"Well, goodnight, Harry." Said Draco, smiling in Harry's general direction. Then they went their separate ways.

00oHarry00o

The first flakes of snow fell on December the fifteenth. The school barely noticed, though, because it was too busy thinking about the Yule Ball. It was only eight days away, and Harry still didn't have a date. Harry also still didn't know how to dance, despite McGonagall's best efforts, and this might
cause some problems considering he was going to have to open the dance, being a champion and all. The golden egg wasn't solving itself either, and had been sitting in Harry's dorm, untouched, since he had first won it. This Draco knew because Harry wouldn't shut up about it, and it was probably the reason why he had been staring at the same sentence in his potions textbook for the past ten minutes, he knee jiggling restlessly under the desk.

"If you stare at that sentence much longer, I think it's going to catch fire."

Harry jumped and looked up in shock. "Huh?"

"You've been staring at the same sentence on that page for the last ten minutes, and it's going to burn a hole in the paper if you stare much longer."

"Oh. I didn't realise. Sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry," said Draco, laughing a little. "What's up, anyway? You've been really distracted recently."

"Just the Yule ball, and dancing in front of everyone when I can't dance, and just all the usual stuff." He sighed, and ran a hand distractedly through his tangled hair. "I tried asking someone, actually."

Draco felt a jolt of emotions at this news, all of which he concealed perfectly. In a casual voice, he asked;

"Really? Who?"

"Cho Chang. She's going with Cedric." He sounded bitter. Envy, as well as triumph that she had declined, filled Draco's mind. He stopped himself smiling.

"Too bad, mate. You'll find someone, though."

"No one I like." Harry leant back in his chair, stretching his back and revealing a strip of skin between his trousers and shirt. Draco looked away quickly.

"Anyway," continued Harry after a minute or two, "You going with anyone?"

"Pansy," Draco admitted. It hadn't been his idea, and Blaise was still a little pissed at him for it, but somehow he had ended up organising to go with her. However, he had reassured Blaise that he definitely didn't have a crush on Pansy, so it would be fine. "Seemed like the right thing to do,"

"You mean you don't have a crush on her?"

"No! I think she likes me but, well, she isn't really my type." Girls aren't really your type, his mind said, but he ignored it. "Anyway, it doesn't matter who I like. I'm probably going to be married off to someone once I leave school. When you think about it, it may well be Pansy."

"That's terrible!" Said Harry, sounding shocked.

"Yeah, well, when you're a Malfoy you're expected to uphold the pure-blood tradition and all that." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Maybe you won't have to. You don't know what's going to happen in the future."

"My father won't ever go away. He'll never let me do what I want."

"Draco," Harry spoke quietly, gently this time. "Is... is everything okay with... with you and your
It felt like a weight was pressing on Draco’s mind. He didn't know what to say, and subconsciously rubbed over the bump of the scar over his stomach. Finally, he answered with the simple truth, thinking that was probably his best option, and at the same time wondering why he was telling Harry at all.

"No. It isn't okay."

"What," Harry was clearly unsure of what to say next. "What about it isn't okay?"

Draco didn't say anything. Eventually, Harry began again to scratch out potions notes on a piece of parchment, and Draco went back to the sketch he had been doing of Harry underneath the table, trying to capture with graphite the way his hair fell in a tangle across his forehead, and the reflections in the lenses of his glasses. Finally, when he couldn't think of anything else to add to the drawing, he stood up and stretched. An idea had occurred him as he was drawing (the methodical pastime had always helped him think), and he was considering whether or not he was brave enough to go ahead with it. Eventually, he decided just to do it. Nothing would come of it anyway, he just wanted to help Harry and this seemed like a good way to go about it. Anyway, it wasn't as if anything was going to happen.

Harry looked up as Draco began to make his way across the room towards the door. "Where are you going? I'm sorry if I was a bit tactless, I didn't mean to be."

"Don't worry, it's not that. Just stay here. I'll be back in a minute, I just need to get something."

Draco returned after a few minutes, carrying a small device, which he set upon the desk. Once he'd put it down, Harry could see that it was a portable radio.

"Draco, what're you doing?"

He got no answer, as Draco was concentrating on finding a good radio station. Finally, the chorus of 'spellbound' by Celestina Warbeck filled the room, and Draco straightened. "It'll have to do, I suppose," He said, more to himself than to Harry.

"Draco, what are you doing?"

"Harry Potter, I am going to teach you how to dance."

"You're going to what?"

"Teach you to dance, Potter. You know, moving to music?"

"How can you teach me to dance? Why?"

"I happen to be very good at it. I had to be - I learned when I was very young and have to do it at the family balls etc. every year. Why? Because otherwise, you're going to make a complete dunce of yourself in front of the entire population of the senior students at Hogwarts, as well as two other schools."

"You know, Draco, I've never had a more encouraging or positive teacher. Plus, what makes you think you can teach me to dance, when several weeks of lessons with McGonagall haven't?"
Draco crossed his arms. "I'm trying to help you, Harry."

"Fine, Fine." Harry's voice was steady, but his nerves weren't. He wasn't really sure if he was mentally prepared to dance with Draco, especially with the dilemma he'd been having recently about his, well, his feelings for him. He tried, and consequently failed, to push the thoughts from his mind as he stood up and faced Draco. "Well then, what do I do?"

"Well, you're going to be the girl at first, because it'll be easier for me to teach you that way. No, don't give me that look, Harry. You can do the male part in a bit. Now, you'll be waltzing for this, so put your right hand on my shoulder and hold my right with your left. Yeah, like that. Okay, now just follow what I'm doing. You've probably learned the basics with your McGonagall, so this shouldn't be too tricky. Ready? And: one; two; three…"

What followed had to be the most awkward two minutes of his life. He kept tripping, and he could tell that Draco was fighting a laugh almost the whole time. His face burned and he made a huge effort to look anywhere but in Draco's eyes as they moved haphazardly through the room. Finally, the song ended, and gladly Harry stepped back from Draco.

"That was pretty bad." Stated Draco, as he leant over the radio again trying to find a station that was playing a good song. "But it's okay, you'll get better. Ah, there we go. This one's slower, so you should find it easier to dance to."

The song was a slow tune that Harry had heard a few times at The Burrow that summer, though he hadn't really paid attention to it then. Again, he took Draco's hand and they began to move through the room, slower this time, with Harry's movements becoming more steady and confident.

"Harry, I'm not sure why you find my chin so fascinating, but you really should be looking at my eyes. It's very bad etiquette not to make eye contact. Honestly, what do they teach you in Muggle schools?"

"Not much," said Harry, reluctantly raised his eyes to meet Draco's and found himself staring into irises of such light blue that they looked like ice, with patterns etched in grey across them. In some parts, they were almost white, so bright he felt as though he were looking into the sun, and yet he was unable to look away. His heart beat in his throat and the music seemed to be coming from a very long way away as he stared, transfixed, at eyes that seemed to be drawing closer. He found his head tilting upwards the arm around his back tightening, and then… The feel of lips upon his own. And the whole world was lost, melted away around them as he closed his eyes. All that existed was feeling.

Breaking apart was like coming up for air. The world swam back into focus, but all Harry could see was Draco looking at him. Neither spoke. Harry was suddenly very aware of Draco's hands around his back, and his own around Draco's neck. Numbly, he wondered at what point they had stopped dancing. In the background, the song finished, and Draco's eyes lost the softness they had only a second before. Suddenly, he looked afraid. The arms around his back loosened.

"Harry, I-" He took a step away from him. In the background, some obnoxious radio presenter spoke in an upbeat voice about the song. Draco turned away and walked over to it, clicking it off. In place of the voice, heavy silence beat on their ears. Harry felt as though he had forgotten how to speak. He was numb, but he felt tingling in the tips of his fingers. He didn't care if that was a good thing or not. Slowly, Draco turned back to him, and took a deep breath.

"I can't do this."

A dull ache crept through Harry's stomach. "Draco, I-"
"Please, don't make this any harder for me Harry." He ran a hand through his hair. "This can't happen. I can't be with you, and you can't be with me. It'll just hurt us."

"It- it might not,"

"It will." Draco leant against the desk and wiped hand over his face. "I'm not the sort of person you should be around anyway. I'll just hurt you. I- I don't want to hurt you, Harry."

"But you are hurting me!" Suddenly Harry's voice came back to him in a rush. "Please, Draco, don't do this to me!"

"I don't have a choice!" Draco stood sharply and faced Harry. "I can't put you in danger and believe me, if we were… together, then you would be even less safe than you already are! What would I do if you were hurt because of me? Can you even imagine if someone found out, the uproar it would cause? What our houses, our friends, my father, would do?" He stopped again, and suddenly he looked very young. Harry could see the circles, like bruises, under his eyes, the way his skin looked almost translucent. He didn't know how he hadn't seen it before. Draco looked down at his shoes, and a tear dropped onto the carpet. "Please, Harry. Just go."

"Draco-"

"Go, Harry! Please."

0o0o

The cool air stung on his face as he stumbled into the grounds, barely able to see for tears and almost tripping on the invisibility cloak. He didn't know where he was going; didn't care. Draco didn't want him. That was all that mattered.

When had it happened, this feeling which now engulfed him? It had been there for a while, but had risen like bile to the surface the moment he had looked into those quicksilver eyes. He wanted to take off his feelings like an old jacket, to lose them in the murky grounds and never think about them again, but he couldn't, so onwards he stumbled, until he sank at the foot of a tree and leaned his head against it, relishing the pain that the wind caused his hands and feet and the way it blocked out the pain in his mind. Dimly, he realised that Hermione and Ron would be worried about him.

Let them worry, he thought. He couldn't muster the energy to care.
"Harry, please tell us what's wrong," Hermione said pleadingly, leaning forward in her armchair towards him. It was Christmas Eve, and he sat with Ron and Hermione in their usual place near the fire. The common room was awash with noise and excitement as almost everyone in fourth year and above had stayed at school over the holidays to attend the Yule Ball. He felt cornered as his best friends watched him with worried stares, and fixed his gaze stubbornly on the frayed fabric of the arm of his chair.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Ron said, frustrated. "You haven't been all week. If you'll just tell us, Harry? Is it something we've done?"

"No. You haven't done anything wrong. Look, I appreciate you worrying, but there's no reason to. I'm fine."

"Harry, please,"

He stood abruptly. "I'm going to bed."

The dorm was empty, for which he was grateful. Collapsing onto his bed, he sat up and drew the curtains around himself before turning onto his back and gazing up at the ceiling. How was it possible to feel so much, and yet so little? It was though his feelings had grown slowly, then with a single kiss, had swollen and engulfed him. And now they had been ripped away, and all he had was the hole they left and the pain of their absence.

Potions was the worst of it. They didn't speak, and Draco sat as though he were recoiling from him. The dark circles Harry had glimpsed were no longer visible, but Harry saw the way Draco's hands shook as he wrote in messier-than-usual curly handwriting. He didn't bring Manimi to lessons any more, and his hands were constantly blackened by graphite on the sides, as though he had been rubbing them on pencil marks. Harry didn't know what that meant, but it was unusual for Draco to be untidy or unkempt in any way. Dully, Harry wondered if he should start thinking of him as Malfoy now, but, as with most things, couldn't bring himself to care.

Sleep came easy, but the dreams were hard. Sometimes anxious - running from unseen people and trying locked doors; sometimes gut wrenching; and sometimes scenes in the Malfoy guest room that made him turn red when he recalled them in the morning. And always was the nauseous feeling of loss and sadness, which had permeated his life, damp and stinking, since that dreadful day exactly one week earlier.

0o0oDraco0o0o

As usual, Draco was crying. It was becoming a habit of his. Weak, hissed his father's voice in his mind. Pathetic. Only children and the feeble-minded cry. Manimi weighed reassuringly on his stomach, her head resting just by his collarbone, but even her presence wasn't enough to calm him down. He kept replaying the moment they had locked eyes, leaning in…

But what could he have done? Visions of Harry being turned upon by his housemates swirled through Draco's mind, and he shook his head, trying to stop the visions. He couldn't bear the thought of Harry being hurt because of him. And yet, Harry's distraught words continued to come back to him —"You are hurting me!" Tears leaked into his hair and he reached up to wipe them away, and
then changed his mind. There was no point wiping them away when they would be replaced in seconds.

He let out a breath with a gasp and reached for it again, but couldn't catch it. His windpipe was closing up as it did when he got really upset. *Panic*, his father's voice jeered, *is yet another attribute of people too weak to change their predicament.*

Again he thought back to those precious moments, letting the memories flow over him, this time with no opposition, and at the mere touch of them, his airways seemed to relax and open, just a little. The way Harry felt right in his arms, how Harry's arms felt resting on his shoulders, the chapped, bitten lips. He wanted to live in that moment forever without thinking about the future of the past, but simply to revel in how perfect it had felt just to be with together.

He reached back under his pillow and found a crumpled slip of paper, the drawing he had done of Harry as he studied, just before everything had gone wrong. Now that he looked at it again, he could see the mistakes he had made, the proportion of the hands slightly too small, the eyes not quite right. And yet it was the closest he could be to Harry right now, and he was thankful for what he could have.

Potions was the worst of all - the thought of touching Harry, even accidentally, scared Draco. He might not be able to break the contact, or worse, it might break the carefully constructed barrier between himself and his emotions that he had created. It was easier to be numb, but at times like this – in the dead of night when all emotions are stronger – he couldn't hide from them any more.

0o0o

"Draco, are you going to dance with me at all?" Pansy's voice was whiny and purposefully high-pitched and babyish. When he listened to her it felt like it did when he bit down on something wrongly and scraped his teeth together. He smiled.

"Sure, Pans. Shall we?"

Offering his arm to her, he lead her regally onto the dance floor and they began to dance, Draco's feet making the movements without him even thinking about it. Once or twice he passed Harry and one of the Patil twins, and noted that Harry's dancing was, if anything, worse than it had been in the Guest Room. He forced himself not to look at them and tried to lose himself in the dance.

However, as the night progressed, the live band appeared and it became more of a concert than anything else. It was loud and intoxicating, and Draco felt like he was almost letting go. At least, he did until the band began playing *that song*. The song he and Harry had danced to. He hadn't realized it was a Weird Sisters song. Pansy turned to him.

"Ooh, Draco, this is a slow dance song!"

His heart felt as though it had crawled into his throat as she took hold of his hands and placed them around her waist, before draping her own hands over his neck and giving him what she clearly though of as a flirtatious smile. He swallowed hard and tried to stop the bile from rising in his throat.

0o0oHarry0o0o

He was dancing with her. Draco was dancing to their song with *Pansy Parkinson*. Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from the sick immitation, and Pansy's cloying smile. He couldn't tear his eyes away when she leaned up and whispered something into Draco's ear, then pulled back and smiled that horrible, sickly smile.
He couldn't tear his eyes away when she pressed her lips against Draco's, her hands wrapping possessively around his back.

Suddenly Draco was breaking away from her, pushing her back. His hands went to his hair and he shook his head slowly, eyes closed. Pansy reached out and put a hand on his arm, still making a damp attempt at a pout. Then Draco looked at her and said something that made her hands fly to cover her mouth in shock. She stepped back from him, paused, and then ran from the dancing area, hands over her face. Draco made as though to follow her, then seemed to think better of it. Snapping something at the few people who had turned to watch the scene unfold, he turned on his heel and made to leave the room in the other direction.

"Hot, isn't it?" Hermione's voice suddenly came from right next to him and he jumped. "Victors just gone to get us drinks."

"He has, has he?" Ron replied sarcastically. Harry breathed out heavily and rubbed his face with shaking hands, his heart beating abnormally fast. He cast about, but Draco was gone from the room.

If the evening had been slow before, it was ten times worse now. It felt like years had passed before he and Ron finally got back the dorm, both in fuming tempers. He didn't sleep, though his exhausted brain begged him to. He just replayed the moment Draco and Pansy had kissed. Jealousy welled up inside him and gave him the ugly urge to hit something.

It was with grim satisfaction that he reminded himself that Draco hadn't wanted her either.
"Just in here," Blaise said, quickly separating from the tide of students and entering the disused classroom. Draco just managed to follow him before being swept away by the mass of bodies moving through the corridor for lunch hour.

"What do you want?" He asked with irritated abruptness, attempting to straighten out his clothes.

"I want you to tell me what's going on." Stated Blaise, arms crossed lightly over his chest. "It's been what, a week since the Yule Ball? And you and Pansy still aren't talking. And then, even before that, you were acting strange for about a week? I won't let you leave until you tell me," He added, blocking Draco as he made to leave. Angrily, Draco stepped back from the exit and crossed his arms, staring at the floor and stubbing it with his toe.

"You have no right to keep me here, and no right to pry. Let me out."

"No." Blaise leant against the door and eyed Draco. "Start talking."

"There's nothing to talk about."

Blaise laughed mirthlessly. "Draco, I think we all know that's a big lie." he sighed, "Oh, alright then, be like that. I'll start. What happened at the Yule Ball with Pansy?"

With cruelty borne of frustration, Draco gave a malicious chuckle. "Blaise, old pall, something gives me the feeling she doesn't like you back."

Blaise blinked, and looked away. "I know you, Draco. Well enough to know that you only act like a dick when you're hiding something. I'm aware she doesn't like me, okay? So just tell me what it is."

Draco continued to study the floor, and reluctantly narrated to Blaise what had happened at the Yule Ball, up to his walking out. When he'd finished, there was silence for a while until Blaise said, at length,

"Well, that's not that bad. It was bound to happen eventually. And now she knows where you two stand, so there won't be any more conflict once she gets over it. You need to apologise, though."

"I'm not apologising for the fact that she kissed me!"

"Yes, you are." Blaise said, with the air of someone explaining to a screaming five-year-old that one plus one did, indeed, equal two, "You hurt her, and now you need to say sorry."

"What if I don't want to? What if the sound of her voice makes me feel physically ill, and I don't want to be around her anymore?"

Blaise's usually level voice was tinged with the beginnings of anger now "So you apologise anyway! When you hurt someone, you apologise, even if it's your worst enemy!"

Draco smiled. "You sounded just like your mother when you said that."

Angrily, Blaise looked away. "You made her really sad," He said quietly. "And that makes me feel like shit too. So, if you're loyal to me, you'll apologise. Okay?"

"Merlin's beard, alright. If I must." He made towards the door "So, is that all? Can I leave now?"
"No. That isn't really what's bugging you, you don't care that much about Pansy. Tell me what happened just before Christmas. That's when you really started acting weird. Oh, and by the way, I happened to notice that that coincides with you and Potter suddenly hating each other. So go on, speak."

With a groan, Draco clasped his hands behind his head and began pacing "I don't want to talk about this, okay? It's none of your business-"

"Yes, it is. Draco, I know you don't really enjoy affectionate terms, but you have to understand that I. Am. Your. Friend. And were our positions reversed, you would do exactly the same thing as I am. So, actually, It's plenty of my business."

Draco turned on his heel and glared at Blaise. With angry quickness, he began to talk. "We had an argument, all right? It's nothing, anyway, it's not like I cared about him-"

"Liar Liar, potion fire," Chanted Blaise. "You care about him. Don't kid yourself, and don't kid me."

"Think what you want, Zabini. But that's all it was. We fought, and now we don't talk. Happy?"

"Nope. Why has one argument made you pissed off at everything that breathes? If he doesn't matter, why do you care?"

"Because-!" Draco stopped abruptly and flushed redder that he already was. He couldn't tell Blaise; he didn't know how he would react. And if word got around that he and Harry-

"Because," Blaise finished, softly, "you like him."

The silence in the room was deafening as Draco's head whipped up, his bright grey eyes meeting Blaise's black ones in terrified defiance. "I- I never-"

"Draco, I don't care." Blaise gave what must have been a reassuring smile. "Unlike our other housemates, I was raised right. It doesn't matter to me who you like- actually, it would matter if it was Pansy, but I get the feeling you play on a different field, if you know what I-"

But Draco was shaking his head hard, the path to his lungs already beginning to constrict against the air in panic, "No, no, no, no! You can't know, this can't- my father-"

"Draco? Draco, calm down! Look at me," But Blaise's voice was growing fainter as the edges of Draco's vision became darker, finally engulfing him in black.

Draco covered his stomach with both hands, over the place where the twisted scar disfigured his body "You can't know, you can't,"

"Draco, please calm down!" But Blaise's voice was growing fainter as the edges of Draco's vision became darker, finally engulfing him in black.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"Did you hear what happened?"

"What." Harry's voice came out flat and uninterested as usual, and he continued to stare at the same sentence in 'Deciphering Dreams: Volume III' that he had been 'reading' for the better part of half an hour.

"It's Malfoy," Ron said excitedly, "I just heard. He fainted! Lavender saw him being carried to the
hospital wing at the end of lunch. 'Parrently he had a meltdown or something," Ron gave a bark of laughter. "Probably kicked one too many first years, and burst something. Oh, Merlin, you wait 'till Hermione hears about this!"

"Is he okay?" Asked Harry, sitting up a little straighter in his squashy armchair.

"Who cares! Hopefully he'll be recovering for ages. Wouldn't put it past the prick to use it as an excuse to skive classes- hey, maybe he did it on purpose, to get time off, you know?"

Harry raised his hand in the air. "Professor Trelawney? I need the loo."

"Very well, my dear, but do not tarry back! I sense there may be some danger lurking for you."

"What, I'm going to be attacked by Moaning Myrtle or something?" Harry said sarcastically, his voice deadpan as he made his way to the trapdoor, ignoring Ron's hurt, confused look. Slowly, deliberately, he lowered himself down the ladder rung by rung, as though he had all the time in the world. Then, as soon as he reached the bottom rung, he began to sprint. In no time at all he was at Gryffindor common room in the boy's dorm, grabbing the invisibility cloak from his trunk. Then he was off again, and in less than five minutes he was nearing the hospital wing, where he slowed, attempting to calm his breathing, and arranged the cloak to cover himself fully.

There was only one bed occupied, and it had curtains drawn around it to shield it from prying eyes. Faintly, Harry heard voices coming from behind the curtains, and drew closer.

"I promise you, I'm fine," Came a voice Harry recognised as Draco's. "Honestly, if my father hears that I'm being forced to stay here-"

"You've had a nasty shock, Mister Malfoy," Said Madam Pomfrey in her usual stern voice. "You need to stay in bed for another few hours before I can allow you to leave. I'm sure your father will not mind you getting the rest you need."

This was followed by a snort from Draco, and a few minutes later, Madam Pomfrey drew back the curtains and made to leave, turning back to say something to Draco before drawing them shut again. While she was talking, Harry had a clear look into the room, and could see Draco looking angrily at Madam Pomfrey. As it always did, his stomach gave a lurch when he looked at Draco, who seemed much more bedraggled than usual. Harry noted that once again dark circles were visible under his eyes, and wondered how they seemed to come and go so easily. Finally, the curtain fell back over the bed once more, and Madam Pomfrey walked purposefully back to her room at the rear of the Hospital Ward. Once again, Harry became aware of his heartbeat, though it had slowed considerably since he had entered the hall. After standing for a moment, he turned on his heel and swiftly retraced his steps to the Divination Classroom, earning a slightly perturbed look from both Ron and Professor Trelawney for his slightly breathless entrance.

0o0oDraco0o0o

The silence hanging between Draco and Blaise was palpably awkward. Once, Blaise made to say something, but then bit his lip, and sank back down onto his seat. At some point, Manimi got bored and returned to the dorm room. Finally, Blaise broke the silence.

"Sorry, Draco. I didn't realise that you were going to be that affected by… everything."

Unsure of what to say, Draco sighed and examined his clasped hands. "You had no right."

"I know, Draco, but I thought - I knew - that something needed to happen. It still needs to happen. I really am sorry about earlier, but you need to get this all out of your system."
Draco glanced around the common room, which was mostly empty, save a couple of studying sixth years. Reluctantly, he turned back to Blaise, and lowered his voice. "Look, my dad isn't, well, he isn't the most forgiving of people. Nor is he the most open, loving person. Can you imagine what he'd do if he found out that I was… you know, with H- Potter."

"You can call him Harry. I won't tell anyone," Said Blaise with a half-smile. "Yeah, I knew that your dad wasn't accepting. But I didn't know it was that bad that it could make you pass out with stress,"

"Yeah, well, there's plenty you don't know," Draco said without elaboration. Blaise obviously understood the frankness and didn't push the matter.

"Come on, let's head back to the dorm. It's getting late."

Hey guys, just to let you know I've got a tumblr now - it's called Eviesreality, same as on here. Feel free to follow it, much love :)
On the day of the second task, Draco rose early, dressed, and spent two hours in the common room trying to stop thinking about what could happen to Harry in the task, drawing and reading and trying to do homework to distract himself - without much success. It had been two months since the Yule ball, and the feelings that had at first threatened to engulf Draco had begun to drain away, leaving a gaping ache of absence in their wake. Eventually, he realised that nothing was working and he was still just as worried as he had been when he first got up. The sick feeling he’d had on the first task was back in his stomach. Manimi was gone, out on a hunt probably.

Eventually, the other Slytherins began drifting into the common room, starting with some older kids he didn't know well from the year above him, and followed grudgingly by Theodore Nott, Blaise, Pansy, and a few other Slytherins from Draco's year. Ever since he'd taken Blaise's advice and brought Pansy on an extravagant shopping trip to Hogsmeade by way of an apology, they'd been on speaking terms. Unfortunately, Draco still got the feeling that Pansy didn't like him, but some things couldn't be helped.

The Slytherins brought little distraction as they crowded the common room, lounging on the regal armchairs and sofas. Pansy was especially unhelpful, as she seemed intent on planning out all the possible ways that Harry might die in whatever unknown event was planned for the second task. Eventually, even the other Slytherins seemed tired of her cackling laughter. Finally, it was Theo who decided to put them out of their misery.

"Pansy, no offence, but could you please shut up?" he asked sweetly. Pansy opened her mouth in mock horror and pouted, pathetically. Draco was thankful when the group finally decided to move out of the cramped common room to the Great Hall, now joined by Crabbe and Goyle. However, the knot in his stomach tightened when he searched the Great Hall and found that the Golden Trio were absent from their usual spot. Surely at least Granger and Weasley would have been at breakfast. With mounting dread, he forced himself to eat some toast and talk to the others, putting on his Malfoy Face and laughing along at their jokes, until the schools began as one to move out into the grounds, and towards the boats floating on the lakes. Clouds sagged in the sky. Draco wondered if it was going to rain.

The stands on the lake were loud and swayed sickeningly whenever strong wind came about, and still Harry was nowhere to be seen. It seemed that his absence had finally been noticed by the other students, as whispering sounded around the stands. Below them, the judges put their heads togethersecretively. Karkaroff smirked.

"He's chickened," Stated Blaise. "he's not coming."

"Shame," Sneered Pansy. "I was looking forward to watching him drown."

"Oh, change the record, Pansy," Spat Draco, and turned back to the castle, ignoring the look she was giving him. Maybe Harry had chickened out… Then he would be safe, he wouldn't have to do the task! Just as Draco thought this, however, a figure came streaking out towards the boats, and the noise in the stands rose as Draco's heart fell once again, coming to rest somewhere near his feet.

Waiting for the champions to resurface was exhausting. He barely stirred when Fleur appeared at the surface, and after that, he couldn't take his eyes off the lake, searching for any tiny hint of movement. For almost an hour he barely moved, staring and waiting, and then jumping almost a foot in the air when out of nowhere a champion appeared. The stands exploded into applause as Draco sank back
into his seat. It was only Cedric. Again he jumped as Krum burst from the water with Granger in his arms. But Harry was nowhere to be seen. Minutes passed like agonising hours, and beside him, Draco heard Blaise say quietly,

"Hey, Pans, I think you might have gotten your wish."

Even Pansy's laugh seemed forced now. The judges whispered and the stands held their breath, the tension almost matching how Draco felt until, finally, the water burst and three heads surfaced, coughing and spluttering, Harry spitting water as he heaved Ron and a small girl into the waiting arms of the judges. The stands exploded and Draco was on his feet with them, barely stopping himself from cheering.

0o0o

A galleon shimmered in the air in front of Draco, before landing crest-side up in his palm.

"I'm going to talk to him," Draco stated quickly before he chickened out. Manimi twisted her head up to look at him from her place on the bed. He took a deep breath, and continued, becoming surer of himself all the time he spoke. "While I was waiting for him to come up from the lake, there was a moment when... when I thought he might not come up again. I couldn't bear it. I guess it made me realise that I need him more than I thought. I have to at least try." He picked at his blanket, thinking.

"I told Harry that we couldn't be together because I thought it would put us in danger. But I... well, I think that even though I might be killed if I'm with him, it isn't really living when I'm without him."

He paused, and as he did Manimi rose up and pressed her head against the base of his chin, where the line of his jawbone made stark shadows across his neck. He smiled; she agreed.

"Basically, I don't think there's anything left to lose. I can't become any more unhappy, so even if he... even if he doesn't want me back, which I would understand, then at least... At least I'll know. For better or worse."

Then Draco thought of something and the smile that had threatened to appear on his lips faded. It had been two months, after all. What if Harry had moved on? He had said something about Cho Chang, maybe he had forgotten about Draco.

Don't think about it, he berated himself. It can't get any worse than this. Just do it, and then you'll know for sure.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"Late, Potter. Do you think that your moral fibre makes you untouchable?" Snape's hair looked particularly greasy as he swooped towards Harry, staring down his hooked nose. The class turned as one to watch.

"No, Sir,"

"Ten points from Gryffindor. Now sit down."

"Yes, Sir," Harry said through gritted teeth as he sat down next to Draco, and began to pull his parchment and textbooks out of his bag, as usual, saying nothing. Slowly, he had managed to pull himself together enough to - mostly - block Draco out of his mind, but he couldn't truly get rid of him. He had simply got better at acting like he had.

The Burn Healing Paste that they had been assigned to make took the whole lesson. It was
complicated, requiring all of Harry's concentration. As usual, the boys communicated little, and if they had to it was only through single words or gestures, so in this way, the lesson passed relatively fast, as time does when one is concentrating hard. When only ten minutes remained of the lesson, Draco ladled the potion into a vial and brought it to his Godfather for his inspection. Harry began to clean their table, avoiding looking at Draco as he walked back from Snape's desk. It was only three minutes before the end of the class when Harry felt a tap on his arm, and turned to see Draco, looking nervous.

"Hm?" He grunted, still avoiding looking directly at Draco, instead opting to busy himself in the contents of his bag. Draco cleared his throat.

"Uh, I was wondering if, uh," He trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"What?" He almost saw Draco flinch at the detachedness of his voice.

"Would- would you come to the Guest Room after dinner? I need to talk to you."

Harry's heart beat in his throat and his hand automatically went through his hair. "What is it?" He asked suspiciously, eyeing Draco, though he still didn't meet his gaze.

"Please. I need to talk to you." Draco made as though to touch Harry's arm, and then pulled back, turning slightly pink as he did so. To give himself time to think, Harry turned away again and busied himself with his bag. Finally, he turned back.

"Okay. I'll come if I can. But I've got Quidditch training after dinner so make it quick." then he walked away before Draco could say anything else, to where Ron and Hermione stood chatting by their desks. There was a buzzing in his ears.

What could Draco want?
Part Two - Chapter Twelve

After eating nothing at dinner and making a transparent excuse to Ron and Hermione, Harry carefully took as long as he could to walk through the school towards the Guest Room. At first he had to fight the crowds of students returning from the Great hall, but soon the corridors emptied themselves, and all that was left were the eerily loud echoes of his feet on the stone floor. Feeling uncomfortably aware of how nervous he was, Harry first stuffed his shaking hands in his pockets, and then removed them when they began to get clammy and damp. He didn't know what Draco was going to say, and even less what he was going to say in return. If Draco wanted him back, what then? Of course Harry wanted to be with Draco, so badly it made his head hurt, but after what Draco had done to him - how bad he’d made him feel - would he be able to say yes? And what if it wasn't that? What if he'd done something wrong, or worse, what if this was all some big joke by the Slytherins? Shaking his head in a desperate attempt to clear his mind, Harry realised he was nearing the room, and took a couple of deep breaths, wiping his palms on his trousers and straightening his back a little.

"Ilunga," He said quietly, and after one last hesitation pushed the door open.

The room was exactly as it had been when he'd left it, over two months ago. Draco clearly hadn't been back either, judging by the radio on the table, and the few sheets of parchment spread over the writing desk. Nervously, he looked around to see Draco, who stood up from his place on the sofa. Neither boy said anything for a moment, just stared, flushing with the awkwardness.

"Um, hi, Harry," Draco began gracelessly. Harry blinked at the sound of Draco speaking his name, an unfamiliar noise after going so long unsaid.

"What do you want?" He asked in a carefully flat voice "Why did you need to speak to me?"

Draco swallowed. Then straightened his back in the same way Harry had done moments earlier, met Harry's gaze, and held it. "Harry Potter, I- I owe you an apology. Would you please do me the kindness of listening to what I have to say?"

Draco's tone was formal, though unsteady, and it dawned on Harry that Draco had truly been brought up in high society, whether or not he cared to admit it. Harry nodded a little. "Okay. Go on." He made no move to sit down but instead dropped his bag on the floor by his feet, and crossed his arms lightly, almost protectively, over his chest. Draco took a deep breath.

"To begin with, I owe you an explanation. It isn't an excuse, I just think you deserve to understand. You deserve to know." Again, he paused. "Ever since I can remember, I haven't been brought up as a son by my father, but instead, as an heir. I wasn't raised, I was trained. My father, as you probably know, isn't the warmest man. But most people don't quite realise the extent of his…" He gestured, grasping for the right word, "His character. When I fail to please him, which is almost constantly, there are severe consequences. Very severe." Draco seemingly subconsciously raised his arm and rubbed an area of his belly, and looked away from Harry. "He starves me over the holidays if I don't do well in school, or if I do something - even the tiniest thing - that isn't perfect while I'm at home. He hits me or my mum when he gets angry, and he- he just does some really terrible things, Harry. I'm not telling you this so that you pity me; I don't want your pity. I just want you to understand that when I say that I don't have a choice, it is very rarely a lie."

Harry could feel his heart beating a little faster, and rage at Lucius Malfoy began to swirl in his mind. Still, Draco continued to talk.
"So, now you know, and I hope you understand what's been going on. But that still isn't an excuse for hurting you." He ran a self-conscious hand through his hair.

"Harry, I really like you. I have done for a long time, even if I didn't realise, or didn't want to realise it. But I thought that if I was with you... well, I knew it would put us in real danger if someone found out. And I didn't - I don't - ever want to hurt you. I thought, realistically, that my father might do something terrible if he knew. And he probably would. But I..." He paused, and looked again at Harry. "Being without you isn't really living, it's just existing. And I can't bear it anymore. I'm so, so sorry for hurting you, Harry. And if you could possibly find it in your heart to forgive me-"

But Draco never finished his sentence, because Harry was kissing him, allowing all the emotions he'd forgotten he had to flow as his hand tangled Draco's hair, the feeling of Draco holding him again blocking out the world.

When their lips finally stopped moving, neither spoke. Draco rested his forehead against Harry's, eyes closed, and Harry felt a tear splash onto his skin. Gently, he lifted a hand to Draco's cheek and wiped away the shining tear streaks. Draco opened his eyes at this, and looked into Harry's. Harry smiled.

"I forgive you."

0000

"So. Where were you?" Asked Hermione over breakfast. "We waited up for you for ages. I didn't even know you'd left after dinner, you just disappeared,"

Harry shrugged, taking a large bite of his scrambled eggs. How was it that everything tasted so good today? "I was just out, thinking about things, you know," He gestured vaguely, "Usual stuff."

"Oh, sure, because it's so normal for you to disappear to 'think about stuff' for hours on end." She rolled her eyes.

"Oh, leave him alone, Hermione," George said good-naturedly between bites of toast, giving Hermione a little nudge with his elbow "He's a man of mystery, Harry is. Can't be telling us all his secrets."

"Probably off saving the school from some unknown terror," added Fred, from Hermione's other side. He leant towards Harry in faux-secrecy and said in a mock-whisper, "I suppose if you told us, you'd have to kill us, right Harry?"

"Oh, give him a break, guys," laughed Ron. Then added, with a smirk, "He probably just wanted to have a break from his adoring fans."

"Shut up!" Laughed Harry. God, it felt good to laugh. He'd totally forgotten about Ron and Hermione and hadn't made it back to the common room until it was very late because he just hadn't been able to tear himself away from Draco. Just being able to talk to him again was wonderful, but being able to kiss him was something else, something more all together.

"First lesson's potions with Slytherin," Said Ron with a groan, bringing Harry's thoughts to an abrupt halt. "Bet Snape gives us another Burn Paste to make, just to torture us all a bit more."

"Well, if you'd just read the instructions a little more carefully, you'd have seen that you had to dice the stag beetles, not slice,"

"Oh, so it's my fault that Dean and Seamus' cauldron caught fire, is it?"
They bickered all the way to potions, for which Harry was grateful, as it gave him ample time alone with his thoughts, and his thoughts were mostly about Draco. He still couldn't really believe what had happened. One day, he'd been miserably lonely and depressed, the next…

The kiss had been so perfect. He could remember it in such sharp focus that it was as though he were still in the Guest Room. The feeling of Draco's chapped lips on his, his hair in Harry's hands, his taste on Harry's tongue and the smell of his skin were all solid in his mind, and it made him feel like he was melting.

0o0oDraco0o0o

"Morning," Smiled Harry as he slid into the seat beside Draco. His heart skipped a beat.

"Hey you," He grinned back, looking down to hide fact that he was kind of blushing. Why? Nothing embarrassing had happened. "How's it going?"

Draco had never enjoyed potions so much. As they remade the burn potion, they chatted freely (though quietly, so as not to arouse any suspicion on the part of Granger and Weasley), and it surprised Draco just how easily the conversation flowed. It was even easier than it had been before they'd fought. There was plenty to catch up on, with almost three months having elapsed since their last proper conversation. And even when they weren't talking, it wasn't awkward at all. It was companionable silence.

"Draco, I know I'm gorgeous, but you need to stop staring or we'll muck up the potion,"

With a start, Draco realised he'd become caught up in that little curl of hair that fell over Harry's forehead as he had intently diced the stag beetles. "Sorry. Didn't realise,"

"That's okay, no need to apologise," Laughed Harry. "You know, you really say sorry a lot,"

"How do you know? You haven't spoken to me for over two months,"

"You've always done it," Harry stated, as he finished the beetles and added them to the potion. Draco thought for a minute, slowly returning to the horn that he was crushing to powder.

"Maybe," He ventured, "It's something to do with my father. You know, the stuff I told you about yesterday," he stared fixedly at his mortar and pestle as he felt Harry's eyes on him, a flush rising to his cheeks.

"Well," Harry said, after studying him for a moment, "You don't ever need to apologise to me, okay?"

"Sor- Okay." He laughed a little, embarrassed, adding the finely crushed powder to the potion, which emitted a shrill, quiet whistle.

"Malfoy, Potter, it appears your potion is complete first. Five points to Slytherin, you may start packing up. Everyone else, I expect you to stay until you have finished your potion." Snape peered down his hooked nose at the whistling potion. "Satisfactory," He stated, before swooping away.

"Five points to Slytherin? What about me?! I did some work!" Harry stormed in a low voice as soon as Snape was out of earshot. Draco grinned.

"It's not my fault he hates you, is it? I can't help it if I'm his godson," He ladled a portion of the paste into a vile for inspection, corked it, and vanished the remaining potion from the cauldron.
"I did just as much as you!" Continued Harry, as he stuffed his books into his bag.

The bell went to signal the end of first period, and Draco tapped Harry's arm quickly. "Can you come to our place any time after school?"

"I wish I could," Harry straightened and looked sadly up at him, "But if I'm missing from Gryffindor two nights in a row Hermione'll get even more suspicious. The only way I could do it would be to sneak down at some ridiculous time like one in the morning."

"Why not? I want to see you,"

"I want to see you too," Whispered Harry with a smile that made Draco grin like an idiot, forsaking all secrecy. "Look," Harry continued, "I'll come down at half past midnight, they should be asleep by then. But I won't be able to stay long."

"I don't care how long for, as long as you come."

Then Blaise appeared at his side with a light touch to the arm. "Draco, I think it's time we left Potter to go to his mates now? People are going to think you're friends with him." He shuddered theatrically, then winked at Draco. "Come on."

Harry shot him a slightly shocked look, which Draco returned with a smile to reassure him. "I'll see you tonight?" He whispered.

Harry nodded. "Take care,"

0o0oHarry0o0o

"You're lucky I made it down here," Harry pretended to be cross as he entered the Guest Room. "Peeves almost caught me."

"But he didn't, so it's fine," Draco said with a smile as he walked over to Harry kissed him, wrapping one arm around his back, and placing a hand on his neck.

"Now that's my kind of welcome," grinned Harry as they pulled apart, "That was almost worth being caught by Peeves."

"Almost?" Laughed Draco, "Give me another kiss and I'll make it worth your time,"

Harry bent to kiss Draco, and he felt him tighten his grip around his back, slowly manoeuvring his backwards until they leant against the wall, Draco pressing into him. The kiss deepened, and involuntarily, Harry moaned.

"Excuse me," Came a quietly amused voice, and they sprang apart. Draco turned, having heard the hissing, even if he didn't understand parseltongue.

"Oh gosh, sorry Manimi, I kind of forgot you were there,"

"I could tell,"

Harry was overcome with excitement. "Manimi! I haven't seen you in months! How are you?"

"Excellent, actually," She said primly, gliding away towards the sofa. "Especially now that Draco's so much happier. And what about you? I heard all about the second task, well done!"

"Thanks! I'm good, yeah. Better since talking to Draco again."
"Ah, young love," Manimi hissed teasingly, and Harry reddened.

"I- You're younger than us, Manimi!"

"And yet, much wiser." she said, and Harry could almost hear a laugh in her voice. "Well, if you don't mind - and I doubt you will - I'm going out to hunt now that I've seen you - albeit briefly. I've been waiting up for you for ages and now I'm ssstarving."

"Well, it's always good to see you, Manimi. Good hunting,"

"And you," She glided towards the door and looked expectantly at Draco, who, looking slightly perturbed, hurried to open it for her.

"I can never decide if I like it when you guys talk," He said after she had gone, and the door was closed once again.

"Why not?"

"Well, one one hand, I feel kind of excluded by it," Draco said, looking away from Harry, "I mean, I know there's no reason to, but I can't help it. I'll never be able to talk to her like you do." He didn't say it in a self-pitying way, but rather as though he was stating a fact. He cleared his throat and continued. "But on the other hand, it's really," He tapered off and laughed a little, embarrassed.

"Really what?" Prompted Harry.

"It - don't laugh - but it's really… sexy?"

Harry laughed "You think parseltongue is sexy?"

"For want of a better word," Draco admitted, with an embarrassed grin.

"Well," Harry switched to parseltongue, "You should have just said," Smiling, he walked over to Draco and switched back to English. "Now, remind me, where were we?"

Draco grinned. "I believe," he took Harry by the waist and swung him around so he was once more against the wall, "That we were around about here."
"What's with you?"

"What?"

"You're so…” Hermione cast around for the right word, "Bubbly."

"Bubbly?" Harry scoffed.

"You know what I mean," Hermione stated irritably, her finger moving down the index of her book. They sat in the library, alone for a moment while Ron searched for a book on the opposite side of the room. It was stuffy, the sun having started warming up as spring progressed, and Hermione was in a bad mood. "You were pissed off and sullen for ages, ever since Christmas, but now for the past, what, four weeks? You're suddenly full of joy. I mean, I'm really happy that you're happy. But I want to know what it is that's affecting your moods."

"I can't find it," Ron appeared by Harry, freckled cheeks pink from the heat, "though I did find '50 common hexes they don't teach you in defence class'. Thought you might like that, Harry." Then Ron noticed the look on Harry's face. "Mate, what's wrong?"

"Hermione," Harry said through gritted teeth, "is worried that I might be a little too… what was the word? Oh, yeah: bubbly."

"It's not that, Harry," Hermione said pleadingly, "It's just that I don't understand why you've been having such severe mood swings! I don't like the idea that there's some outside force having such a big effect on you!"

Madam Pince appeared around the corner of their bookcase and made a violent shushing sound. Harry glowered at Hermione.

"Look, I appreciate that you're worried about me, Hermione. But please, just let me be happy for once! God knows I need it,"

"He's right, Hermione," Ron agreed. "He's happy, so just drop it for know, alright?"

Hermione blew air out her nose, frustration on her face. "Fine. Let's just get on with finding stuff for Harry to use in the stupid maze."

0o0oDraco0o0o

The Triwizard Champions had all been called out of the Great Hall yesterday evening by Ludo Bagman, and though Draco hadn't been able to talk to Harry since then, he knew it had to have something to do with the Tournament. Unfortunately, it didn't look like he was going to be able to ask Harry about it until tomorrow evening, as they didn't have potions that day, and he didn't know when they would next be able to arrange a meeting.

It had been four weeks since he and Harry had made up, and Draco had never been happier in his life. They didn't see each other outside of potions very often, but the few hours they managed to have together each week were better than Draco could ever have imagined. They could talk forever and never get bored, and it was so easy! And what was more, ever since Draco told Harry about the whole… parseltongue thing, Harry had started speaking it all the time. Draco had no idea what Harry was saying but it drove him crazy, though they hadn't done anything more than kiss. So far.
In fact, the only bad thing was Blaise, who continually nagged Draco about how stupid he was being at the moment. The worst part was that the quiet, logical voice in Draco's head agreed with him. Draco wasn't stupid; he knew that what he was doing was a gamble and that this sort of giddy happiness rarely lasted. But he couldn't bring himself to consider leaving Harry.

So he didn't.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"Hey," Grinned Harry.

"I think I'm going to change the password for that door," Draco commented as he walked into the room. "I'm bored of Ilunga. I think the next password should be... Limerence. Yeah, that'll work,"

"Nice to see you too," Harry said, as he bent to give Draco a kiss, which Draco returned wholeheartedly.

"It feels like ages since I last saw you," He said, as they pulled apart, "I missed you,"

"I missed you too," Smiled Harry, "It's going to be hell without you over the summer."

"Let's not think about summer," Draco said, taking his usual seat on the sofa. "Tell me what Bagman said when he took you all out of the hall a couple of days ago."

"He showed us the Quidditch pitch," Harry sat down and grimaced. "They killed it."

"What do you mean?"

"Hagrid's grown huge bloody maze on it, and they want us to get through it to get to the cup." Harry picked at the bobbles of his Weasley jumper as he spoke. "I think they're setting monsters loose in the maze for us to fight, and casting spells over it and stuff. So I basically have to learn as many spells as possible."

Draco raised his eyebrows "I hope they get the pitch back to normal before next year."

"Yeah, because Quidditch is my biggest concern at the moment," Harry laughed sarcastically. "Who knows if I'll even make it to next year,"

"Don't say that," Draco said sharply, "I don't care if it's a joke. I don't even want to think about that."

"Okay, okay," Harry raised his hands as if in surrender, "Sorry. Look, let's not talk about the tournament, I need a break from thinking about it. Tell me how your day was. You never talk about yourself."

From that point, the conversation carried on under its own steam. Time passed differently in the Guest Room, and the boys barely noticed the sun sink low below the horizon, and a few brave stars trying to make an appearance in the twilight. It was coming up to ten o'clock by the time the boys stopped talking, reluctantly lifting themselves from the sofa and gathering their things. Harry was just about to leave when he remembered something.

"Draco?"

"Hm?"

"I was going to ask: what do ilunga and limerence mean? Ilunga's been bugging me for ages but I always forget to ask,"
"Oh, right. I pick those sorts of words up from the older books I read, which are actually mostly muggle classics. But ilunga's actually a Cuban word I think. It's famously difficult to translate, but it basically describes someone who will forgive any abuse the first time; move on from it the second time, but will never forgive a third."

"Ah, interesting. Did you choose it because it describes you?"

"I mostly chose it because I liked how it sounded," Draco came and leant with his shoulder pressed to the door, facing Harry. "I guess I sort of related to it."

"And what about limerence?"

Draco blushed and studied the ground at his feet. Harry smirked. "Go on, tell me."

"It means 'a state of infatuation with another person'."

"Infatuation?"

Draco flushed pink. "Ask Granger,"

"I will." Harry looked up at Draco, studying the taller boy's face. "I really love being with you, you know. Spending time with you. Even if I don't get to do it often."

Draco smiled, and cupped Harry's cheek with his hand. "I love spending time with you too."

Shutting his eyes, Harry leant into Draco, inhaling his smell, and loving how his head fit perfectly into the crook of Draco's neck. A swell of affection rose in Harry, and his grip around the small of Draco's back tightened. They stayed like that, simply existing with each other, for an indefinite amount of time. Then, Draco spoke.

"It means being in love," he said, with a suddenness that suggested he was scared to say it.

"What does?" Asked Harry, leaning back slightly to look at Draco.

"Infatuation. It means being in love."

"Oh," Harry looked down, at Draco's collar, and asked tentatively, "Do- do you think you might be infatuated with me?" He looked back up at Draco's intensely bright grey eyes and found that Draco was staring at him. He looked frightened, and took a deep breath before answering.

"I think I might be,"

Harry watched Draco's eyes carefully, his heart rate quickening. "Are you scared?"

"Terrified."

Harry kissed Draco, so softly that he could barely feel it, and at the same time feeling every detail. Then he pulled away a fraction of an inch, so that their noses still touched, though their lips didn't.

"I love you, Draco,"

The words were whispered, frightened yet self-assured. Harry felt Draco smile slightly against the soft skin of his cheek.

"I love you too."
It was dinner time, and the entire school was buzzing. Harry Potter had fainted in divination. Could it have been a vision? A premonition? Was just as Rita Skeeter had said: he was an attention seeking prat with a love for publicity?

Draco didn't actually care because he was too busy worrying about Harry. It seemed he was spending more and more time doing that these days, but that evening it seemed he was going positively mad. Harry was nowhere to be seen in the Great Hall - though Granger and Weasley conversed in low whispers at the Gryffindor table - and according to the Slytherins sitting opposite from him at the dining table, no one had even glimpsed him since Divination. To make matters worse, Draco had to act like he was happy about the whole thing, to keep his 'friends' under his carefully constructed spell. Only Blaise knew anything otherwise (though, thankfully, he was more concerned about Draco's safety than he was about Draco's choice in partner), and, at any rate, there was very little he could do about anything. Blaise had his own status to uphold, even if it was less pronounced than Draco's.

Usually, it was at this point, in the run-up to the Summer Holidays, that Draco would almost double the amount of food he ate. He had started doing this during second year when he realised that he could make his Summer much more bearable by putting on a few extra pounds in the month beforehand, and thus avoid looking quite so emaciated by the time he came back to school. However, tonight he couldn't bring himself to touch a morsel of food, worry making him feel sick and causing a dull ache to resonate in his temples and behind his eyes. His lips were painfully dry and chapped. He chewed at them and forced a laugh between his teeth as Theo made a joke. Time was passing unbearably slowly and the meal dragged out longer and longer until... finally... the food disappeared from the plates and the students began, as one, to push towards the exit. Draco's headache had become all consumingly painful. He stumbled out of the hall with the rest of the group, nerves the only thing in his stomach.

Through the dull pounding in his mind, Draco wondered if he should go back to the dorm or go and look for Harry. Luckily, the decision was made for him when Blaise grabbed his arm and led him firmly to the dorm, saying words Draco didn't quite catch to the other Slytherins before pulling Draco into the fourth-year's shared bathroom and locking the door. Wincing at the brightness of the bathroom lights, Draco felt himself sitting numbly on the closed lid of the toilet and peering at Blaise.

"What do you want, Zabini?"

"Draco, you've gone very pale. Are you alright?"

"These lights are too fucking bright," Draco slurred, grimacing unevenly, "My head hurts."

"Where do we keep the headache potions?"

"Check my cupboard. Bottom shelf."

The boys all had their own bathroom cupboards within the large washroom, and it took Blaise only a moment to locate and search through Draco's cabinet (which was mostly filled with potions of his own creation, all in coloured phials) and find the milky headache potion. He handed it to Draco, who took the phial and downed it in three large gulps, almost doubling the recommended dosage. The effect was instantaneous: a feeling like warm water splashed through his brain and the aching loosened. Without the pain, Draco's worry intensified.
"Harry. I need to know if he's okay. I'll go and-"

"No, you won't." Blaise caught Draco's arm again and Draco allowed himself to be pulled unceremoniously back onto the toilet seat from where he'd started making to the door. Blaise continued. "You're in no fit state to look for him. Even without that headache, you've quite clearly made yourself ill with worry. Honestly, you are so impulsive! He's probably with Dumbledore or something, and he'll be fine, okay? Just stop for a minute and think before you act."

Draco breathed air heavily out of his nose and rubbed his face with his hand. At length, he said in a tired, resigned voice: "Okay. I know you're right." Blaise watched him as he stood up from the toilet seat and walked across to a sink, bending and splashing some water on his face. Blaise took Draco's place on the toilet seat.

"How did you get like this?" He gestured at Draco. "You're a wreck. You care so much about this guy - Harry freaking Potter - I mean, could your choices actually be any worse?"

Draco leant against the sink. "I know. Don't you think I'm terrified? I hate that he has this much control over me. I hate that he can both make my day, and make me incredibly unhappy just by being unable to meet me after dinner. But I love him. I really do love him, Blaise. And he loves me, too. He told me so."

"You've been together for three weeks!"

"No, we've been official for three weeks. We've liked each other for much longer than that."

Blaise groaned. "You are seriously out of whack, you two. You care so much about this guy - Harry freaking Potter - I mean, could your choices actually be any worse?"

"You don't think I'm terrified? I hate that he has this much control over me. I hate that he can both make my day, and make me incredibly unhappy just by being unable to meet me after dinner. But I love him. I really do love him, Blaise. And he loves me, too. He told me so."

"No you don't," Draco smiled, "You don't even mind Potter that much. You just pretend you do."

"I want to hate you right now." Blaise ran a hand through his dark, curly hair and stood up. "Right. Let's get back to the others or they'll get suspicious."

0o0oHarry0o0o

"Draco, I'm fine! Really," Harry laughed into Draco's shoulder as he hugged him, "You have to stop worrying about me so much."

"I can't!" Draco grinned, looking embarrassedly down at the ground as he pulled away from Harry. "You try stopping getting yourself into trouble instead."

"That's impossible." Harry took a seat at the desk in the centre of the guest room and slouched down, feeling the exhaustion from a day spent both in classes and practicing spells to use in the Maze. "I don't look for trouble. It finds me."

"Clearly," Draco took the seat opposite Harry and, seemingly without thinking, pulled several sheets of paper towards him and grabbed the quill from the inkwell. He began to draw. "How's everything going with all the... Maze stuff?"

"Don't even get me started. I've learned more spells practising with Ron and Hermione than I have all year in defence against the dark arts. And that's with Mad Eye bloody Moody teaching us!"

"Well, at least you'll be prepared this time. It's not like the first and second tasks. This time you know, at least vaguely, what you need to do to prepare."
"I guess so," Harry leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms above him, yawning.

"How long do you have until the big day?

"A week and a bit. But it's going really fast,"

Draco looked at Harry worriedly across the table, and reached his hand across to hold his. "You're really worried about this, aren't you?"

Harry gave a sad attempt at a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine. I always am."

"Yeah, you'll get through this. You're doing plenty, and I'm sure there'll be safety rules. You won't be completely on your own."

Harry nodded quietly. Then said with a much lighter tone: "We've been talking about me too much. Let's talk about you."

0o0oDraco0o0o

Trumpets blared and happy anticipation rolled off the crowd in waves as the stands waited for the third task to start. It felt different to the other tasks. The sick feeling wasn't there and for once, people were going a little easier on Harry - at least, the other houses were. Draco got the feeling that this task was going to turn out well as he sat and chatted easily with the group of Slytherins surrounding him, as they waited impatiently for things to kick off.

Finally, the four champions stood out onto the grass in front the Maze to a roar of noise. Draco easily spotted Harry, the smallest of contestants, and gave an extra loud whoop just as Bagman took his place in front of the champions and began to talk.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied for first place, with eighty-five points each - Mr Cedric Diggory and Mr Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points - Mr Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place - Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!"

As the clapping began to reside, Bagman turned to Harry and Cedric. "Ready, boys? On my whistle. One, Two," A shrill sound echoed through the stands, which had become very silent. The boys turned and ran down the entrance to the Maze. Draco chewed at one of his nails as he watched Harry's figure, dwarfed next to Cedric's, retreating down the dark passage and into the Maze.

"Hey, you alright?" Blaise asked quietly.

"Fine, fine." Draco nodded brusquely. "He'll be fine."

After a short wait, Bagman blew his whistle again and Krum vanished into the maze. Now only Fleur remained. Even from a distance, she looked scared.

Bagman blew his whistle a third and final time, and Fleur ran into the Maze. The crowd waited. Nothing happened.

"Well, this is all a little anticlimactic, don't you think?" Pansy asked, pretending to yawn.

"I wonder what's going on in there..." Blaise was looking out over the vast maze stretching in front of them.
They only had to wait about ten minutes before something happened. A scream echoed out from the dense hedges, accompanied by a shower of red sparks, and someone on a broom - Madam Hooch - sped out over the maze. Draco wasn't worried about Harry - that scream was clearly Fleur's voice - but still watched intently as she was brought from the maze and dropped next to a medical tent that had been set up near the Maze's entrance. She looked very shaken.

It wasn't long before red sparks appeared once again over the Maze. This time it was Krum who was rescued, suspended between two brooms. He was clearly knocked out, though there was no way of knowing what had downed him.

The waiting continued, and now the students were becoming restless. An hour had passed since Harry had entered the Maze. An hour and a half. The judges began to whisper and, for the first time that evening, worry began niggling its way into Draco's mind.

An hour and three quarters.

Blaise wordlessly put a reassuring hand on Draco's shoulder. He looked over at his best friend. Blaise gave a nod and looked back out over the vast maze.

Two hours.

Madam Hooch whizzed over the Maze again, seemingly to search for the two Hogwarts Champions. The sky had darkened to a sombre twilight and, by the time she returned, the last orange traces of sunset were dissipating into the blackening sky. As she landed, she shook her head at Dumbledore, who's hands were clasped tightly in front of his sombre face. It began to get cool. Then cold. Breath rose like a mist over the shivering students as time ticked on. Draco became aware of pins and needles in both his legs, but made no effort to move. His hands were shaking - but then again, it was cold. Then, quite suddenly, a loud bang reverberated over the stands and a flash of light of electric blue light illuminated the front of the Maze. A figure was sprawled across the grass - Draco looked closer, making out the figure in the near darkness... It was Harry!

Applause shook the stadium and Draco gave a whoop of delight as the Brass Band began to play out a happy tune. Everything was okay! Harry was fine...

Wasn't he?

Quite suddenly, as the applause died way, Dumbledore ran over to Harry and crouched. Draco was beginning to hear yelling, Harry's yelling, over the dying noise of the crowd. It was as though someone had flicked a switch. Chaos erupted in the stands and Draco found himself running, running to Harry. He wasn't the only student moving; a swarm of bodies propelled him forward. Draco could now see that Harry was not only clutching the Cup, but a body too. Cedric Diggory's body.

"Harry!" Draco yelled in panic, and was almost at the base of the stands when he felt a strong hand grab his collar.

"No, Draco!" Blaise yelled, wrapping an arm around Draco and pulling him back, "Don't! You'll get yourself killed if the others see this- Draco, stop!"

"I don't care! He's hurt!"

"He'll be more hurt if you get involved! Draco-" Blaise grunted and gave a massive tug, effectively wrestling Draco into one of the spare seats by the walkway down the stands. Draco had tears running down his face.
"Please, Blaise! I have to!"

"Draco, stop talking right now. The others have probably seen everything, and they are going to want answers. You need to calm down. Dumbledore is dealing with this."

Draco felt himself go limp and leant against Blaise, staring down at the Grass where Harry was sobbing, blood smeared over his skin. A throng of teenagers were being held back by mediwizards and teachers. Every molecule in him pleaded to go and comfort the Harry, to tell him it would be alright…

"What's Moody doing?" Blaise asked suddenly, and Draco realised Harry was being pulled to his feet and escorted by Mad-Eye through the mass of students.

"Follow him," Draco began, but Blaise's grip tightened on his shoulders.

"You're going nowhere except Slytherin tower."

A scream rose above the noise of the crowd, and the two boys whipped their heads up to see Amos Diggory keening over the body of Cedric, his wife sobbing on the ground next to him, holding Cedric's head in her lap. Bile rose in Draco's throat and he swallowed hard, blinking salty tears out of his eyes. Dumbledore rose from where he had knelt next to the Diggorys and pointed his wand at his throat, muttering what was surely a sonorous charm, as his then voice sounded loudly over the din.

"Everyone will, please, not panic!" He yelled over the chaos. "Heads of houses, and the Head Teachers of Beuxbatons and Durmstrang, will please escort students back to their dormitories or their respective sleeping quarters in an orderly and calm manner."

Dumbledore looked around motioned to McGonagall. The pair began to stride towards the castle, following Mad-Eye and Harry's path.

The next few hours passed in a blur as the Slytherins were led by Snape, almost at a march, to the dungeons, and he began to get ready for bed. As it turned out, by some miracle, none of the Slytherins had seen Draco's scene at the base of the stands because the crowd around them had provided an effective shield for both sight and sound. They began to get ready for bed, back in the dorms. Draco felt numb. It was completely surreal, after what he had seen, to be doing something as mundane as brushing his teeth.

As he sat in bed, having filled Manimi in on the whole thing, he had an idea. There was no way he could go and check if Harry was in the hospital wing, and especially not Gryffindor Tower. But he was a human. A snake, on the other hand…

"Manimi, I need you to go to the hospital wing and see if Harry is there or not. Find some way to tell me if he is. I don't care how. Just go. Quick."

He only had to wait fifteen minutes before Manimi returned, and rose up to face Draco before giving a jerk of her head that looked exactly like a nod. Draco had no way of knowing what state Harry was in but at least he knew where he was and with that knowledge, he relaxed a little.

That wasn't to say he slept one wink.
Part Two - Chapter Fifteen

Harry awoke bleary-eyed on the morning of his second day in the hospital wing, and knew instantly that he was not alone. Someone was sitting on the end of his bed - he could feel their weight next to his feet. Groggily, feeling a sharp pain in the newly-healed cut on his arm, he pushed himself up on his elbows a little to see a blurry figure whom he recognised as Draco, cross-legged, on the end of his bed. Reaching for his glasses, Harry wondered why Draco hadn't noticed him wake up, but as the world came into focus he saw that Draco was reading Jane Eyre. His favourite. No wonder he hadn't noticed.

"Morning," Harry grinned tiredly. Draco jumped in surprise and looked up at Harry, first with shock, and then happy relief. Quickly dog-earing the page, he threw the book to the side and scrambled over, pulling Harry into a very tight hug and burying his face in his neck.

"Harry! You're awake! I was so worried about you, I'm so sorry I didn't come yesterday, I tried but I couldn't! There were loads of people for ages and then after that you feel asleep and I didn't want to disturb you... I'm so sorry, I should have done something... I should have protected you,"

"There was nothing you could have done!"

"I should have done something. I tried but Blaise stopped me. Oh God, Harry, when I heard you screaming... I thought-" Draco cut off and pulled out of the hug, examining Harry's face with an intense gaze. "Are you alright? How do you feel?"

"Better," Harry winced as the cut on his arm gave a twinge. Draco didn't look convinced.

"Did you get hurt badly?"

"Cut on my arm. Nothing major."

"Do you want to say what happened yet? Or do you want to wait?"

"I'll tell you at some point but... not right now. It's too raw."

Harry felt like Draco's piercing eyes were looking straight through him, and felt terrible for putting him through so much worry. He grasped for a change of subject.

"Cornelius Fudge was here yesterday."

"The Minister for Magic? Why?"

"Well, officially it was to give me my prize money. I had totally forgotten about it, but I guess I did 'win' the tournament, though it doesn't feel like I did."

"What about unofficially?"

"He told me I was a deranged lunatic and that I was making everything up. I think he's been reading Rita Skeeter. To be honest, it's probably best that you didn't try to see me yesterday; you wouldn't have enjoyed the conversation."

"What? What does he mean by that? Made what up?"

Draco looked shocked, and Harry realised that he had completely failed to change the subject. He sighed, resigned. "Okay, I'll tell you just now - if your dad hasn't already - but don't make me go into
Draco put a hand on Harry's cheek. "My dad hasn't told me anything yet, and I would never make you do or say anything you didn't want. You know that."

Harry smiled briefly at Draco, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Painfully, he began to recite to Draco what he had seen in the graveyard, and what had transpired in Mad E- Barty Crouch's office. He used a coping method to prevent himself from getting upset, one that he had been forced to come up with all the way back in first year. Unfortunately, he had to do a lot of coping in the past few years. He pretended he was telling another person's story, distancing himself to a point where he felt disconnected from the entire experience. Even so, when he had finished, he realised that he had tears welling up in his eyes. He squeezed them shut and shook his head like a horse trying to get rid of flies. Draco shut his mouth, which had been hanging slightly ajar throughout the telling, and swallowed, hard. Then he said, in a surprisingly calm voice:

"Harry, you don't have to be brave with me."

And it was those words that finally broke the barrier of bravery Harry had created. He found himself sobbing into Draco's shoulder as Draco held him tightly and allowed him to cry out the knot of suppressed sadness and fear and rage that he had been carrying with him for so long. It was the first time Harry had really cried since that day, about a week before the Yule Ball, when he and Draco had first kissed. But this time it was different, because now he had Draco. He knew that with Draco, he could get through anything.

0o0oDraco0o0o

"How is he?" Asked Blaise, as Draco walked into the dorm half an hour later. It was empty - most of the Slytherins were out to lunch - meaning that he and Blaise could talk in private.

"He's a lot of things," Draco sighed, sitting down on his bed and lightly stroking Manimi's head. She uncoiled herself and opened her eyes, probably wanting to listen in as Draco hadn't allowed her to visit Harry in person, just yet.

"He'll survive?"

"He always does."

Blaise looked down at the blankets of his four-poster, and asked, quietly: "Are they true? The rumours?"

Draco closed his eyes and rubbed the side of his head. "No. He didn't attack Cedric."

"Well, of course not," Blaise nodded, though he hadn't seemed so sure earlier. "Potter is many things, but he's not a killer."

"According to Harry," Draco continued, "And, by the way, I believe Harry on this: the cup was a portkey. It took them to a graveyard, and that's where Cedric was killed."

"How?"

"You're not going to want to hear this, Blaise."

"You're still going to tell me, though."

Draco nodded. "Just... prepare yourself. Okay. It was one of the Dark Lord's followers - Wormtail -
All the blood seemed to leave Blaise's face at the mention of the Dark Lord. Draco continued.

"Harry was tied to a gravestone, as far as I can tell, and Wormtail cut his arm. He put his blood into a potion, along with his own hand - yeah, I mean it: he cut it clean off - and bones from the grave. Blaise, I really don't want to tell you-"

"Draco, could you just spit it out?"

"They brought him back. The Dark Lord."

Blaise stood up very fast and wiped his hands over his face. They were shaking. Then, without warning, he kicked out at the leg of his four-poster.

"Fuck!"

Draco jumped at the suddenness and loudness of Blaise's anger, and squeezed his eyes shut, as if merely shutting out the light could stop the shouting. "Please, Blaise, calm-"

"Calm down? You expect me to calm down about this?!!" Blaise was yelling right in Draco's face. Fear wriggled through Draco's mind as his body began to assume, out of experience, that the shouting meant danger.

"Please don't shout."

"He's back," Blaise said with a snarl, kicking out once again at the leg of the four-poster. "Don't you realise what this means? Your father; all the parents of our bloody dorm mates; everyone we know in Slytherin are going to become spies! We can never be safe anymore, especially not you and him!"

Manimi gave a sudden twitch, and without warning, snaked off the side of the bed and out of the room.

"Where's she going?" Asked Blaise angrily, putting unnecessary force into the words. Draco said nothing and Blaise, pausing for a moment, seemed to calm down a little. He looked at Draco. He had moved right back on his bed, away from Blaise, and almost seemed to cower away from him with his knees clutched to his chest. His eyes were squeezed shut.

"Draco?"

The boy flinched, even at the quiet sound of Blaise's voice, and opened his eyes warily. Only then did he realise that he had moved from his original position on the bed, and loosened his body, though he was still flushed.

"Are you done shouting?" he asked, in a voice that made him sound much younger than he was. Blaise looked at him, worry in his eyes.

"Did- did I make you think of your dad or something?" He asked, embarrassed. Draco looked at the floor determinedly. Blaise sighed. "Look Draco, I'm sorry. I was just shocked. I didn't mean to..." He sighed. "I'm sorry."

Draco shrugged, still tense. "Manimi is probably going to the hospital wing. She'll want to hear this from Harry." He didn't want to look Blaise in the eyes and instead stared at the covers of his bed. "Can I please continue telling you what happened?"
Blaise nodded, and sat back down on the bed looking sheepish. "So, you were saying?"

Harry had done, Draco recited what had happened in the graveyard that night. When he had finished, Blaise said nothing for several minutes. Draco appreciated that.

"And Potter is telling the truth?" he asked, eventually.

"I believe so, yes."

Blaise sighed, clasping his hands behind his head. "This is going to change everything."

"Yes," Draco agreed quietly, "yes, it will."

0o0oHarry0o0o

The guest room was unusually cool for such warm summer's day, perhaps due to the fact that its windows looked out into the lake, and therefore was never warmed by the rays of the sun. Whatever the reason, the chill air suited the mood in the room today. It was the last day of term. Time to say goodbye. Manimi was absent, having already spoken to Harry and said her goodbyes before giving the boys some privacy.

It is often said that actions say an awful lot more than words can, and today, both boys were speechless. They didn't have the words to express the goodbye that neither wanted to suffer, even if only for a month and a half of summer. And so they showed each other how they felt. They were on the sofa, Harry on top, with Draco's legs wrapped around his hips as they kissed, hungry for as much as they could get out of these last few stolen moments. The kiss slowed, and then stopped as the two boys pulled slightly apart. Tentatively, Draco slid his hands up under Harry's shirt and lifted it, his pale hands showing up white against Harry's tanned skin. Harry's hair became messier as Draco pulled the fabric over his head, dropping it next to the sofa. Harry shivered as Draco's cold fingers trailed over his bare chest, exploring the new territory.

Unable to stop himself, Harry leant down and kissed Draco once more, his hands making their own way under Draco's shirt, first playing with the fabric, and then beginning to lift it. Then, something changed, and Draco caught Harry's wrists, preventing him from lifting the shirt. Confused, Harry pulled away.

"Is something wrong?"

Draco sat up and looked away, his face turning red. Harry shuffled off him.

"What's wrong? Is it something I did?"

"No," Draco said quickly, "It's not that. It's just..." He trailed off, biting his lip.

Harry reached over and touched Draco's hand. "Tell me,"

Draco sighed, looking down at his knees. "I have a scar on my stomach,"

Harry was a little surprised. "Is that all?"

"My father gave it to me when I was nine years old. He-" Draco took a deep, slightly shaky breath, seeming to mentally prepare himself for what he was about to say. "I had done something wrong. I don't even remember what it was - it can't have been anything too bad. But he got very angry. He became violent - I mean, more violent than usual - and I guess he just grabbed whatever was closest. The thing is, I was unlucky. The thing he grabbed was a knife which had been charmed so that any
damage it caused could never completely heal. If it had been anything else, then a simple spell could have erased any cuts or marks from my skin, just like it had never happened. Not this time."

Harry shuffled forward, clasping Draco's cold hands tightly as he continued.

"I don't remember exactly what happened. I think my brain must have tried to block out the memories of it afterwards, as some sort of defence? But I remember the pain. And a lot of blood. I fainted at some point, woke up a day later in St. Mungo's. It took two months to heal to a point where I could leave the hospital without the scab opening, and six before it even started to become a scar instead of a scab. And now I have this disgusting... thing... on my body forever. It's like this constant reminder of my father, like I can never escape him. I'm sorry, Harry, I just..."

He trailed off. Harry watched Draco's face intently. He wasn't crying, but he was clearly upset, and angered by the whole retelling. Harry tried to think what the right thing to say was, but he didn't know. Eventually, he decided to go with what felt right.

"Stand up," Harry asked softly, getting off the sofa and gently pulling Draco with him. When they were both standing in front of each other, Harry dropped Draco's hands and began to lift his shirt, this time in a way that was less urgent, and instead borne of love, rather than lust. Draco raised his arms over his head and allowed Harry to pull the shirt over his head and drop it on top of his own, next to the sofa. Then Harry reconnected their lips once more, pulling Draco closer to him. Distantly, through the feeling of the kiss, Harry noticed that, though he was still taller, Draco didn't have to go on the tips of his toes to kiss him anymore.

Slowly Harry pulled back once more and planted a single kiss on Draco's lips.

"You are beautiful."

He began to kiss down Draco's neck, and got to his knees as he moved lower. Now he saw the scar, a shiny white-pink shape across the otherwise unmarked skin. Gently, he kissed the tarnished skin.

"Your scar is a part of you, and that makes it beautiful."

Then, slowly, Harry moved his hands to the buckle of Draco's belt and began to unfasten it, moving on to the button of Draco's jeans, and then the zip. Finally, he hooked his thumbs over the top of the jeans and the waistband of Draco's boxers, but before doing anything else, he looked up and met Draco's gaze.

"Is this alright?" Harry could see that Draco's jeans had tightened, just as his own had, but that didn't mean that Draco was comfortable with this.

Draco didn't say anything, but he nodded quickly, and Harry turned his attention back to the jeans, quickly sliding them down Draco's legs, followed by the boxers. Then, he leant forward and kissed the spot just above Draco's groin, underneath his belly button. He heard Draco suck in air at the contact.

"Everything about you is beautiful, Draco. Never think otherwise."

0o0o

"Was that the first time you've done that?" Draco asked breathlessly. Harry saw that his pupils had dilated until they looked huge and intense, and that what could be seen of the irises had turned from their usual white-grey to a much darker, lustful blue.

Harry nodded, grinning. "It's not like I've ever had much chance to practice, is it?" Then, in a more
serious voice, he asked, "Was it good?"

"Harry, It was amazing!" Draco grinned, and pulled Harry in for another kiss. "I'm going to miss you even more now,"

Harry laughed, and turned away a little to give Draco some space to pull his clothes back on.

"It's not too long. Only seven weeks."

"It's far too long," Draco said. Having done up his belt buckle, he moved over and turned to straddle Harry, kissing him again. This time, it was more gentle. It felt like Draco was savouring every movement. "I can't think how I'm going to survive this summer."

"Bad choice of words," Harry said, seriously. "I can't believe what your father did to you. It makes me so angry,"

"He won't do anything like that again."

"He'd better not, or I swear to god, I'm gonna kill him,"

"Easy there, tiger. I'll be fine." Draco looked away from Harry, seeming embarrassed, "And... thank you. I've never been told I was beautiful before."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I'll make sure to make a habit of it then. You deserve to know." He smiled at the blush that this earned him, but it didn't really reach his eyes. The clock was ticking. He knew it would be time to leave very soon. "Write to me?"

"Of course I will." Draco paused, looking into Harry's eyes. "I love you, you know."

"I know. I love you too."
The present Harry had bought for Draco's birthday sat on his desk, immaculately folded and expectantly waiting to be wrapped. It was beautiful, a soft cashmere scarf, made in a traditional plaid style using light tones which would perfectly suit Draco's pale skin and hair. The scarf was graceful and expensive, thing Harry knew Draco liked. But more than that, the reason it had caught Harry’s eye was not something one could see. If Harry knew anything about Draco, it was that he was invariably too cold. That was why, when Harry saw the note next to the scarf reading 'Enchanted to warm the wearer', he knew he simply had to buy it.

It would be perfect. He had some dark green wrapping paper folded next to him, which he would use once he had finished Draco's birthday letter. Really, he should have given Draco the present while they were at school as Draco's birthday was the fifth of June, but the problem was that Draco hadn't ever actually told Harry when his birthday was until after it had come and gone.

"I hate birthdays," Draco had told him the week before the third task, "Too much attention, too many expectations."

Harry had bought the present soon after that conversation, but before he had the chance to wrap it and give it to Draco, the third task had blown it completely out of his mind. He had found it in his trunk the day he had come back to number four, Privet Drive. However, he was going to send it now. Harry re-read Draco's most recent letter once more, smiling at the fact that, despite everything, he could still reach Draco through something as simple as a piece of parchment.

Dear Harry,

I'm fine! Seriously, if you ask me once more, I'm going to stop writing to you. Okay, maybe that was a lie. I'll wait a little longer to reply to you, at least. That'll teach you!

But seriously, everything is okay. Father has barely spoken to me all Summer, he seems really busy. I don't want to think about what he might be doing. Still, I'm seriously benefiting from his continued preoccupation. This has been the calmest Summer I've ever had. All the better, I've had some time to be with my mum since father isn't here very much. She is pretty busy too, but not at the same level as my father. While he's been out we've been able to eat together in private and take walks in the grounds. It's nice to see her so much. I miss her when I'm at school.

I think Manimi misses you. I mean, obviously, I have no idea as I can't understand her. But yeah, she (probably) sends her love.

The drawings I sent with this are the ones I've done recently which I think you'll like. Tell me what you think.

In the Manor grounds, we have this rose garden which I hope one day I'll be able to show you. It's gorgeous and it smells incredible. All the roses are blooming just now, so it looks really beautiful. There's a pond in the middle of the garden with koi fish in it (I think that's what you call them?). I sent you a drawing of the fish too, but if there are any drawings you don't want, just send them back. Sorry I send you so many.

I miss you a lot.

Please reply fast.

Love, Draco
Enclosed in the thick parchment envelope which had arrived with Draco's eagle owl had been three drawings. One had been the aforementioned koi fish, and one was a portrait of Draco's mother - Narcissa - which had been done, Harry guessed, while the two had been eating in the grounds of the manor, as it featured flowers. The final one was a rose with a dewdrop sitting pearly between the petals. It was the only one that featured colour, as it had been lightly filled in with watercolour paints. The drawings were under the floorboards, along with the other possessions Harry had hidden from the Dursleys.

Once he had finished his reply to Draco, Harry meticulously wrapped the scarf and attached the letter to the present, doing his best to make it neat. Finally, he tied a piece of string around the present, looping it over all the sides, to make it easier for Hedwig to carry. Then he watched her carry it away until she disappeared into the sky bright summer sky. He was already impatient for his answer.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco grinned as he read through his (very belated) birthday letter, having sent Hedwig back off home. Harry's messy - sometimes borderline illegible - handwriting always had the ability to make Draco feel less lonely, and today it was doing so marvellously. He read and re-read the letter before placing it aside and carefully began unwrapping his present. He smiled as he pulled out the scarf, holding it against his skin to feel the feather softness that only cashmere could possess. Then he noticed a note torn from a sheet of parchment within the wrapping paper, obviously written by Harry. He picked it up. It read:

Draco,

I know how you're always cold, so I thought this would be perfect. It's enchanted to keep the wearer warm, and (as far as my fashion sense goes) I think it's pretty stylish too. It will certainly look dazzling on you.

-H

Though it was a warm day, Draco hurriedly wrapped the scarf around his neck and felt himself grow warmer until he was at a perfect temperature. Then, to put the cherry on top, Draco realised that, as Harry had been keeping the scarf in his room for a while, it smelt of him. He gathered the fabric to his face, inhaled through his nose... and positively ached from how much he was missing Harry. It was hard to ignore the loneliness when he was engulfed in Harry's smell. Trying to block the feelings from his mind, he walked over to his desk and sat down, pulling parchment and a quill towards him. Harry's birthday was due in a week, so he was going to start the letter now.

Draco had thought long and hard on what to get Harry for his birthday. It wasn't an easily answered question. It couldn't be Quidditch related - everyone got Harry Quidditch stuff. Clothes were out of the question, as they weren't personal enough, and Draco had already given Harry too many drawings for them to be special anymore. So, finally, Draco had decided to go window shopping in search of inspiration. He had asked permission to go into Diagon Alley by himself, and luckily, Narcissa had agreed. After two hours of fruitless searching, something gleaming in a shop window caught his eye - two rings. They were simple to look at - unadorned bands, one silver, one gold - but they were more than they seemed.

"Enchanted," the old man behind the counter had wheezed. "Give this to someone, wear a ring yourself, and you will always know if the other person is in danger."

Rings had originally been crossed off Draco's mental list of possible presents for obvious reasons. Apart from the fact that is was incredibly cheesy, it also made Draco think too much about marriage.
He loved Harry, but something about the idea of weddings made him feel strange - maybe because his only experience with courtship was of his parent's very unhappy arranged one. But these rings felt different. They perfectly suited his and Harrys' situation. Draco had left the shop that day with considerably less money than he had entered with.

Draco dipped his quill into a well of dragonfly blue ink, and pressed the nib to the parchment, writing in an elegant, curly hand:

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday you wonderful person! (I'm hoping this get's to you on time.) I hope the muggles aren't being too horrible and that you are having a decent day. I wish I could be there with you. I promise that as soon as you escape from the muggles, I will make your birthday amazing. Until then, I hope my letters provide some form of entertainment.

On the subject of birthdays, THANK YOU! This scarf is absolutely going to change my life this winter. It is so soft! How did you know I liked cashmere? Not to mention it smells of you (i.e. amazing). I'm probably going to look like a complete crazy person, sniffing this scarf all the time, but I don't even care. Thank you. This has totally made my week - no, my year!

Draco made his letters as long as possible because he knew Harry had absolutely nothing to do when he stayed with the muggles. At least Draco had a whole manor to himself - Harry was often confined to a single room for hours or days.

Once Draco had written a good deal, he folded the parchment and sealed it in an envelope. Next, he placed one of the rings - the gold one, as he thought that colour would best suit Harry (he was a Gryffindor, after all) - into a small cushioned box, along with a note explaining what it was and how it worked. Unfortunately, he still had to wait a few days before sending them. But it gave him a sense of accomplishment to know that he had got the job done.

Groaning internally, Draco counted the time left of the summer, knowing that whatever the number, it would be too long.
Chapter Two

Harry,

What the hell is going on? My ring went mad! Please tell me you're alright. Reply as soon as physically possible.

-Draco.

The handwriting, which was usually painstakingly elegant and neat, was scrawled across a torn piece of parchment and hastily fastened to Draco's owl's leg. Groaning, Harry looked to Hedwig, her cage firmly padlocked. The Dursleys wouldn't let him send a letter to anyone in a million years, not after what had happened. The dementor attack had been almost a day ago, but Harry was still burning up with anger and resentment. It wasn't just the fact that he was incarcerated because of something he didn't do, it was also because still, even after being attacked by one of the things he was most terrified of in the world, no one would tell him anything. Even if he could write back to Draco, what could he say? He was just as in the dark about everything as Draco was. Furious, Harry twisted the gold band he kept on the ring finger of his right hand around and around, wishing for a way to tell Draco he was okay.

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco had been pacing his room, up and down, for several hours. He hadn't slept a wink. All he could think about was the moment when his ring had suddenly become very cold, and a fear that wasn't his own had spread through his body, causing adrenaline to shoot through him and his heart to pump twice as fast as normal, as though it were he who was in danger, instead of Harry. Then, after about five minutes, the fear and coldness had vanished just as fast as it had arrived, leaving Draco breathless and out of his mind with worry. He had scrawled and sent a note out only a few minutes later, and even though he knew it would take some time for Hedwig to bring him a reply, he still felt impatient for her to come.

Then, without warning, the ring began to change again. It didn't become cold this time, however. Instead, it warmed up, just a fraction, just enough for Draco to notice. Then, quite suddenly, a rush of emotions flooded through Draco once again, as they had done last night. Feelings which were alien, which didn't belong to him. Harry's feelings.

There were no coherent thoughts transmitted through the ring, only very raw emotions. Anger and hurt were prominent, as well as frustration. But it was all Draco needed. He knew now that Harry was safe, even if he wasn't necessarily happy. There was no fear coming through the ring. Then, as quickly as they had come, the feelings rushed out of him again, and the ring cooled once more. He looked down at the innocent silver band on his right middle finger.

"I am so glad I bought you," He told it.

0o0o00o0

Draco,

I'm sorry I didn't write sooner, but I couldn't. The muggles locked Hedwig into her cage.

I'm fine, I'm safe. I can't tell you very much, I'm really sorry. But I'm not with the muggles anymore, I'm with Ron's family and Hermione. I have a trial on the 12th of August, and that's
when they will decide whether or not to expel me.

I'm so sorry for making you worry, I swear I didn't mean to.

Love, Harry.

Harry,

What the bloody hell do you mean you can't tell me anything? I want answers. What in Merlin's name possessed you to perform illegal magic? I swear you've given me grey hairs.

-Draco

Ps. I knew you were alright because I felt it through the ring. Have you felt anything through them?

Draco,

If I'm allowed back at Hogwarts, I promise I will tell you everything. But I can't say in a letter and I can't say before the trial. And no, I haven't felt anything through the rings, but it's a good thing you did. Maybe you haven't felt anything strongly enough for it to be transmitted to me?

Love, Harry.

P.s. you are blonde. No one will notice grey hairs.
The night before the hearing, Draco slept badly. When he finally did sleep, it was broken and insubstantial. He dreamed that Manimi had been split into three smaller snakes who spoke in English, each with a different person's voice. The one with his father's voice bit him, the one with his mother's voice died, and the one with Harry's voice shrunk until it was nothing. He woke up in a cold sweat to see that his window was wide open and freezing air was billowing into his room. He grabbed Harry's scarf from the pillow beside his (so maybe he had been sleeping with it next to him) and felt himself warm up deliciously as he wrapped himself in it. He got dressed after he had closed the window, bluish early-morning light creeping in through the glass, and then began to walk to the kitchen to get something to eat.

Funnily enough for Draco, his sleep had generally been improving over the last few months. Sure, during the Triwizard Tournament, and those nights when Harry had worried him, he had barely slept at all. But in general, everything was getting a little better. It probably had something to do with his father being away so much. Unfortunately, things didn't feel better today. The fact that Harry might not be allowed back to Hogwarts again sent him into a panic when he thought about it for too long, and he felt cold despite the magic of the scarf. To make matters worse, Manimi was still out hunting, meaning Draco was totally alone in his sufferings.

It took Draco half the journey to the kitchen to realise that he wasn't in the slightest bit hungry, and instead, he diverted to the entrance hall and out into dew-splashed grounds. Without thinking, his bare feet led him back to the same spot he always gravitated to: the rose garden with the koi fish. The smell of the flowers made him calmer. As he stood and breathed the smell in deeply, a drop of icy condensation fell from the overhead climbing plants onto Draco's head and trickled through his hair, making him shiver horribly. Lifting his hand to wipe the water from his skin, he inhaled roses and tried to forget.

He stayed in the garden until he could no longer smell the roses. He had no idea what time it was but imagined that, possibly, the trial might be over and a letter might be on its way. Then, while he trudged back to the Manor, he heard a whoosh of air above his head and looked up to see a snowy owl soar above his head and looked up to see a snowy owl soar above his head, and turn to angle herself back down towards him. His hands shook as he took the letter from Hedwig and ripped it open, thanking her before sending her off again, and hastily read the scrawled writing.

Draco,

Cleared of all charges!

Love, Harry.

0000

"You wanted to see me, father?" Draco tried very hard to stop his voice from shaking as he stood straight and proper in Lucius Malfoy's office. A week left of the holidays, and he had almost got through without a single run-in. But it wasn't going to happen, not on Lucius' watch. He had never gone a holiday without doing this and wasn't going to break that habit now.

Lucius' cheek had a large, deep looking slash across it, which was only just beginning to scab over. Draco knew not to ask where he had got it. His father didn't instantly reply - Draco wasn't expecting him to - but instead, he finished whatever he was doing at his desk. Eventually, he turned his eyes on Draco.
Once, when he was about seven, Draco had seen a dead fish in the kitchens. Its eyes had been glossy and white, like milk that has gone off, and had stared unseeing straight through the soul of the child. It had scared him so much that he had been sick. His father's eyes were the same: blank, pale, and, above all, dead.

"Draco, come here." His voice was flat and dead as his eyes. Draco obeyed swiftly.

Lucius stood up, still towering over Draco despite his recent growth, a hand resting lazily on his snake-headed cane. "Why, dearest son of mine, has the news reached me that that mudblood has beaten you in every subject except potions - which is taught by your godfather and therefore doesn't count - for the fourth year in a row?"

Draco felt an overwhelming urge to run away. "I'm sorry, father."

"'I'm sorry' doesn't change the fact that, for the fourth year now, you have disappointed and embarrassed me!" Lucius Malfoy practically screamed this in Draco's face, spraying him with spittle. Draco winced.

"Father, I'm trying! But she's just... very clever?"

The blow came from the metal end of Lucius' cane, hitting him in the chest. Draco felt his lower ribs bending and, excruciatingly, cracking under the force of the blow and reached for the breath to cry out, but found no air in his lungs. He fell back and felt his head hit hard against the panelled floor, barely able to breathe for the pain, with tears leaking out of his eyes.

"Crying, are you? YOU DESERVE THIS, DRACO!" Lucius cried with some crazy laughter, an evil smile playing across his face. Lifting his leg, he placed a boot on Draco's chest and, terribly, slowly, pushed down. The pain through his broken rib was almost unbearable and Draco screamed out, sobbing, unable to think enough through the pain enough to formulate words to plead with his father - as if that would have made any difference.

Finally, the pressure on his chest was removed. Lucius Malfoy bent over him and said, quietly, "It'll be worse than this next time if you don't shape up, Draco." Then, through the haze of pain, Draco heard him walking out of the office, leaving him on the floor of the office.

When Draco had the courage to move, he pushed himself up and saw the large painting of himself with his parents. His mother was sobbing, trying to reach towards him through the painting, while his father stood like stone, unmoving, with an iron grip on the painting-Draco's shoulder. And his painting-self was just standing there, tears silently cascading down his face, the hand of his father preventing him from doing anything to help his mother. The sight of his mother in such hysterics hurt Draco just as much as his broken rib.

"Please mum, I'll be fine. Please stop crying."

"Get out." Said his painting-father. So Draco did.

0o0oHarry0o0o

Harry had never been so thankful to see the Great Hall. Despite the students who stared at him suspiciously and whispered behind their hands, the fear that he might never see it again had made him appreciate every minute detail of it. But the beauty of the Hall was completely lost on Harry as soon as he sat down, because it was then that he spotted Draco.

The Summer had changed him. His hair was longer and kept much more messily now, falling perfectly in his eyes instead of being slicked back. It suited him like hell. And he looked healthier
now, less pale and maybe - it was difficult to see from across the Hall - even a little less spindly. Clearly, the walks in the grounds of the Manor had done him some good. He had lost the lanky quality that boys get when they grow too fast for their bodies to keep up. For the first time Harry had known him, he looked healthy.

All this went through Harry's mind in a second as he watched Draco talking easily to Pansy and Blaise, who were both laughing at something he had said. Then he saw Draco turn around, and practically had palpitations as their eyes met briefly. Draco grinned at him for just a second, and then turned away once more.

Dinner went excruciatingly slowly, but not only was it boring, it was sinister. The toad-woman who had wanted Harry convicted at his trial was going to the DADA teacher, which, according to Hermione, meant that the Ministry was interfering at Hogwarts. And, when it was finally over, Harry had no choice but to head back to the common room with Ron and Hermione, who, as they were prefects, were hearing first-years along the corridors. When they finally got to the common room, the air between Harry and the other students was dead. he knew they had been discussing him just moments before. Then, Dean stood up.

000oDraco000o

"Limerence," Draco smiled as he spoke the word, and pushed inside the room. He had told Manimi to wait inside the common room until a bit later, to give them some space for a bit. He hoped she hadn't offended her too much, but he was sure she would understand. The Slytherin common room had been unbearable. Because of The Daily Prophet, all the talk was about Harry and none of it was good. Not that it was usually good, but it was certainly worse than usual, and this had prompted him to leave for the guest room earlier than the arranged ten o'clock. While he waited for Harry, Draco walked around the room straightening already-straight pillows and generally fidgeting with the furniture and dressings of the grand room. He went into the bathroom, checked his hair - he hoped Harry wouldn't mind that he had changed it up a bit - and wiped his face with a damp towel. Then, five minutes before ten, the door swung open. Confusingly, no one was there. And then Draco was bowled over by a fast-moving force and found himself sitting, rather promptly, on the floor with Harry ripping off the invisibility cloak before squeezing Draco so hard that he could barely breathe, and Draco hugging back just as tightly, ignoring the pain he was feeling in his newly-mended ribs. Neither said anything, they didn't need to. The smell of Harry was intoxicating, it made Draco feel like he was high, and as their lips finally met, Draco realised how empty, how lonely he had felt over the summer. But now he was whole, and it felt incredible. Harry grinned at him as they finally broke apart.

"It's so good to see you," He said breathlessly. Draco just pulled him closer once more, burying himself in Harry and wishing that he wouldn't ever have to let go.

000oHarry000o

There were four reasons Harry could bear school: Hermione, Ron, Draco, and Manimi. Unfortunately, there were many more reasons why he couldn't bear school. Everyone was suspicious of him, the prophet spouted lies about him, and worst of all, Umbridge's detentions were making his life hell.

When Draco had seen the words carved on his hand, he had fought Harry to let him go to Umbridge and "Give the bitch a taste of her own god-damned potion!", and even when Harry had convinced him to calm down, he had been in a bad mood for the rest of the evening. And now, Harry was pretty sure he about to give him another reason to be in a bad mood.

"So, I uh... I met Cho Chang today in the owlery," Harry spoke quickly and looked down at Draco,
who had been reading with his head on Harry's lap. Draco's eyes didn't move from the book.

"Potter, if you're about to leave me for her, it's your loss. She might have a pretty face, but I have a much more ethereal, ghostly beauty in both my looks and my actions which far excels any other."

Harry's face became very hot at the quotation of one of his letters. "You ponce!" He spluttered.

"Why're you embarrassed? You wrote it," Draco laughed.

"I know, I just... you know it off by heart?"

Draco shrugged. "What were you gonna say about Chang?"

"Well, it's just that I think she likes me."

"So? Who can blame her?"

"But you don't get it. If she asks me out, it'll look seriously weird if I say no. I mean, from an objective point of view, she is very good looking."

Draco finally laid the book down and looked at him. "Let's cross that bridge when we get to it, okay?"

"Okay,"

Draco smiled and got back to his book. From where she had been coiled on the king-sized bed, Manimi loosened and hissed to Harry:

"Poor you, having to put up with these girls throwing themselves at you,"

"Shut up," Harry hissed laughingly.
"How's your hand?" Draco's voice was filled with sympathy as he walked over from where he had been sitting on the sofa. He reached Harry just at the entrance to the Guest Room.

"You smell like blood," Manimi observed.

"That's most likely because I'm bleeding," Harry replied shortly.

"Alright, no need to get yourself in a twist," Manimi replied evenly. "I was just ssaying."

It was late; Harry had just finished his final detention with The Umbitch (as Fred and George had taken to calling her), and his hand was stinging all over. Honestly, though, Harry was too tired and emotionally exhausted by everything that was going on to really care about the pain anymore. Regardless, Draco gently examined the torn skin before walking back to where his schoolbag was leaning against the writing desk, opening it, and returning with a small, dragonfly-blue phial.

"Here, come sit down, and I'll see what I can do," Draco beckoned him over to the sofa and produced some cotton pads from his sleeve as Harry sat down. He poured the liquid from the phial over one of the pads and then gently pressed the soaked cotton to Harry's skin. The relief was so great that Harry actually moaned.

"What was that, Potter?" Draco asked, eyebrow raised in amusement.

"Draco, I love you," Harry laughed, with his eyes closed in bliss.

They sat in silence for a minute, not needing to speak to be comfortable in each other's company, until Draco broke the silence.

"That woman is totally crooked," He said angrily, examining the vicious cut on Harry's hand.

"If it means you'll look after me like this, I won't complain." laughed Harry, but Draco didn't smile.

"I mean, it's definitely illegal to do this, but she's got the whole ministry on her side. Who can we go to?"

"Jesus, hessss really obsessed with this," Manimi hissed in exasperation.

"I know. But it's kind of sweet when you get all angry so I don't mind," Harry hissed in return. He turned to see Draco staring at his lips, though he quickly looked away when Harry noticed.

"Draco, control yourself," He laughed.

"Shut up," Draco admonished, blushing. "What were you saying?"

"I was saying how cute it is when you get all angry on my behalf," Draco blushed even deeper and concentrated on Harry's hand much harder than he needed to.

After there had been a brief pause, Harry took a deep breath and decided to broach the subject that
had been nagging at his mind for a while now. "You've been getting pretty chummy with Umbridge recently, I've noticed," he observed.

Draco looked at him with a guarded expression. "Everyone in my house is chumming up to her. It would look seriously odd if I didn't join in."

Harry looked down at the sofa, not replying. Draco sighed.

"Harry, you know I hate her really. But sometimes, you just have to act. Sometimes there isn't a choice."

Harry looked at Draco, right into those gorgeous blue eyes of his, and took his hand, not caring if the cut began to sting again.

"One day," He stated firmly, "I promise you, one day I will make sure you never have to pretend anymore- we will never have to pretend. And I'll take you out to dinner in public and we'll go on dates and hold hands like normal people. I promise you, Draco."

Draco just smiled at him sadly and gave him a quick kiss before going back to concentrating on Harry's hand. It wasn't that he didn't believe Harry, nothing like that- he knew that Harry meant what he said. It was just that Draco had lived through enough pain to know that people can't always keep their promise, no matter how much they want to.

0o0oHarry0o0o

"I have news," Harry stated, as he and Draco worked together over a steaming cauldron.

"What's up?"

"Two things. One - I've had a... thing"

Draco turned and looked at him, one eyebrow perfectly raised. "How incredibly literate you are, Potter."

"Shut up, I'm trying to find the right word," Harry spat irritably. "I... I felt something yesterday..."

Draco grinned. "Was it like a sneeze, but better?"

Harry hit him with his potions textbook. Snape then walked over and hit Harry with his.

"Ow!" Harry yelped, watching mutinously as Snape billowed back to his desk, then turned swiftly back to Draco. "Bloody hell, I'm trying to tell you something important here!" He lowered his voice to the point that Draco had to hold his breath to hear it. "I felt a flash of Voldemort last night."

Draco looked about as shocked as Harry had felt when the flood of Voldemort's emotions had run through his own body.

"That shut you up, didn't it?" Harry huffed.

"Shut up and tell me what happened."

"I got feelings. Anger, mostly."

Draco swallowed. "Sorry for being an idiot. I didn't realise it was so serious."

Harry nodded. "I would have told you about it tonight, but that's the other thing I needed to say. I
can't get to the guest room." Harry, lowered his voice, if possible, even further now. "You know, obviously, that DADA is totally shite now that Umbridge is in charge."

"Obviously,"

"Well, Hermione's convinced me to start teaching a defence class secretly-"

"What?!" Draco yelled, which earned then some strange looks. He hastily covered up, "-Are you doing talking to me, Potter?! God knows you're going to balls up this potion if you don't concentrate!"

The rest of the Slytherins, seeming satisfied with this, turned away again. Blaise let out a snort before going back to his potion.

"Good one, Malfoy," Harry said sarcastically, "Good save."

"Sorry," Draco whispered, "but- well... Don't you think that's a bit of a stupid idea? Imagine if you get caught! Please don't do this, Harry!"

"We won't get caught because you will let me know whenever Umbridge is coming. You're in with her gang, right? You tell me if she's coming and we'll scatter."

"How," Draco asked, irritably, "Am I going to do that?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll think of something. The first meeting's tonight, I'm sure it will be fine if you can't tell us yet, because Umbridge hasn't heard anything about it yet. But we'll have to think of something soon."

Draco looked heavenwards. "Merlin, I should have listened to my mum!"

Harry looked at him in surprise. "What did your mum say?"

"I don't know, I didn't listen! But I bet it would be something along the lines of, 'Now, Draco, try not to do anything that would make powerful people hate you!'"

Harry laughed. "You'll be fine. You're just a drama queen."

Draco looked at him. "No drama," he corrected, "I'm just a queen."

0000Harry0000

"We won, Harry, we won!" Angelina said excitedly, sounding overjoyed despite glaring angrily at Crabbe. The long-awaited Quidditch match had just ended with Harry catching the snitch and being hit with a bludger... at the same time. But they'd won, that was what mattered. Harry was just about to go to reply when he heard a noise behind him, and turned around.

"Saved Weasley's neck, haven't you?" Draco sneered. Shock flooded Harry's mind as he realised Draco looked positively ugly with anger. "I've never seen a worse keeper... but then he was born in a bin... did you like the lyrics, Potter?"

Harry couldn't believe Draco was actually saying this. He knew that his boyfriend was competitive but this was too far, even if they had lost a big game. Trying not to get angry, Harry turned around to the rest of his teammates, who were all cheering and celebrating - except for Ron, who was walking defeatedly back to the changing rooms by himself.

"We wanted to write another couple of verses," Draco continued, loudly enough for Ron to hear,
"But we couldn't find rhymes for fat and ugly - we wanted to talk about his mother, see -"

"Talk about sour grapes," Angelina said in disgust.

"-We couldn't fit in useless loser either - for his father, you know -"

Fred and George had, by this point, realised what Draco was saying. Stiffening, they turned to look at him, both turning red in anger.

"Leave it," Angelina said quickly, gently taking Fred's arm. "Leave it, Fred, let him yell, he's just sore he lost, the jumped up little-"

"- But you like the Weasleys, don't you, Potter?" Draco was still saying, and Harry turned to stare at him in shock. Was he seriously going to bring him into this? As he caught Draco's eyes, he realised that they had gone completely blank, emotionless, and cold. Fear made Harry's heart beat out of time.

"Spend holidays there and everything, don't you? Can't see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you've been dragged up by muggles, even the Weasleys' hovel smells okay-"

Harry had to grab George to restrain him, while Angelina, Alicia and Katie all struggled to stop Fred from leaping on Draco, who was laughing. Not his normal laugh - the one which made Harry's heart melt - but a terrible ghost of a laugh which sounded sad, not happy. Beside him, Goyle egged him on, chuckling stupidly, and whispering something in Draco's ear.

"Or perhaps," Draco said, more quietly now, "you can remember what your mother's house stank like, Potter, and Weasley's pigsty reminds you of it -"

Harry didn't realise that he had let go of George. He wasn't even aware of his legs running beneath him. All he knew was that he wanted to hurt Malfoy in any way he possibly could, to make him feel the same as he had made Harry feel when he'd spoken those words.

No time to draw a wand, he just pulled back the fist clutching the snitch and sunk it into Malfoy's stomach, right over his stupid scar-

"Harry! HARRY! GEORGE! NO!"

He could hear girls screaming, and Malfoy yelling in pain, and George swearing, a whistle blowing, and the bellowing of the crowd around him, and he did not care. Not until somebody in the vicinity screeched 'impedimenta!' and he was knocked over backwards by the force of the spell did he abandon the attempt to punch every inch of Malfoy he could reach.
"How dare you."

Malfoy visibly winced at the anger in Harry's voice.

"How fucking dare you, Malfoy."

The Guest Room felt too small for the emotions it was containing. It was as though the very walls were shaking with the effort of withstanding the furious energy pushing against them. Harry paced back and forth, not looking at Draco- unable to look at Draco. He clenched his fists at his sides, digging his nails into the soft flesh of his palm in a vain attempt to distract his mind from the pain of what he was feeling.

"I don't know why you asked me here. I don't care what you have to say." He spat. "I mean, I know why you make fun of us sometimes. I hate it, but I know why you have to do it. But what you did at the match," Harry's voice filled with venom as he recalled the events of only a few hours ago, "Do you know how much it hurt me to hear you talk about my dead mother like that? Or about my best friend, who's parents have looked after me like I was their son for four years?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," Malfoy's voice was pained, "I know it was too far, I know there's nothing I can do to take it back. It's just-"

"You really think there's an excuse? Did poor little Malfoy have to do it? Did he have no choice?" Emotions swamped Harry's voice. "YOU BETRAYED ME!" He burst out. "I trusted you and YOU BETRAYED ME!"

"Please stop calling me Malfoy," Draco murmured, his eyes squeezed closed, as though he could block out Harry's anger.

"I'll call you whatever I damn well please, and a Malfoy is all you are to me now." Harry took a deep breath, readying himself for what he was about to say. "I don't want to be with you anymore."

Tears began to roll down Draco's cheek and he made as though to walk over to Harry.

"Please," He pleaded, his voice breaking with emotion, "Please don't do this, Harry, please."

Harry stepped back, away from Draco. "I'm sorry I hit you." He stated, before turning and walking out of the door. He slammed it shut behind him, fighting the urge to run.

Back in the guest room, Draco stared at the door, hearing it slam over and over again in his mind as though it were a broken record.

Harry didn't want him.

Through the numbness in his mind, emotions broke like a tidal wave and drowned him in their inescapable depths. A sob wracked his body and he crumpled in on himself, sinking to the floor as his legs became too weak to hold him up. It was as though the truth was suffocating him.

Harry didn't want him.

0o0oHarry0o0o

In sadness, anger, and pain, there comes a point where it's all too much. The brain shuts down as a
defence mechanism and instead of feeling an incredibly strong emotion, it feels nothing.

Harry was completely numb. It was like being in shock. His brain was fuzzy, and he saw his surrounding as though he was watching them on a screen - detached from reality. His legs took him through the halls without him telling them to, up what seemed like miles of stairs and corridors back up to the common room.

"Harry! Where have you been? Ron's gone to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I've been really worried about you! You seemed in a really bad way when you went out," Hermione said all in one go, rushing over to meet him as he walked through the portrait hole. The common room was empty except for them - Harry hadn't realised how late it was until now.

"I've just been out," He said flatly. "Needed to clear my head after the match."

Hermione looked at him suspiciously, her dark eyes piercing straight through his mask. "Something's wrong," She stated, leaving no room for argument. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Harry insisted, pushing past her and making towards the stairs to his dorm. Hermione caught his wrist before he could go too far, forcing him to turn back around.

"Please, Hermione," He pleaded, feeling the numbness in his mind begin to ebb away as his emotions fought to get free. "Just let me go,"

Hermione looked at him with her head cocked to the side, as though he were nothing more than a tricky question she was trying to solve. Finally, she just pulled him towards her and hugged him tightly. Harry concentrated on his breathing. Don't think, don't cry, just breathe in and out... He felt a sob rising in his throat and swallowed it down.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Hermione said softly into Harry's shoulder, "But I just want you to know it's okay to cry. I promise you'll feel better if you don't hold it in."

Harry gave a shuddering gasp as the tears finally began to drip down his face, and his whole body shook with sobs as the wall of secrets he had built meticulously broke in an instant as everything came rushing out.

"It's just-" He began, but struggled to complete the sentence as another sob deflated his lungs. "Hermione, please, d- on't h- hate me,"

"I won't hate you, I promise," Hermione reassured him gently. "Just tell me,"

And so, between shaking, gasping sobs, Harry did. He told Hermione everything, and she listened quietly and brilliantly without interruption. When he finally finished, Harry felt as though all the energy in his body had drained out of him. He was too exhausted to cry anymore.

"What do I do now?" he whispered into the silence.

Hermione looked at him, worry etched into her face. "I don't know."
Chapter Six

One Week Earlier

The sun had just set and the world was bathed in twilight blue as Draco walked with quick strides up the steps to the owlery, Manimi coiled around his neck as she allowed him to carry her. It was colder in the smelly tower than it was outside, and Draco shivered as he whistled softly, calling the family's eagle owl down from its perch and obediently onto his outstretched arm.

"Hello," Draco spoke quietly to the owl as he began to untie the letter from its leg. "What've you got for me today?"

Once the owl was free of its letter, it fluttered back to a perch in the wall with an urgent air - the owls didn't trust Manimi - and shut its eyes. Draco turned and began to walk back out of the owlery, opening the letter and lifting his wand with a "Lumos" to read his father's elegantly slanted writing.

Dear Draco,

I hope you are well-

Draco stopped reading. Obviously, that wasn't the real letter - the actual letter must be hidden by some spell to prevent the letter from being read by the spying eyes of Umbridge. After thinking for a moment, he experimentally tapped his wand to the parchment, and the letters instantly transformed into new words. The parchment must be trained to recognise his wand. Again, Draco began to read aloud, so that Manimi would understand.

Draco,

I am writing to you because of some news that has reached me via your godfather. He has reported that you sit next to Harry Potter in his potions lessons, and therefore he has noticed that you and Potter seem, in his words, "disturbingly close".

Now, I am aware that in your first year I advised you to befriend Potter. However, times have changed since then. It is completely shocking to me that you haven't already ended whatever friendship you have with Potter, and I believe that this reveals a severe lapse of judgement on your part, which I do not expect to see again, and for which you will be punished duly.

Furthermore, not only has Severus reported your apparent closeness to Potter, but Mr Parkinson says his daughter has also noticed an odd closeness. You are arousing suspicion from both Severus and your fellow Slytherins.

"Fuck," Draco swore. Manimi had tensed around his neck. He kept reading.

I have concluded that you must not only end your friendship with Potter, but also prove to your housemates that there is no friendship between you two. We cannot have rumours going around in such dangerous times. Severus will be watching closely, and if I do not hear that you have followed my instructions within two weeks, there will be serious trouble for you.

Your mother has fully recovered from her chest infection.

- Your Father.

Draco had stopped walking as he read and now stood to stare at the letter in shock. He read it over once more, a feeling of anger growing inside him.

"Fuck," He repeated, and stuffing the letter into his pocket, he began to hurry back to the castle.

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Father,

I don't think I can do what you ask me to. I'm really sorry, but I just can't hurt him like that.

-Draco

Draco's hands shook as he stood in the darkened owlery, holding the incredibly short letter in his hands. Manimi was still around his neck - he didn't want to do this alone. Never in his life had he directly disobeyed his father like this, and the consequences of what he was about to do were enormous. He turned, as though to walk out of the tower, and then twisted back around with a sound of frustration.

"Just do it, Draco," He told himself through gritted teeth. "Harry would do this for you without even thinking about it."

Manimi pushed the top of her head against his jaw, showing him she was there for him without having to use words. Feeling as though he were about to jump off a cliff without a broom or a wand, Draco whistled and a flurry of wings announced the eagle owl's presence. When the bird was perched firmly on his arm, Draco took a deep breath and attached the parchment to its leg. He then carried it outside and allowed it to swoop noiselessly off into the night, feeling as though he had just signed his own death warrant. From his neck, Manimi hissed quietly. Draco couldn't help but agree.

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"Draco," Blaise's voice caused Draco to twist around just before he got to the door of the fifth year dorms. It was two days since he had sent the letter, and so far he had managed to forget about it as much as possible.

"Hm?"

"I almost forgot, an owl came for you at breakfast," Blaise walked over with an envelope in his hands, holding it out for Draco. "Where were you, by the way? And where's Manimi?"

Draco took the envelope, blushing as he remembered exactly what he and Harry had been doing that morning.

"I was just with Harry." He shrugged, hiding his red cheeks by looking down at the letter instead of at Blaise. "And you know Manimi, she does her own thing." Then, he realised what he was seeing. "Oh, shit..."

"What?" Blaise stood next to Draco, looking down at the slanted handwriting on the front of the letter.

"It's from my father."

Blaise looked confused. "You get letters from your parents all the time, what's up with this one?"

Draco went over to his four-poster and sat down heavily. "Severus noticed me and Harry in potions and told my father that we seemed weirdly close, and Pansy's dad told him that Pansy had noticed us too."

Despite the fact that the common room was empty, Blaise looked around furtively. "So? I thought your dad wanted you to be friends with him?"

Draco shook his head, still staring at the letter in his hands. "Not now that the Dark Lord has
returned. Now he doesn't want me to have anything to do with him. He told me with his last letter to very publicly make it clear that I'm not friends with Harry."

"You mean like having an argument in public?"

"I guess, something like that." Draco sighed. "Obviously I can't do that, and I can't fake it because Harry can't act or lie for shit and Severus can read me like a book anyway. So I told my dad I wouldn't do it."

"Seriously?" Blaise sounded impressed as he sat down opposite Draco on his own bunk. "How very Gryffindor of you."

Draco stared at the letter in his hands. "Okay, why am I so scared? It's just a letter, right?"

Blaise shrugged. "You might as well open it. You're going to have to eventually."

Draco closed his eyes momentarily, then opened the envelope and pulled out the letter.

Dearest Draco,

How lovely to hear from you,

Of course, the real letter was concealed. Pulling out his wand, Draco tapped the tip to the surface of the paper. Suddenly, an excruciating pain shot up his wand arm and spread through his body so that ever fibre of his being felt as though it was on fire. Draco screamed out and was suddenly on the ground, curled up into a ball as the agony rose, worse than any crucio he had ever received. Blaise yelled out in panic, falling to his knees next to Draco.

"Draco? Draco!" He looked around for anything that might help, but nothing came to his aid. The pain was so bad that just listening to Draco seemed to hurt, and Draco's sobs were like knives through Blaise's chest. Powerless, he could do nothing but listen to his best friend scream out in terror and pain and pray to anyone who was listening to make it stop.

Finally, it did. After what seemed like hours, Draco finally went limp and lay panting, curled into a ball on the ground with his eyes squeezed shut and tears running down his face. Neither boy said anything.

Finally, Draco spoke in a hoarse voice after his breathing had slowed and his heart rate had returned to something more like normal. "Blaise, could you please fetch me the black phial from my bathroom cabinet?" After taking the phial Blaise brought, Draco gulped the thick solution and allowed the calming effects of the potion to take full effect before he pushed himself off the ground weakly, and sat back down on the bed.

"Are you okay?" Blaise asked, shakily. The question seemed ludicrously insubstantial against the magnitude of what had just happened. Draco nodded.

"I'm fine." His voice said otherwise. Wrapping his hand in covers from his bed, he very carefully picked up the letter from where he had dropped it onto the bed.

Draco,

If you do not do as I ask within a week, You can say goodbye to that snake of yours. I hope this little taste of pain has made you see sense.

Lucius.

Draco looked at Blaise. "He's going to kill Manimi if I don't do it."
Part Three - Chapter Seven

Disclaimer: This chapter features quotes directly from JK Rowling's book - 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire'. I do not claim to have created these lines. All rights and copyrights are JK Rowling's.

Present Day

Harry stared across the tables to where Draco sat, staring at his untouched breakfast. He didn't look very well. Harry felt a tug in his stomach as he watched Draco slowly squish his scrambled eggs into a slush with his fork.

"Stop looking at him," Hermione said quietly, touching his arm. "You'll just make yourself sad."

Harry snorted and went back to picking at the toast that Hermione had pointedly handed him as they had sat down at the Gryffindor table. As if he could get any sadder than this.

It had been about two weeks since he and Draco had last spoken, but Harry hadn't really noticed the time passing. In his continuous, dreary state of numbness, the days seemed to just mix together into a dirty brown sludge of moments. Nothing really made him happy anymore- well, he supposed that Dumbledore's Army made him feel something other than sad, but he wouldn't go so far as to say it was happiness. More like a distraction.

"I'm not hungry," Harry stated, pushing his plate away from himself as though it were poisoned. Ron looked at him worriedly.

"Come on, mate. You must be hungry, you barely ate anything at dinner last night. Or at lunch before that, or at breakfast. Come to think of it, I don't even know what you're existing on anymore. Please, just eat something,"

Distantly, Harry felt bad for making his best friend worried about him. But he didn't really feel it. "Seriously Ron, it's fine." He said appeasingly, trying vaguely to smile reassuringly but only succeeding in grimacing slightly. "I'll eat when I'm hungry, and I'm just not hungry right now."

Hermione squeezed his hand under the table, but that just made Harry feel worse. He stood up.

"I'm going for a run."

"Again? But it's freezing outside! And it's a Hogsmeade weekend," Ron protested.

"I don't want to buy anything in Hogsmeade, and I'll warm up when I'm running." Harry persisted. "It'll give me time to plan what we're doing tonight in DA."

Ron sighed. "Fine. We'll see you later. Have a good run."

Once Harry had changed into his quidditch gear - which was now doubling as his running clothes - he made his way outside into the crisp air. It was very cold, as Ron had said, but that was good. It is much harder to concentrate on anything when you're freezing, and Harry needed that kind of distraction. He began to jog, trying to concentrate on the feeling of his feet hitting the ground and nothing else. Jogging had become his meditation, lifting him far away from his feelings so that the hurt didn't feel quite so sharp. It wasn't flying, but it was the best he had at the moment. He ran until it hurt: until every step sent hot pain shooting through his muscles and he couldn't get enough air with each breath, and then he kept running. Only when he physically couldn't make his muscles
move anymore did he finally allow himself to slow to a walk, making his way gradually around the lake with his pulse roaring in his ears. It was late afternoon by the time he got back to Gryffindor tower. The common room was empty - Ron and Hermione no doubt enjoying their Saturday in Hogsmeade - and he was glad of the solitude as he changed into more comfortable clothes, not even bothering to shower.

Once Harry's muscles had relaxed and his heart had properly slowed, thoughts of Draco managed once more to creep back into his head. He shut his eyes, as though he could blot out the memories with darkness. He wanted nothing more than to forget Draco, to stop being so heartbroken and pissed off and be himself again, but he just couldn't do it. It wasn't just that he was still angry with Draco, it was more than that. It was as though Draco had stolen a part of him, and he wouldn't be able to live again until he had it back, no matter how much he wanted to.

0o0o

"You're all getting really good," Harry smiled at the DA members, proud of his friends for how far they had come. "When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff - maybe even patronuses."

There were only two days until the Christmas holidays. In the weeks since his fight with Draco, Harry had managed to turn his sadness into numbness, which was, at least, less painful than it had been before. He was still angry, still swimming in an endless mourning for what he'd lost, but it had gotten better. Or maybe he'd just got used to it.

The rest of the members begin to drift out of the Room of Requirement, chattering happily, many of them wishing him a 'Merry Christmas' as they left. He hung around, tidying away the cushions they had been using in the lesson. Eventually, he told Ron and Hermione to just go on without him, and thought he was the only one in the room until he saw Cho telling her friend Marietta-

"No, you go on,"

Harry turned and finished straightening the pile of cushions, and was just wondering if Cho was going to speak when he heard a sniff, and turned to see Cho standing in the middle of the room with tears streaming down her face.

"Wha-?"

He stood, unsure of what to do. It was enough to deal with himself at the moment, he really didn't know how he was going to deal with Cho crying, too. Bracing himself, he walked over.

"What's up?" He asked, awkwardly.

Cho shook her head and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robes.

"I'm sorry," She said, sniffing. "I suppose... it's just... learning all this stuff... it just makes me wonder whether... if he'd known it all... he'd still be alive."

Inwardly, Harry groaned. How on earth was he meant to console Cho over the death of her boyfriend when it was a death he had practically caused? When he himself still found those memories painful?

"He did know all this stuff," He began, wearily. "He was really good at it all, or he could never have got to the middle of that maze. But if Voldemort really wants to kill you, you don't stand a chance."

Cho blinked at the sound of Voldemort's name and another tear rolled down her cheek.
"You survived when you were just a baby," she said. It felt like an accusation.

"Yeah, well," Harry said tiredly, wishing he could be anywhere but here. "I dunno why, nor does anyone else, so it's nothing to be proud of." He made as though to go towards the door.

"Oh, don't go!" Cho exclaimed getting teary again. "I'm really sorry to get all upset like this... I didn't mean to..."

She gave a dejected hiccup. Harry wished she'd just said 'Merry Christmas' and left.

"I know it must be horrible for you," She wiped her eyes. "Me mentioning Cedric, when you saw him die... I suppose you just want to forget about it?"

Well, yeah, Harry resisted the urge to say sarcastically.

"You're a really good teacher, you know," She continued, attempting a smile. "I've never been able to stun anything before."

"Thanks," Harry said, stiffly.

The silence was deafening. Harry wanted nothing more than to run away as fast as he could.

"Mistletoe," Cho said finally, pointing above their heads. Harry's heart sank.

"Yeah," He searched for something to say. "Probably full of nargles, though."

"What are Nargles?"

"No idea," She was moving closer. "You'd have to ask Loony. Luna, I mean."

Cho made a weird noise that was a mixture of a sob and a laugh. She was really way too close now - he could have counted her damp eyelashes.

"I really like you, Harry."

Harry had known she was going to kiss him, but he still wasn't prepared for it when it happened. Her lips felt all wrong, they didn't fit against his own like Draco's and they weren't able to find a rhythm, their lips felt out of sync with each other, and Harry could taste the salt from her tears. Yet, somehow, Harry found himself kissing back in a desperate attempt to feel what he felt when He and Draco kissed- to feel something. Her hands were in his hair and he was heartbroken and numb. So he did what his instincts compelled him to do - he deepened the kiss, and tried to forget.

0o0oDraco0o0o

"Did you hear about Potter?" Pansy prompted conversationally over her single slice of buttered white bread. Draco was suddenly very awake.

"What about him?" He asked, mock-casually.

"Well," Pansy leant forward secretively, "He had an episode, didn't he? Woke up in the middle of the night saying he'd had a vision or some sort."

Blaise raised an eyebrow, glancing briefly at Draco. "How would you know?"

Pansy looked mildly offended by this questioning of the validity of her gossip. "I know because Millicent heard one of the second-years saying that they'd overheard that one of the Gryffindor first-
years had heard Potter and his lot in the dorms last night. McGonagall was there and all."

This didn't exactly wipe doubt from Draco and Blaise's minds. However, as these things go, the whole school also seemed to know about Harry's vision, or dream, or... whatever it was, and people were talking about nothing else. When Draco arrived in potions to see that Harry's seat was gaping empty, he knew something was up. His instant reaction was to write Harry a letter to see if he was okay, but then he remembered. He couldn't talk to Harry anymore.

The past few weeks had been shit. There was no other way to describe them. After the first waves of sadness had rolled over, Draco had been left with an intense anger - at Harry, at himself. At the world. If only Harry had let him explain. But anger is a finite resource, and it had ebbed away as fast as it had come, leaving Draco to drown in self-loathing and grief. It had been more than a month since they'd fought, but Draco still hadn't escaped the depression he had flung himself into.

Settling into the seat next to Blaise (after he and Harry had fought, Draco had sat in Goyle's seat and refused to move. Snape had placed Goyle next to Harry and said no more about the matter) Draco started getting what they needed to make the potion they'd prepared for the previous day. Blaise looked at him piercingly, his dark eyes searching Draco's face.

"How are you holding up?" He asked.

Draco looked at him, then picked up a glass phial from the desk and dropped it to the stone floor, where it smashed. He pointed at the shattered remains.

"I'm the glass."

Blaise winced, before pointing his wand at the broken glass and muttering "repairo." No one really noticed the smashing glass - things were broken so often in the potions class that people had stopped hearing the noise. After the glass had been fixed, they made the potion in relative silence. There was nothing to say.
Part Three - Chapter Eight

Draco’s heart sank as he alighted on platform nine and three-quarters to see that his mother wasn’t there. His father, however, was very much present. Draco had practically sensed him before he saw him - sensing the nervous energy in the crowd that subconsciously flitted around the tall, ominous figure. Draco walked towards him with Manimi’s cage in one hand, and his trunk in the other, every fibre in his body aching to turn tail and run as far away as he could. However, he set his face into a blank mask and forced his legs to *just keep moving*, concentrating on not letting his hands shake too much.

"Draco." His father stated. "Come."

Without any further talk, they left the station. A black Aston Martin was waiting for them outside, along with a white-gloved chauffeur who took Draco’s luggage - and Manimi, to his dismay - and placed them in the boot of the car. As if the beautiful classical car wasn’t enough on its own, the inside was magically expanded to give enough room for more than ten people to sit comfortably. Lucius sat a little away from Draco and said nothing to him for the entirety of the drive. When they arrived at the manor, he told the chauffeur to give Draco’s luggage - and Manimi - to a house elf to be brought to Draco’s quarters.

"And you, Draco, will come with me."

Draco was surprised when they didn’t appear to be going to his father’s study, but instead to the meeting room - a large, cold room with a long table that Lucius used when he needed to talk business with large groups of people. Draco swallowed, and, guessing that he couldn’t really make his situation much worse anyway, got up the courage to ask;

"Father, why are we going to the meeting room?"

Lucius looked at Draco. "The Dark Lord wishes to speak with you."

Draco’s eyes widened and his heart began to beat sickeningly hard.

"And Draco," Lucius continued, "I expect you to come to my office afterwards. We still have matters to see to."

Draco wanted to cry - he almost did, but swallowed the tears down and took a shaky breath. He was going to talk to the Dark Lord himself, going to meet the man - if he could be called a man - who had tried to kill Harry not once, but four times. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, his father was going to torture him directly afterwards.

Too soon, they arrived at the meeting room. Lucius reached over Draco, cornering him, and tapped on the door.

"Yes?"

Draco winced. The voice sent shivers down his spine. Over his head, Lucius spoke.

"My Lord, I have Draco for you as you wished."

The door opened of its own accord, and Lucius put a hand on Draco’s back in a sickening mock-fatherly touch, pushing him in. The cold, high voice snaked through his mind.
"Ah, Draco. How pleased I am to finally meet you."

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The Christmas dinner was completely surreal. Maybe that was just because Draco hadn't eaten in five days. On his left was his aunt, Bellatrix, who was gulping food like a famished wolf and cackling loudly at something one of the other Death Eaters had said. On his right, his mother squeezed his hand under the table. Her fingers were ice cold, just like his own always were. Manimi was with him, of course, coiled in his lap and keeping a low profile from Nagini, who clearly scared the life out of her. They were surrounded on all sides by death eaters - though some were absent, as they were having their Christmas dinner with family - and most disconcerting of all, the Dark Lord sat at the head of the long table, watching them all enjoy the beautifully prepared food with the cold eyes of death himself. Draco had never seen him eat or drink. He stared at the beautifully prepared food and felt giddy with hunger.

After his meeting with the Dark Lord, Draco had suffered one of the worst experiences of his life in his father's study. It had been especially bad because, as well as causing him physical pain, Lucius had used a spell that Draco had never even heard of before - *inducerorum terrores*. It made Draco relive the worst moments of his life as though they were happening again. Over and over, he had been slashed with his father's knife, and it had felt real, even though it had been nothing but a convulsion of his mind. Again and again, Harry's words had pierced his heart. *A Malfoy is all you are to me now.*

After it was finally over, he had been informed that he wouldn't eat until his father said he could, which could be anytime from the next day to the next week, or longer. It wasn't the first time his father had starved him as punishment, but to be doing it over Christmas...

He thought about Harry. He couldn't help it anymore - not when his brain was so exhausted. Mentally, he thanked his godfather for teaching him occlumency, and sank into the only refuge he had - memory.

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*Tumblr: Eviesreality
Spotify: Eviesreality*
Harry felt as though he had been punched in the gut when he got to the window to see that the source of the tapping noise was none other than Draco's owl, sitting haughtily on a branch outside the window and looking at him with all the disdain of a bird who knows his worth. What the hell was Draco doing, sending him a letter? He stared at the creature, then turned, planning to ignore it, before whirling back around with a torn expression. Crossing his arms, Harry stood glaring at the owl as emotions churned in him. He considered opening the letter, then disregarded the idea, then turned back to it. Not only was he craving Draco and wanting to have some - *any* - contact with him, but he was curious. And worried. Harry hadn't worn his ring since the day of the argument, so he had no idea if Draco had been hurt, or if he was trying to apologise, or even if something else had happened. It was only due to Hermione that Harry had kept the ring at all - and she had so far been keeping it safe for him. It was as Harry thought this that he realised Hermione was the only one who could help him - she'd know what to do. Twisting around once more, he strode from the room, leaving the agitated bird to wait outside.

"Hey, Harry," The twins whispered in unison, stopping him on the landing outside his room. Fred continued. "Look, about the shop, we might just be able to get ourselves a place in Diagon Alley-"

"That's great," Harry interrupted. "Look, have you seen Hermione?"

The twins wore matching expressions of befuddlement. George pointed down the landing. "Sitting room."

"Thanks," Harry said, already walking.

He found her on one of the recently cleaned armchairs, reading one of the books she'd been given for Christmas.

"Hermione,"

"Mm?" She said, distractedly.

"I need your help with something," Harry was conscious that Sirius and Mr Weasley were also in the room, so tried to act as casually as possible. "It's, uh, homework stuff."

She looked at him, instantly suspicious. "...Okay," she said slowly, putting her book to the side and following him out of the door.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the sitting room, Harry turned to Hermione and grabbed her wrist, pulling her along with him in his haste.

"Harry, wha- Harry, seriously! What's wrong?"

"He sent me a letter," Harry said, still pulling her along behind him as they arrived in the room he and Ron were sharing. "Look. It's his owl."

Hermione gave a little "oh" of understanding. She looked at Harry. "Why d'you need me?"

Harry threw his hands up in a half exasperated, half pleading gesture. "I don't know what to do!"

Hermione thought for a moment. "You need to make sure he's okay, Harry. Even if you're cross with
him, you can't truthfully say you don't care."

Harry sighed. "It's just... I don't really know how to explain this... it's just that I'm scared to have contact with him again just as I'm beginning to get used to this, in case it makes everything worse again. I don't want it to get like a few weeks ago."

Hermione reached over and took his hand, squeezing lightly. "Of course you don't. But think about it - Draco cares about you. I'm sure he wouldn't do anything he knew would make you upset?"

"You don't know-" Harry began, angrily, "I mean, if he did care about me, why did he say those things, huh?"

"Harry, please!" Hermione looked startled at his quickness to anger and dropped his hand. "I didn't mean... Oh, whatever."

Harry felt bad as he looked at Hermione's insulted expression. "Sorry, 'mione. You were just trying to help." He said, sheepishly.

"Yeah, I was." She said, icily. Then, she relented. "Look, if you want, I'll read it for you. I'll make sure nothing's wrong."

Harry considered the idea. "That actually sounds like a pretty good solution."

"Yeah, well, I'm good at those," Hermione said with a shrug. She moved towards the window. "I'll read it. You go distract yourself."

Harry nodded and left the room.

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"Have you really been sitting there this whole time?" Hermione asked as she left Harry and Ron's room, an envelope in her hand.

"It wasn't very long," Harry said defensively, quickly standing up from the grubby floor. "What was the letter?"

"A Christmas card." Hermione shrugged. "Nothing more. Seems perfectly innocent to me. You can read it if you want?"

Harry looked at the envelope in Hermione's hands for a moment, then took it before he changed his mind.

"I'll leave you to it," Hermione said, already walking back to her book in the living room. Harry barely noticed her go. Walking back into his room, he pulled out the card.

It was very small, much smaller than the envelope, and on it was a drawing - more like a doodle - of some snowflakes. Harry opened it, and read;

_Harry,

I hope you're having a really wonderful Christmas.

Love, Draco_

Harry blinked. Turning the letter over, he looked to see if there was any more writing on the back. There wasn't. Then it struck him that he should tap it with his wand, and, feeling stupid for not doing
so before, took it from his pocket and tapped the card. A single line of writing appeared at the bottom, and Harry's stomach contracted.

Ps. I really, really miss you.

0o0o

Harry sat staring into the fire, long after Mr Weasley's snores could be heard drifting down from the top floor. He held the card in his hands, turning it over again and again as he watched the last flames of the dying fire flicker in the near-darkness. He didn't know what he was feeling or thinking. He didn't know how long he had sat there.

"Harry,"

Jumping up from the sofa, Harry whirled around to find himself pointing his wand at Hermione, who was wearing a dressing gown and slippers, and was looking at him with one eyebrow raised. Her hair was wrapped in a silk scarf, which Harry knew was to keep it from frizzing and drying out. She looked at his wand.

"You want to point that thing away?"

"Sorry," Harry shook himself, sitting back down on the sofa. "I'm feeling a bit off."

Hermione nodded, sitting down next to him and tucking her legs under her body. "What's wrong?"

"What do you think?"

She looked at him. "I want you to tell me exactly what's wrong. I know generally, but you need to define the problem before you start to fix it."

Harry sighed. Her logic, as always, was indisputable. "I think it's the confliction. I miss him so badly, I don't even know how to describe it. But I keep hearing those things he said to me in my mind, and I just can't forgive him, you know? He completely betrayed me."

Hermione nodded. "Well, that's totally understandable. I wouldn't expect you to move past that easily, if at all."

"But then what can I do?" Harry said, his voice rising in frustration. "I'm stuck!"

"No, you're not," Hermione said, gently. "Work the problem, don't just do nothing."

They were silent for a while, both looking into the fire.

"What did you do with the ring?" Harry asked, suddenly.

"I still have it, don't worry. Why?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed.

"...You want it back?" She ventured, cautiously.

Shrugging, Harry shuffled into a more comfortable position and rubbed his eyes, not looking at her. He felt awkward, though he didn't know why. Hermione watched him.

"Do you want to know what I think?"
He nodded.

"I think that this can only go on for so long. You have to at least listen to what he has to say, for closure, if for nothing else." Reaching into the pocket of her dressing gown, she took something out and placed it on the sofa in-between her and Harry, where it gleamed, reflecting the firelight on its golden surface. "I can't make your choices for you, Harry. Just do what you think is right."

Long after she had gone, Harry stared at the ring. Tiredness felt like a weight pressing down on him. Finally, he picked up the band of gold and slid it on to its familiar place on the ring finger of his right hand. The weight of it felt comforting after not wearing it for so long. Then he dragged himself off the sofa and collapsed on top of his bed, where he fell into an instant sleep.
Lying on his back in the boy's dorm, Draco allowed himself to relax for the first time in weeks. The knowledge that he was no longer sharing a house with The Dark Lord himself was like being able to breathe again, and meant that Draco could finally let down the tense guard around himself and his mind. Without the alertness, he realised he felt exhausted. Christmas really hadn't been easy.

Absent-mindedly he twisted the band of silver around his finger, thinking. Seeing Harry had been numbingly painful, and yet somehow thrilling. The split second of eye contact they had had while boarding the train had been enough to make his heart pound and his hands shake almost uncontrollably. And, like rubbing salt into a wound, it had made the sadness that had been with him so long return to its full intensity with sharp precision. But the green eyes had not hated him this time. Not like they had before the holiday.

A sketchbook lay, pages splayed, by Draco's head. No new drawings had been added to it since Harry had left. Draco found himself sitting and staring at the blank pages in front of him more often than he could count, wishing for the urge of inspiration to come to him as it had so often used to, and yet feeling nothing. The pages mocked him until, defeated, he would return it to its place.

He was remembering what Harry's eyes had looked like on Platform Nine and Three-Quarters as he drifted off into murky dreams.

Harry

Harry rubbed a hand over the place he'd felt pain only two days ago, when the line of fire had been burned into his ribs, making him yell out in hurt. It hadn't been his - it came from the ring which he had returned to his hand the night before. It was difficult to tell what hurt him more - the pain on his skin, or the pain of knowing that whatever was happening to him would be much, much worse for Draco.

Guilt that he hadn't been able to protect Draco was ever present in Harry's mind. And he was angry - so angry - at whatever person had dared to harm him. Seeing him on the train, even briefly, had been heartwrenching. It had been all Harry could do not to go and pull Draco to him, to tell him he was sorry, and yet...

Suppressing a grunt of indecision, Harry rolled over and pulled his pillow into a more comfortable position. He wanted to sleep, but as always, Draco kept him awake. When he shut his eyes, all he could see were the fathomless icy irises staring through him. How he longed to look into those eyes again, without hesitation, and see only his own love reflected back.

It was with a sense of giving up that Harry finally decided to talk to Draco again, tomorrow.

When tomorrow came, Harry began to get nervous. It felt strange to feel scared of talking to someone who he had spent so much time with, whom he had talked to for hours, but there it was. Just because he didn't like it didn't mean it wasn't true.

Potions was first thing. Harry didn't know whether it was a blessing to get it over with, or a curse to have to do it so soon. As they made their way to class, Hermione shot him a look.

"What's up?" She asked quietly, so that Ron wouldn't hear.
"I'm going to talk to Draco after school." Saying it made it feel final. That scared Harry even more.

"I knew you'd come round," Hermione said, barely hiding her smile. "Stop looking so sad. Remember that you're about to talk to the guy you're in love with. Be happy!"

"I'm not-" Harry didn't even bother lying to himself, and tailed off. Forlornly, he made his way to his seat, and sat down next to Draco, who already had his things on the desk.

"Morning," Harry said, feeling awkward at how formal he sounded. Draco looked shocked at the acknowledgement of his existence and took a second to answer.

"...Hi."

Harry spent the entire lesson trying to think of how to ask Draco if he could go to the guest room after school to talk. The more he thought about it, the stupider he felt. He was just experimenting with the possibility of writing a note instead when suddenly, as if from very far away, he heard his name being called.

"Potter? The answer?"

Harry jerked back into reality to see the whole class staring at him, and Snape glaring with unhidden disgust.

"I- I'm sorry, Professor?"

"What is the answer to the question I just asked you, boy?"

The worst part was that Snape was enjoying watching him flounder. Then, the faintest whisper came from his left.

"Toad skin."

"Toad skin!" Harry almost yelled. Snape raised an eyebrow, and returned to the blackboard. Automatically Harry turned to Draco.

"Thanks," he began to smile, before realising who he was talking to and stopping himself, turning slightly red. Draco was also colouring.

"No problem." He said finally, and returned to his note-taking. Harry watched him, feeling as though he were about to jump from a very high place without a parachute. Just do it, Harry...

Harry cleared his throat. "Draco-"

Draco was looking at him with eyes that didn't know whether to be happy or afraid.

"-Could you come to the guest room after school? I want to talk to you."

Suddenly it occurred to Harry that Draco might not want to come. Maybe he had left it too long, maybe-

"Sure," Draco said in what must have been a neutral tone, and went back to his notes. Harry saw that his hands were shaking enough to make his usually neat handwriting look scrawled. He looked away, back to his own notes, and was startled to find out he was shaking, too.
Every time Draco heard footsteps outside the door, he jumped. It was just like Harry to be late, but really? This time?

Another set of steps thumped into Draco's head. He sighed, rubbing a weary hand against his temple. Please, Merlin, he thought, let him listen to me this time. Let this be over.

Then, a new set of footsteps approached. They didn't pass by, but instead stopped outside the door. Draco's heart froze. The person outside the door sighed tiredly, then said in an unreadable voice;

"Limerence."

Draco stood up as Harry entered the room, wiping his hands nervously on his jeans. Harry looked at him, and then quickly away, as if looking was forbidden. He hadn't brought a bag with him.

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but caught himself. It seemed right to let Harry make the first move. Silence drowned them.

"So..." Harry started, finally. He did his little look again, at, and then away from, Draco. Maybe he thought Draco would disappear if he looked at him too long. Draco wished he could. Harry started again. "I-" he ran a hand through his hair, looking distressed. "I was wondering if you could maybe - I mean, if you want to... if you could, please, explain what happened?"

Draco almost smiled, but stopped himself firmly, not wanting to believe that there might be a chance. "Of course," He said, nodding. "Of course."

They stood awkwardly, the sofa seeming too familiar, the desk and wooden chairs too proper. Draco, deciding just to stand, gave a jerky nod, and stood a little taller. There didn't seem to be an appropriate way to start, so he just did.

"Okay. About a week before the quidditch match, I got a letter from my father. He had heard from Sev- from Professor Snape, that... well... that you and I had been getting very close lately. My father wouldn't have minded in normal circumstances because, of course, he wants me to have friends in high places. But things aren't normal anymore. I mean, The Dark Lord is sleeping in our guest room, for Merlin's sake." The not-joke hung between them like stale air. Draco rubbed a tired hand over his face, and continued. "He was so angry with me. Of course, I understand why. But I couldn't do what he asked - I couldn't leave you." Draco took a deep breath, and looked at Harry. "So, I told him. I told him I couldn't hurt you. Ironic, isn't it? After what happened next."

"It was brave of you," Harry said, suddenly. It was breaking Draco's heart all over again to see the tears that already threatened to spill onto his cheeks, making his green eyes shine like precious stones. "To stand up to him like that."

"No." Draco shook his head. "It was just the right thing to do. Anyway. I sent him that letter, saying I wouldn't stop being friends with you. I got his letter back the day before the match. He said-" Draco broke off, not enjoying the memory of the day. "He said that if I didn't do it - if I didn't end whatever ties I had with you... He would kill Manimi. He said that Severus would be looking out, and if he didn't see any proof that we were no longer friends, he- he would kill her."

Harry didn't say anything for a long time. He was looking at the ground. Draco, having nothing else to say, watched Harry. It had been too long since he'd had the opportunity to look at Harry without feeling bad about it. Years seemed to pass before Harry looked up. He gave a shaky breath, and as he met Draco's eyes, Draco was shocked to see how upset he was. He looked like he was shattering into a million tiny fragments.
"I'm s- so sorry," He said, finally.

"You don't need to be.-"

"Yes, I do!" Harry burst out with surprising force. Furiously, he wiped the tears off his face. "I SHOULD HAVE PROTECTED YOU! I should have been there for you and heard you out but I didn't and.-"

Without consciously deciding to, Draco found himself walking to Harry and pulling him into his arms. Harry collapsed against him, dissolving into sobs and holding Draco so tightly that he couldn't breathe.

"Y- you had to make that choice, I shouldn't have put you in that p- position," Harry sobbed. It wasn't only the anger at himself, Draco knew, but it was the months of misery that they had both endured, finally leaving Harry's body in the form of tears. Draco shut his eyes, and was surprised to feel his own tears hot on his face.

"It doesn't matter," He soothed. "Shhhh, it's fine, Harry. Really, it's fine."

"But I hurt you! I let you go b- back to that house when I knew you weren't safe! I L- LET YOUR OWN FATHER TORTURE YOU! All because you s- said something at a Quidditch match!"

"You didn't know. You were just hurt." Tears stung in Draco's eyes and it was everything he could do not to start sobbing with Harry. But he had to be the strong one this time. He had a hand on Harry's head, his thumb stroking the mess of hair. He focussed on the action. "Shhh," he calmed. "Shhh,"

Draco felt Harry's hands grip the material of his shirt, holding him together. He focused on stroking Harry's hair, on not crying, on keeping himself steady. Slowly, he felt the sobs subside into shaking, hiccupping breaths, and then to a slow, steady in and out of air. Finally, after an eternal smudge of time, Harry pulled back to look at Draco, eyes still a little bloodshot, and wiped the half-dry tears off his face.

"I really am so, so sorry, Draco," He said, barely whispering. Draco's heart tugged. "Please forgive me."

Draco said nothing. Instead, he held Harry's face in his hands, and kissed him.

It felt like the first time, but without the fear of uncertainty. The room, the castle, the entire world, all were suddenly nothing, and the only thing that truly existed was the feeling of Harry - the chapped lips, the taste of salt and dried tears, but above all, the feeling of coming home to something warm and familiar. The kiss became increasingly frantic, as both boys truly realised how much they had missed each other. They sank into each other, into the bed, as hands went first to hair, then to shirts, then to belt buckles, jeans. They barely noticed the clothes come off. All they noticed was each other, and that was all they needed.
Draco looked beautiful when he was asleep. The lines of worry that were almost permanent on his forehead disappeared, making him look younger and happier. Harry loved how perfectly they fit together, and how it felt to have Draco in his arms. It felt good to feel like he was protecting his boyfriend.

The greenish morning light swam through the lake into the window - no one had thought to draw the curtains last night - and shone in Draco's hair, illuminating him and making him look emerald-tinted and ethereal. Harry felt like he could look at him forever and never get bored. It was like an intricate painting - you saw more as you looked.

Draco shuffled a little, making little sleepy noises, and Harry couldn't stop the grin from spreading across his face. He had forgotten what it felt like to be so happy. Draco slowly opened his eyes, and looked confused for a moment. Then he looked up and their eyes met, and Draco gave a heartbreakingly adorable, drowsy little smile.

"Morning," He said, yawning and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Not long," Said Harry, catching Draco's yawn as he said it. "I only woke up a minute or two before you." He smiled. "You look really beautiful when you're asleep."

"Well then, I'm sure you won't mind if I go back to sleep, then?" Draco said happily, snuggling back up to Harry and closing his eyes.

"Actually, Draco," Harry said, looking at his watch, "It's a school day, and if we're late together then-"

"Stay. Here." Draco said, wrapping an arm around Harry as though to pin him down. Harry tried to resist the urge to just let him sleep, but it was hard when Draco was looking at him with that hilariously cute sleepy-pout. Harry sighed.

"Come on, don't make me rip the covers off."

"No, please!"

"I will,"

"You wouldn't!"

Harry grabbed the covers and threw them away, making Draco shriek. Then Harry turned very red as he remembered that they were both completely naked. Draco looked at him with a wicked grin. "See what you get for defying me? Naked and afraid!"

Harry laughed. "Shut up. You sleep for a minute while I get dressed if you want, but you need to get up soon."

"'Kay, mum," Draco said sarcastically.

"Please don't call me mum," Harry grinned as he replaced the covers over Draco and stood up to look for his boxers. "It's really weird, considering-"
"Yeah, yeah, I got it." Draco said, sleepily.

Harry dressed quickly, despite having to hunt for each item of clothing as they appeared to have been thrown to various locations in the room. As he searched, he also made a pile of the clothes he found belonging to Draco. Once he had all his clothes on, he walked to the bed.

"Draco?"

"Mmmh... go 'way" Draco murmured into the pillow.

"Don't make me rip off the covers again. I will, you know," Harry threatened, smiling despite himself.

"You're a horrible person, Potter." Draco groaned, sitting up. "Go on then. Pass me my clothes."

"If I'm so horrible," Harry said as Draco started pulling clothes on under the covers, "why did I just wake up in the same bed as you?"

"Because," Draco pulled Harry towards him by his tie and kissed him, "Despite your horribleness," He kissed him again, "you make me the happiest person in the world."

Harry grinned. "Good to know the feeling's mutual," He said, happily.

After Draco had performed some yoga-like movements to put on his trousers under the covers - it apparently being too cold to get out until fully clothed - he stood up and gave Harry a look that was devoid of the sarcasm and humour of moments ago. "We're... We're alright now, aren't we?"


Draco nodded emphatically. "I missed you too. You don't even know how much."

Softly, Harry kissed him, savouring the touch and the memories it brought of the night before. "I love you. I never once stopped loving you, and I never will," he said, fiercely. Draco put a hand on his face, looking at him intently.

"I love you too. Always."

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"Where were you last night?" Ron said through a mouthful of cornflakes, watching Harry suspiciously.

"Yeah, Harry, what were you doing?" Asked Hermione mischievously, raising one eyebrow. Harry looked at her in faux-aggravation.

"Well, I wanted to go on a walk before it got too late, but if you must know I felt really hungry so I went to see Dobby. I accidentally fell asleep on the sofa in the kitchen because I was exhausted, and woke up there in the morning."

Hermione snorted as she drank her tea and Ron looked between them, confused. "Is there something I'm missing here?" he asked, dubiously.

"No, no," Hermione said happily, "I just choked on my tea. Still half asleep. Shall we head to Transfiguration?"

Ron, looking slightly miffed, made no more of the matter, and the trio headed from the hall a few
moments later. Hermione looked at him innocently. "What's that bruise on your neck, Harry darling?"

"Must have fallen off the sofa in the night," Harry said darkly, shooting her a look. She just grinned at him.

"That must have been rather unpleasant for you."

Harry didn't merit her an answer and instead engaged Ron in conversation as they entered McGonagall's class. He made a big effort to resist looking at Draco, who was sitting just behind him, Ron and Hermione. Whenever he did chance a glance, Draco seemed in deep conversation with Blaise and Pansy. The class passed in the normal way for transfiguration, and presently first period was over. Harry was getting his stuff together when Draco drifted over and said, casually,

"Weasel, it's a wonder you haven't done a Seamus and blown yourself up yet. What were you doing to that beetle? Trying to ask it out?"

Surreptitiously, Harry watched Draco drop a piece of paper into his bag, which was open by his desk on the floor.

"To be honest, maybe a beetle would be below your standards," Draco shot a pointed glance at Hermione, "If you can call them standards, anyway."

Ron was going red and clenching his fists, while Hermione looked at Harry, eyebrows raised. "What do you know about standards, Malfoy?" Ron spat, "The closest thing you have to a girlfriend is that pug you seem to think is a person, and actually, even Pansy doesn't seem that interested in you anymore. I think that kiss you had at the ball probably scared her away - you probably taste like shit."

"For your information, Weasley, I have excellent standards, which is why I can tell you truthfully that-"

"Malfoy," Harry said in warning tones, "Back. Off."

With his back turned to his friends, Harry allowed his eyes to plead with Draco though his tone stayed cold. Draco looked at him with a perfect Malfoy poker face. Then, Blaise's voice broke the pretence.

"Draco, stop conversing with the riff-raff. We've got a class to go to."

Draco shot Ron a look, then turned to Blaise, who gave Harry a smirk that almost could have been sarcastically friendly before the two walked away.

"The bastard," Ron said darkly as they made their way to divination, Hermione having split off to go to ancient runes. "One of these days, I swear..."

"I know," Harry said half-heartedly, not making eye contact. "Total git."

When they got to Trelawney's heavily incensed class, Harry allowed himself to take a peak at Draco's note.

*Harry,
Our place, 7?*
D x
"But does he have to be a total dickhead?" Hermione asked, huffily. "Can't he be nice?"

They sat together in their usual place around the common room fire. Ron was getting a book from the library, and Harry had decided to use the time to fill Hermione in instead of going with him. After Harry had explained to her what Draco had told him the night before, and the initial shock of the situation had worn off, she had moved on to getting annoyed at Draco for the earlier episode in transfigurations. Harry looked heavenwards.

"Okay, Hermione. One, the Slytherins would get suspicious and tell their parents, who would tell Draco's dad, who would kill Manimi. Bad, right? Two, Ron would get very suspicious, which could mean bad luck as well. Three, he needs a reason to come over so that he can give me notes, like he did today."

Hermione sighed, still looking disgruntled. "I know. It's just that I hate how mean he is to Ron. Surely you do, too?"

Harry nodded. "Course I don't like it, but to make an omelette you have to break eggs." Hermione was silent. Harry gave way. "Look, I'll set up some sort of ground rules about what he can make insults about and what he can't. That way, he can still be mean, but it won't be about family stuff and that sort of thing."

Hermione nodded. "I guess that's the best I can hope for."

They were silent for a moment. Then, a mischievous grin appeared on Hermione's face.

"So, what was it like?" She asked, conspiratorially.

"What was what like?"

"You know..." she giggled. Harry was slightly frightened of girls when they giggled. "Last night. Did you... you know?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Why do I get the feeling that you're living vicariously through me?"

"Because I am." She grinned. "This is the most fun I've had in ages, and it's not even me doing it."

Unwittingly, Harry returned her smile. "It was..." He searched for the right words. "actually, it was incredible."

"How far did you go?" She whispered, and Harry felt his cheeks colour.

"How far do you think, considering the fact that I was out all night?" He said, caught between being awkward and defensive.

"Was that the first time?"She asked, not paying attention to how uncomfortable he was.

"We'd done stuff before... but yeah, that was the first time we did... that." Harry's whole face was burning. Hermione looked overjoyed.

"I knew you just needed to give him a chance. Ooh, I'm so happy for you two!"

"Me too," Harry admitted softly. "You don't know how much I missed him."

Hermione nodded, looking a little more serious. "You were very brave to see his side and work it
out. That's a sign of a good relationship, you know - having an argument but getting over it."

Harry hoped she was right. He didn't know if he was strong enough to deal with losing Draco again.

"But," Harry decided to voice the thing that had been troubling him all day, "There's just one thing that I'm really worried about."

"What?"

"Well, you know I kissed Cho that time..."

Hermione's hand went to her mouth. "Oh gosh, I'd totally forgotten about that..."

"I've been trying to," Harry agreed, darkly. "I'll have to tell him about it, but god knows it's scaring the life out of me. Do you suppose he'll see my side of it? I mean, I did kiss her..."

Hermione looked thoughtfull. "I'm sure he'll understand. It might take him a minute, though. You need to do it sooner, rather than later, so that it doesn't escalate."

"That's what I'm going to do," Harry said, standing up, "Speaking of which, I actually have a date to go to, so if you'll excuse me,"

"yes, yes, go." Hermione shooed him away with her hand. "Have fun, stay safe, use protection-"

"'Mione!"

0o0oDraco0o0o

"Hey D- Manimi!" Harry exclaimed as he walked into the Guest Room. Draco grinned as he watched his boyfriend sit cross-legged on the floor and hiss to Manimi, who was hissing back animatedly. The silver sounds of Parseltongue drifted to him, sending shivers down his spine, and he had to shake himself a little. Now was not the time.

Draco didn't mind being ignored a little. In fact, he enjoyed it. While Harry talked to Manimi, Draco slid a sliver of charcoal and his sketchbook out of his schoolbag. Pulling his knees close to his chest and relaxing into the sofa to get comfortable, he started with Harry's slightly crooked, upturned nose, moving to his eyebrows and well-defined cupids bow, then sketching the eyes, the scatter of barely-there freckles, and glasses. He got caught up putting detail into the lips as they wrapped around the strange sounds of Parseltongue. Harry caught Draco's eyes and looked to the drawing pad.

"Can I see?"

"Not until it's finished, and only if I like it." Draco smiled. "Just keep talking."

He drew the beginnings of shoulders and torso, then smudged the charcoal into soft shadowy lines and set about outlining with much finer strokes to capture the details. Finally, he rubbed out highlights in Harry's eyes, the apples of his cheeks, and his hair.

The finished drawing was the best he had done of Harry so far. The hair was perfectly messy, the lopsided grin just right. Draco smiled, happy with the result, and slid the sketchbook across the floor to Harry. He picked it up in a way that allowed Manimi to see it too, and they examined it together. Finally, Harry said something to Manimi, who hissed a reply.

"She's offended that you didn't include her, and asks is she's 'getting fat or something?'" Harry grinned. Draco laughed and looked at Manimi.
"My darling Manimi, you are the most beautiful snake in the world, and I promise to draw you very soon." He looked at Harry. "I'm afraid I was just distracted this time."

Harry looked at Manimi, who hissed again. "She says that she forgives you this time, but if you don't watch out, there will be trouble."

"I'll bare that in mind," Draco laughed. "And Harry? What do you think?"

Harry looked at the drawing again, thoughtfully. "It's really good, Draco. And I'm flattered you think I'm so good looking - my hair looks less hip and more like a bird's nest, if you ask me."

Draco grinned. "I just draw what I see."

Harry said something to Manimi - possibly asking permission to pick her up - then carried her and the sketchbook to join Draco on the sofa.

"Sorry, I've totally been ignoring you," Harry said with an apologetic smile.

"Nah, you've just missed Manimi," Draco said, happily, "What was she saying?"

"Well, she met a really horrible grass snake last night who yelled at her for doing nothing, but she also caught a rat, so that was good," Harry looked at Manimi, "She is very happy for us, and she is pleased you're drawing again..." Harry stopped, looking puzzled. "Why did you stop drawing?"

Draco looked down at the sketchbook in his hands. "When you... when we weren't speaking, I couldn't draw. I don't know what it was, but I just couldn't. This one," He pointed to the drawing of Harry, "Is the first I've done since then."

Harry looked at Draco solemnly. Manimi hissed something gently, and Harry hissed a reply before saying, "She thinks it's right that I was the first person you drew. Sort of like coming full circle."

Manimi made her way over to Draco, coiled around herself until she was just a little bundle on Draco's leg, and went to sleep. Draco watched her. "She's right, of course."

The two talked, the only contact between them being their interlocked hands resting on the back of the sofa. There was a lot to catch up on. Haltingly, Draco told Harry what had happened when Harry had felt the pain in his stomach through the ring - which made Harry feel even worse that he hadn't been there to protect Draco. Harry revealed what had happened the night that he'd had the vision. They talked about everything. Eventually, Manimi uncoiled herself and informed them that she needed to go out hunting now. Draco got up to open the door for her, and with a nervous, lurching feeling, Harry realised that it was time to tell him about Cho.

"Draco," Harry began nervously, "There's something I need to tell you." Draco sat down next to him and looked at him quizzically.

"What is it?"

"Well, you know the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes that I've been teaching?" Draco nodded. "And you know Cho Chang in Ravenclaw?" Again, Draco nodded, this time looking slightly suspicious. Harry took a moment to breathe.

"Well, it was the last class we would be doing before Christmas. I stayed behind to tidy up, and she sort of hung back. Then all of a sudden she was crying and talking about Cedric," Draco looked worried at this - he knew how much Cedric's death had affected Harry. "So I sort of said the usual stuff, you know, 'yes, he was a great wizard', etcetera, etcetera. She looked at me a bit weirdly, and I
think I must have been giving the wrong impression because..." Harry looked at Draco, apology in his eyes, "She kissed me."

Draco seemed to retreat within himself. "What did you do?"

Harry sighed. "I kissed her back- but Draco, I didn't want to kiss her, I wanted to kiss you! I was just angry with you and myself and the world and so, so sad, and on top of it all I was really numb, and I just wanted to feel something again." Harry knew his tone had become pleading, but he couldn't help it. "I'm so sorry, Draco."

Draco didn't look at him for a long time. He was hugging his knees to his chest and looking at the ground, clearly deep in thought. Harry allowed him the time to think in silence.

Finally, Draco looked at him. He looked right into Harry's eyes and held his gaze, unblinking. Harry made himself hold the contact. Draco shut his eyes briefly, then turned to sit cross-legged facing Harry. He didn't look angry, but he didn't not look angry, either.

"Thank you for telling me," Draco said, briskly. Then, he seemed to rearrange his thoughts, and his gaze softened. "Look, I don't think it should matter that much. I can understand why you did it. Sometimes I was tempted to do the same, and I can't tell you truthfully that I wouldn't have kissed her, had I been in your situation." Harry let out a breath that he hadn't realised he had been holding. "Don't think it doesn't piss me off to think about you kissing somebody else," Draco continued. "Because it does. But yeah. I forgive you."

"Thank you," Harry said, pulling Draco into a tight hug. "I was really worried about that."

"Good." Draco said, smirking. "You had to suffer for a bit, so we're even." Harry laughed and kissed him, feeling much lighter without the weight of the secret bearing down upon him. When they broke apart, Draco looked at him with eyes that had turned the dark blue of a stormy sky. Harry kissed him again, and together, they fell back into the sofa.

A/N: Wow, what a long chapter by my standards. You have no idea how much I wanted to make Harry say: "WE WERE ON A BREAK!!!!". Ah, Friends... Anyway, I have realised that I can't write smut very well, and I don't really enjoy doing it, so sorry to any of you who came here for sex, but I don't know if I'll be delivering on that anytime soon. Also, I'm studying SO MUCH at the moment, and I am trying to write but I have to prioritise exams, so if I don't update for a while, that's why. This has been an oddly long A/N... see you next chapter I guess.

Much love, Evie.

Ps. Thanks for all the votes and reviews, it makes my day to see that people are actually enjoying this crazy little story of mine.
Part Three - Chapter Twelve

Every pulse of blood felt like a hammer breaking into Harry's skull. Why did he have to do occlumency with Snape? Surely Dumbledore trusted him enough to- Harry halted the flow of thoughts there. There was no point in wondering why Dumbledore did what he did, and thinking about it would only make his headache worse.

His footsteps echoed harshly on the stone floor and he thanked whoever was listening that there were no students around to hear them - he was in too much pain to walk slowly.

"Illunga," He said, before realising that that hadn't been the password for more than a year. He shook himself. "Limerence." The door opened.

"How was it?" Draco asked concernedly, coming over to Harry and looking him over. "Is it your head again?"

Harry just nodded, allowing the invisibility cloak he had been wearing to drop to the floor. It was his fourth lesson with Snape, and they had fallen into something like a routine. First, the lesson. Then, briefly, the Guest Room. Finally, Gryffindor Tower - but only once the headache had died down a little. As they sat down on the cushy sofa, Draco handed Harry one of his miracle-working headache potions. He gulped it down, and felt what was like a trickle of warm, soothing water running down the inside of his skull. The pounding lifted, and he gave a sigh of relief.

"Better?" Draco asked.

"Much," Harry nodded. Draco leant into Harry and rested his head against his shoulder, while Harry put an arm around him. For a while, neither said anything, just existing with each other.

"You know," Draco started eventually, "We haven't slept - and I mean, literally slept - together very often, but whenever we do I fall asleep like that," He clicked his fingers. "Which is odd because I very rarely sleep like that anywhere."

Harry thought for a moment. "Well, usually you'll be quite tired by the time we're actually going to sleep if we do sleep together." He winked a Draco, who rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, I did think of that," He continued, "but I don't think that's it. I'm very tired all the time, and usually, it doesn't make any difference." He looked at Harry. "I was thinking about it while I was waiting for you to finish your lesson. I think it's because I feel so much safer in here that anywhere else. I can't sleep in the dorm because I don't feel safe there. Same goes with the Manor - especially now. But when I'm here, it all seems to melt away." He smiled up at Harry, his left cheek dimpling the way Harry loved so much, and said, "I guess being with you just makes me feel really safe."

Harry grinned stupidly. "Thank you," He said, laughing a little embarrassedly. Draco shrugged, snuggling into Harry closing his eyes.

"You don't need to thank me for telling the truth," He said, smilingly.

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Harry knew he should go. Ron would be getting suspicious, Hermione worried, and anyway, he really should try to get a good night's sleep. But Draco looked so sweet and peaceful when he was asleep that Harry really couldn't bear to wake him up, and as he was using Harry's lap as a pillow, there wasn't any way that Harry could escape. Absent-mindedly, Harry ran his fingers through
Draco's hair, feeling happy that he didn't slick it back anymore. Sleepily, he twirled a strand of hair around his fingers, loving the way the murky light from the pond playing tricks across his boyfriend's skin. Draco's hands clenched in his sleep and his brows furrowed. Harry wondered what he was dreaming about in a tired, abstract sort of way. Then Draco made a sort of whimpering noise.

"Please," He murmured, "No- st... no,"

Harry looked at him, confused. "Draco?" He asked, softly. Draco was shaking his head.

"Hurts..." he murmured again, covering his face with his hands. Harry shook his shoulder gently, worried that touching him would translate badly into the dream.

"Draco..." He said, louder. "Draco, wake up,"

Draco jerked awake and sat up quickly, looking wildly around. "What-" His voice broke and the word turned into a sob. "What?"

"Shhh," Harry pulled Draco towards him, holding him tightly. "You were just having a bad dream. You're safe here with me. Nothing can hurt you."

Draco buried his head in the crook of Harry's neck. "It felt so real," He whispered. He sounded very young.

"It was just a nightmare," Harry soothed, stroking his hair. "You're not there;"

"But that's just it!" Draco said, angrily. He looked at Harry, viciously wiping the tears from his face. "I'm safe until I walk out of here. Sooner or later I'm going to have to go back home, back to him," His voice caught. "I'll never be safe, Harry. I'll never escape."

A silence stretched between them as Harry grasped for something, anything to say. Draco looked at him and sniffed.

"I'm sorry," He said, shaking his head. "You shouldn't have to worry about this, you've got other things to think about."

"No, don't say that," Harry said firmly, and took Draco's hands. "Don't ever not tell me something because you're worried about me, okay? I can deal with it. I want to know."

Draco nodded, not meeting Harry's eyes. Harry sighed.

"Look, it won't be like this forever. You can leave home when you're seventeen, then you'll be free to do what you want. We can be together when this is all over."

"I can't leave home when I'm seventeen!" Draco burst out. "I can leave home when an arranged marriage has been set up between me and some other pureblood, and then I can move into some other house, but it'll be the same prison, just in a different place." It was as though a barrier had broken. The words poured out of him and Harry wondered how long Draco had been keeping this locked away. "Don't you see, Harry? I signed on to a lifetime of this when I was born pureblood. I can't escape."

"You will." Harry insisted. "I'll find a way to be with you. I won't let your dad have control over you. You'll see. I promise." He placed a hand on Draco's cheek. "I love you." He added, fiercely. A tear clung to Draco's eyelashes, then fell.

"When will you understand," he said in a broken voice, "That that isn't enough."
"What's wrong?" Blaise asked Draco as they sat in the great hall. Draco stabbed at his vegetables with his fork.

"Two things," he said, mouth full of food. He swallowed and continued in a low voice. "One - the worried looks Harry keeps giving me. Two - I still haven't decided what to get him for Valentine's day, and I only have tomorrow."


"Maybe, but getting his something as simple as chocolate is like saying 'fuck you', you know? It's such a normal gift, there's no thoughtfulness."

"You'll think of something. It's a Hogsmeade weekend, we'll go window shopping while he's with Chang." Blaise sipped his tea. He always had tea after dinner, never dessert. "On the subject of her, why are you okay with your man going on a date with someone else? A girl, at that."

"Because it's going to be incredibly awkward, and she won't want another date. It solves the problem."

"Did he come up with that?"

"No, me. Why?"

"It's very Slytherin, I would have been surprised if it had been him." Blaise looked over at the Gryffindor table, where Harry was chatting earnestly with Ron. "Why do you think he's giving you funny looks?"

Draco sighed. "We were hanging out the other day and I dozed off. Had a bad dream."

"About your...?" Blaise gestured.

"Yeah." Draco nodded. Then sighed. "He thinks that love solves all the problems, that he can make it go away. And I wish he could. But that's not how life works." They shared a look, Blaise's normally cool face betraying worry. "He's a Gryffindor. He wants to burst in, sweep me off my feet, and slay the dragon before riding off into the sunset. And it hurts him that there's nothing he can do."

Draco looked around, realising where they were. "Look, we should talk about this later, not here."

"Okay." Blaise nodded and changed the subject. "So, did I tell you what Vincent asked me earlier?"

"What?"

"Whether a cucumber was a fruit or... 'that other thing'." They both started to laugh, and the tension dissipated.

Later, they sat together in their favourite spot by the fire, the other Slytherins having eventually retreated to their respective dorms.

"About... what we were saying earlier," Blaise began as the last first years trickled out of the common room. "It came as a shock to me too when I realised just how bad it was. Maybe he just needs some time to get used to it."

Draco nodded. "It'll get better. I just wish that he wouldn't talk about things the way he does. It just
makes me sadder when he tries to be all optimistic."

"Why?"

Draco shook his head. "It's hard to put into words. It's just that..." He thought. "It makes me sad when he's optimistic because it will hurt him more when he realises that he can't save me. And it makes me sad because it makes me think about my future. We can't afford optimism - it just makes the truth hurt more."

"What if he's right, though?" Blaise asked, leaning forward in his chair. "He might be able to do something."

"No!" Draco swiped the air with his hand. "It's useless to think like that. I've accepted what my life will be, it's time that you did too."

Neither spoke for a long time. The fire, tinted green, crackled happily into the awkward silence.

"You know," Blaise eventually started, then paused. Finally, he spoke. "Look. Slytherin isn't the warmest house, and I know that a lot of the time friendships aren't really friendships here." He appeared to search for the right words. "I just want you to know that you're my best friend. And I don't mean that in a Slytherin way. I mean it in a Hufflepuff way."

Draco looked at Blaise in surprise, turning a little red. They never said this sort of stuff. He swallowed. "Thanks for standing by me and being okay with me being who I am, and for being my best friend. I don't know where I'd be without you."

Silence hung between them for a moment. Then Blaise loudly cleared his throat. "...Anyway,

0o0oHarry0o0o

"They get closer to catching us every time!" Harry said as Draco stepped into the Guest Room.

"Well, hello to you too," Draco laughed. "I am trying to stop them, but there's only so much I can do. And did you have to have a DA meeting today? I wanted to see you, not pretend to hate you. And wasn't it awkward with Chang there?"

"She didn't come, I think I upset her a bit on our 'date'," Harry came over to Draco and kissed him. "Hi, by the way,"

"So, you get me something nice?" Draco asked as they sat down together on the sofa.

"No, of course not." Harry said, seriously, "We weren't going to do that."

"...What?" Draco looked abashed. Harry laughed.

"Relax, Draco. 'Course I got you something."

"Why do I bother?" Draco shook his head as Harry pulled a wrapped present out of his bag. He hadn't been sure what to get Draco, but while he and Hermione had window shopped they had come across some things he hoped would do.

"There you go," He said, passing it to Draco. "I tried really hard to wrap it nicely for you."

"Aw, thanks Harry," Draco said smilingly as he carefully picked open the spellotaped parcel.
"Brushes!"

"See, I saw all these enchanted brushes in the art shop," Harry explained, "But in the end, I don't think you need enchantments to help you with art, so I just got you nice non-magic ones. The label said they were badger haired. I hope they're good, I don't know much about art..."

"They're lovely!" Draco threw his arms around Harry. "Thank you!"

"There's another one, too," Harry nodded at the parcel. Draco looked inside and found a small white tube.

"I know you like your hands to be nice," Harry smiled. "And this hand cream looked really good. It's meant to have charmed ingredients, though I don't know what difference that makes. I'm not a hand cream kind of guy myself. But I hoped... yeah."

Draco undid the lid on the tube and sniffed. "It smells delicious!" He exclaimed. "Thank you. They're wonderful. And I'll be using them all the time."

"That's what I hoped," Harry smiled, kissing Draco's head.

"Yours now!" Draco exclaimed, diving into his satchel and retrieving Harry's present, which was immaculately wrapped in silver paper.

"How do you make it so neat?" Asked Harry, and Draco leant closer, adopting a conspiratorial whisper.

"The secret is to get the shop assistant to do it for you."

"Ah, of course!" Harry laughed. "Shame it doesn't last." Ripping the present open, he grinned at the contents. "Hey, this is exactly what I was planning to get myself!"

"I'm just a genius," Draco shrugged, "I can't help it."

Draco had got him a beautiful shaving kit - the exact one that Harry had thought about buying while out with Hermione that day. Draco put his head on Harry's shoulder. "So you like it?"

"Love it," Harry grinned at him. "Thank you."

"It was really in my own interest," Draco smiled. "I didn't want to be kissing any sort of stubble."

"How Slytherin of you," Harry laughed. He looked out of the underwater window. The light of the setting sun came through the water of the lake in greenish rays, making the room look ethereal. "You remember the first time we kissed?" He asked, almost without meaning too.

"Yeah," Draco smiled. "God, it's been ages now, hasn't it?"

"A year and a half, give or take?" Harry thought aloud. "I wish we knew the exact date, so we could have an anniversary."

"I don't know when our first kiss was, but I apologised to you on the twenty-seventh of February last year," Draco said. "So it's been thirteen days under a year."

"Wow, you remember that?" Harry gaped. Draco shrugged.

"It was important. I totally forgot to think about our anniversary. But we can do something if you want?"
"You know what I want to do?" Harry asked, then continued without waiting for an answer. "I want for us to walk into Hogsmeade holding hands, and I take you to honeydukes. We splurge on sweets, then head around all the different shops together, in public, without being scared, before heading back to the Hogshead for butterbeer and some proper food. And I kiss you all I want without being scared of someone seeing us, and I'm allowed to be in love with you. That's what I want to do."

Draco looked at him sadly, and Harry sighed. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Draco placed a hand on Harry's face. "I'm happy that I'm here, with you. I don't need anything else."

Covering Draco's hand with his own, Harry closed his eyes and tried to feel the same way. Then he smiled. "Let's not get sad," He grinned, kissing Draco. "We've got all this time to ourselves."

"Oh no," Draco smirked and raised an eyebrow. "Whatever will we do to fill it?"
"Happy anniversary!" Harry called as he entered the guest room, before looking around and realising that Draco wasn't there yet and that he had just shouted into an empty room. Feeling like a bit of an idiot, Harry dropped the invisibility cloak to the side and was about to take a seat at the desk when the door burst open once more and Draco flew into his arms.

"Happy anniversary!" Draco cried, mimicking Harry's words of moments before, and Harry smiled as hugged Draco back, tightly. He smelt fresh, and was wearing just a hint of Harry's favourite cologne, which made Harry smile. Then he stopped, looking surprised.

"Draco, you're nearly as tall as I am!" He exclaimed, looking Draco up and down. "How did I not notice that yet? Oh, this is really weird,"

"Before you know it, I'll be taller than you," Draco grinned. Harry shook his head.

"Not a chance. I'll put a shrinking spell on you if I have to." He said seriously. They both laughed.

"Anyway," Harry continued, "I know we decided against presents, but-

"Harry!" Chastised Draco, "But I haven't got a present for you! Now I feel awful!"

"No, no, don't worry, it's not a present," Harry reassured. "It's a surprise."

"Oh thank Merlin," Draco sighed, looking relieved. "What is it?"

"A surprise." Harry laughed at Draco's exasperation. "I need your broom though - bloody Umbridge has mine. Could you get it? You can have the cloak if you want. Oh- and you might want to get the scarf I got you, too."

Draco, perplexed, retrieved his broom and scarf from the Slytherin dorm under the cloak. "You going to tell me what it is now?" He asked as he returned.

"Patience," Harry smiled. "Get under the cloak - if we both hunch over it should cover our feet - because we're going out!"

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Not that this isn't sweet of you, but we'll definitely be seen if we go flying around, Harry."

"Nope, I've got other stuff planned. Just follow me."

"If we get caught..." Draco muttered.

"We won't. Come on. And if we do get caught, just show your face and we'll be left alone. Umbridge loves you."

"I will kill you, Harry."

"No, you won't," Harry smiled as they slipped from the room on silent feet, hidden under the cloak.

The fact that the astronomy tower had no glass in its large arched windows had been a source of annoyance for cold students since Hogwarts had been founded, but tonight, Harry was thankful for it. He slid the invisibility cloak off.
"Harry, what are we doing?" Draco whispered anxiously, wrapping the scarf around his neck as the cold of the room sank in.

"Can the broom take both of us?" Harry asked, ignoring the question and looking out of the window. He was pleased to see that the stars looked brilliant.

"Yes, but-"

"Then trust me, and get on the broom," Harry said, then quickly added, "Please."

Sighing, Draco mounted the broom behind Harry and held on tightly to his waist. "If I die, I'll kill you." He said, not really sounding angry. Harry grinned.

"What's with all the death threats tonight?" He laughed, then added, "Brace yourself."

Slowly, being careful to keep the broom as steady as possible, Harry flew them out of the paneless window and felt Draco grip his sides hard as he looked down at the dizzying drop. Manoeuvring the broom, Harry climbed higher, then lowered them down onto the gently sloping roof of the tower. The flight had barely taken thirty seconds.

"Harry!" Draco exclaimed as he dismounted, "You didn't have to do this!"

Set up on the roof was a quilt blanket covered in the Gryffindor covers and two grey throw pillows, beside which sat a record player, vinyl disk, and a steaming teapot with two large mugs. Harry grinned sheepishly.

"I wanted to take you on a date, so-"

Draco hugged him tightly, and kissed him on the cheek. "It's wonderful, Harry. Thank you."

"Let's sit down," Harry took a seat on one of the pillows. Then, more as an afterthought, waved his wand to cast a warming spell. Draco sat next to him and laced their fingers together, looking up at the sky.

"What an excellent night to do this," He said quietly. "You can see all the stars. And the moon's almost full. It looks huge over the forest, doesn't it?"

"It reminds me of that night we went flying last year. You remember?"

"The time you damn near gave me a heart attack? Yes, I recall," Draco laughed. Harry handed him a mug of hot chocolate, and he let go of Harry's hand to cradle the warm cup.

"Courtesy of Dobby," Harry smiled as he poured a mug for himself.

"I would ask you to tell him thank you, but I doubt he would appreciate it from me,"

"I'll thank him for both of us," Harry reassured him, momentarily resting a hand on Draco's leg before going back to holding his mug for warmth. They both looked up at the sky.

"Which one's Draco?" Harry asked, gesturing to the stars with his hot chocolate. Draco's eyes moved back and forth for a moment as he searched the sky for the constellation that was his namesake, then pointed to an area just over the forest-covered mountains that surrounded Hogwarts.

"Over there,"

"Where?"
Draco moved closer to Harry and pressed his cheek against Harry's to see from his point of view. "See, if you follow my finger, it's those stars that curve around then back up, there," Harry followed Draco's fingers and thought he saw the ones he was talking about. "And then goes down, and those stars," He circled his finger, "make a sort of square at the bottom."

"Oh yeah!" Harry exclaimed delightedly as he made out the pattern.

"It doesn't ever set, so you can see it all year round," Draco rested his head on Harry's shoulder and looked at the constellation. "There are a few myths about it, but my favourite is the one that says that Draco was the dragon who guarded the tree of golden apples. The muggles call it mythology, but most wizard historians think it's a true story, as most Greek and Roman Myths are."

"It's beautiful," Harry said softly, and turned to Draco. "But you know what's more beautiful?"
"What?" Draco asked quietly.
"Me." Harry grinned, and laughed as Draco elbowed him. "Careful, I'll spill my hot chocolate!"
"You dickhead," Draco giggled.
"You love me," Harry smirked as he righted himself on his pillow once more.
"Yeah, I do," Draco said with a smile. "Can't think why, though."

Harry put a hand on the back of Draco's neck and kissed him, tasting hot chocolate. When they drew apart Draco rested his head on Harry's shoulder again, and they watched the sky.

"What's the record player for?" Draco asked, at length.
"I was hoping you'd ask that," Harry said, happily, and moved to set the record into place before sliding the needle over the disk and starting the music.

"Oh," Draco made a small sound of recognition as the song began.
"It's the song-"
"We first kissed to," Finished Draco quietly. He looked at Harry, and even after a year of looking, Harry felt the little lurch in his stomach.
"I had to sing to Hermione to find this song," Harry laughed. "Luckily Seamus had a record player, and I got Hermione to borrow the record from Lavander."

"What did I do to deserve you?" Draco asked, and Harry could see the moon reflected in his eyes as they looked at each other. And then they were kissing, mugs of hot chocolate left to grow cold beside them as the stars danced overhead.

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A/N: I love fluff. We all love fluff. Fluff is great. And I finished my exams, woo-hoo! -E

(Some of this was a bit inspired by this absolutely fantastic art by Upthehillart on tumblr/deviantart/instagram, please check her out she's such a bamf. Here's the picture: http://upthehillart.tumblr.com/post/144509116374/stargazing-%E5%BE%9F-inspired-by-anon-suggestion )
Blaise watched as Draco paced up and down the dorm, pulling his hand through his hair like a nervous tick.

"Calm down, Draco. I'm sure-"

"He'll be expelled!" Draco burst out. "I'll never see him again! They'll break his wand and send him back to be tortured by those godawful muggles-"

"Don't you think we would have heard by now if he had been expelled?" Blaise interrupted. "You know how news travels here. It barely took ten minutes for everyone to know that his little group had been caught, and that's nothing compared to Potter being chucked. Think about it, Draco. You're not being rational."

"What if he hates me?" Draco continued, unabashed by Blaise's logic. "It was me who caught him-but I had to! It would have seemed really suspicious if I hadn't when I was so nearby, and with Umbridge watching... But I told Dobby to warn them, surely that counts for something?" Draco looked beseechingly to Blaise, who came over to him and gripped him by the shoulders.

"Draco, listen to me. Potter isn't as stupid as he looks. He'll know you didn't want him to get caught. Even if you did, he might not even care because he loves you so much!"

"You think?" Draco asked quietly.

"I know. Potter is so clearly in love with you that it's a surprise the whole school isn't yet aware of it. He's not exactly subtle, is he?"

Draco smiled in spite of himself. Blaise gave him a pat on the cheek that was only half sarcastic and returned to his four-poster. They both jumped as Pansy strolled in, bearing her sharp-toothed grin.

"You do know this is a boy's dorm, right Pans?" Blaise drawled. Pansy stuck her tongue out at him.

"This is more important than gendered dorms, guys. You won't believe what's happened."

"What?" Draco asked sharply. "What's happened?"

"Dumbledore's gone!" She said with a slight cackle, and Draco relaxed again. "He took the blame for Potter and buggered off! Umbridge just told the Inquisitorial Squad members who she could find - myself included - to notify all the other members, so that's what I'm doing. Oh, and we've all decided as a group that Potter will be losing a substantial amount of points tomorrow, so be on the lookout for anything you can get him in trouble for." She seemed to say this all in one massive breath in her eagerness to share her news. Draco and Blaise shared a glance.

"What about Potter?" Blaise asked. "He got no reprimands?"

"Apparently not, so far's I've heard," Pansy shrugged, "hence the point-taking I just told you about."

Draco closed his eyes briefly, and then said, in a cold voice, "Shame. The stupid git deserves whatever he gets."

"I know," Pansy said sadly, "But what can you do?"

0o0o
In the days that followed, neither Draco nor Harry seemed to be able to get away from their housemates for more than a few minutes, and if it hadn't been for potions, Draco might have gone mad. As it was, Harry had managed to briefly explain the capture of the DA to Draco the morning after it had occurred as they worked on a potion together.

"So that's why Marietta was sent to the hospital wing. Granger can be a lot more violent than you would think, can't she?"

"Considering she once punched you in the face, I don't think that should come as a surprise," Harry had laughed in reply. "Yeah, she can be pretty brutal when she wants to. I don't know if they'll be able to remove those warts."

"Serves her right for snitching," Draco shrugged, "if you sell your friends out, you deserve whatever you get."

Harry chuckled. "And there's the Slytherin,"

The fact that Umbridge had become Headmistress was made easier to bear by the fact that the entire school had taken it upon themselves to make her life hell, and this was punctuated by the explosion of fireworks released by the Twins later that day. It came as a small comfort to Draco that, by attempting to vanish the fireworks (which multiplied tenfold when a vanishing charm hit them), he and Blaise had managed to create hundreds of extras for Umbridge to deal with.

Despite Harry's nightmares, and the onset of exams, the summer was alive and happy.
Draco hummed quietly as he walked towards the guest room. It had been an excellent birthday - he'd been woken up by his dorm-mates at six for an early breakfast of all his favourites - blueberry tart; chocolate cake; and many more delicacies - and the food was swiftly followed by a shower of gifts and cards. Slytherin wasn't the warmest of houses, but when they wanted to, they sure as hell could have a good time. They had organised a proper party for later that night, but first, Draco wanted to see Harry. As they were in exam season, their classes had been cancelled and he hadn't had a chance to talk to him all day. However, an inconspicuous note had been passed from Harry as they'd passed in a crowded corridor.

**Draco,**

**Come to our room before going to dinner?**  
-H

As Draco said the password and pushed open the door he was met by a soft orange glow and the sound of piano music. Then Harry appeared, smiling, and hugged him.

"Happy birthday," He said, happily, giving Draco a kiss. "I've got a surprise for you,"

In the centre of the room sat a round table covered with a white cloth, laid with candles and plates, and two comfortable chairs. Other candles were dotted around the room while a white sheet had been placed over the window to hide the murky lake, creating a warm, romantic atmosphere. The source of the piano music became apparent when Draco's eyes fell on the record player sitting on the writing desk, which had been pushed to a corner. Draco felt like he was melting.

"I know you didn't want something big," Harry started, and Draco beamed at him.

"You are the best boyfriend in the whole entirety of the universe." He said, unable to stop grinning like a maniac. Harry blushed.

"Do you want to sit down?" He asked, covering his red cheeks by pulling out a chair for Draco. The table was set in the same way as you might find in a posh restaurant, even down to the basket of bread and butter in the centre, which made Draco laugh a little.

"What is it?" Harry asked quickly.

"You're just..." Draco shook his head, still smiling. "It doesn't matter."

Harry raised an eyebrow, smirking slightly. Without warning, a popping noise came from the side of the room and made Draco jump. He turned and saw a small, grubby-looking house elf wearing several badly knitted hats standing in the corner, holding a quill and pad in his hands.

"Dobby?" Draco exclaimed. The elf nodded towards him, obviously still slightly scared of his old master, before turning to Harry, who smiled at him.

"Would sirs like any drinks?" Dobby asked in his high-pitched voice, looking between both of them. Draco laughed.

"Just like a restaurant!" He grinned, and Harry nodded.

"It's a proper date, and Dobby has very kindly agreed to be our waiter for the evening." He said, and turned to the house elf.
"Could I have a glass of pumpkin juice?" He asked, and the quill in Dobby's hand came to life, obviously charmed to take notes for the elf, who Draco doubted could write. Dobby looked at Draco, then quickly away.

"And for Master Malfoy?" He asked in a slightly shaky voice, looking at the pad instead of at Draco.

"Uh, the same, Please?" Draco asked, still adjusting to the situation. Dobby nodded and disappeared once more with a pop.

"As he is a modern house elf," Harry said, "I am paying him by the hour to work for me. It was Hermione's idea, actually."

"That's oddly nice," Draco smiled.

"Hermione would never have allowed me to let him work for me unpaid."

"He's still scared of me, isn't he?" Draco said, more quietly. Harry nodded. "I never hurt him, it was my father," Draco started, and Harry covered his hand with his own.

"I know."

"It was a good idea to pay him,"

"That's Hermione for you," Harry smiled.

Another pop announced Dobby's return, and a decanter of orange pumpkin juice was set upon the table between them.

"I will return in a few minutes to take your orders for the first course," Dobby squeaked, and disappeared once more.

"This is amazing!" Draco burst out, as Harry poured him a glass of juice. "I don't know how you continually think these things up,"

"I guess I'm just a genius," Harry shrugged, smirking, "I can't help it,"

The food arrived in waves, tasting better even than any of the usual Hogwarts meals, and each course was more intricate and beautiful than the last, until finally, after one last scoop of vanilla ice cream, Draco groaned.

"Make it stop! One more bite and I'll explode!"

After the meal had been cleared, they found themselves in their usual place on the sofa, talking fluidly and feeling comfortably stuffed. Finally, Draco looked to the door and sighed.

"They'll be wondering where I am."

"Nooo," Harry whined, holding Draco's arm. "Stay,"

"I wish I could, I really do,"

"Then just stay!" Harry laughed. "Just never leave! We'll stay here forever!"

"Harry," Draco laughed.

"Draco" Harry imitated.
Rolling his eyes, Draco started to stand, but Harry pulled him back and, before Draco could say a word, pressed their lips together in a passionate kiss. As they pulled apart, Harry looked into his eyes and, slowly, hissed in Parseltongue. The hairs on Draco's neck stood on end.

"Maybe a few more minutes won't hurt" He smiled, and Harry grinned triumphantly, pulling him down into an endless sea of kisses.
The evening that Hagrid was fired, Draco was in the library with Blaise. Manimi, coiled in his bag, had started to hiss when a loud cracking noise accompanied a burst of red light from outside the jewelled windows. Looking up from their textbooks, the two boys made brief eye contact before looking at the window, waiting for another sound. When none came, Blaise raised an eyebrow and returned to his work.

Another sudden noise made them both jump. This time Draco closed his textbook, draped Manimi over his shoulders, and walked to the window, opening it into the darkness and looking around.

A little way away, several figures surrounded Hagrid's hut. Draco recognised the unmistakably squat figure of Umbridge and the huge mass that was Hagrid, as well as several other people. Blaise, peering out from behind Draco, pointed at something moving a towards the figures.

"Is that... McGonagall?" He asked, incredulously.

"Shh," Draco hissed as he strained his ears. McGonagall, for it was her, was screaming something that Draco couldn't quite make out at the people standing around Hagrid's hut, and a second later, a cacophony of light and noise met their eyes. Manimi gave a sound that was more like a cat spitting than the normal hiss of a snake, and even though Draco didn't speak Parseltongue, he completely understood. Suddenly, out of the mass of spells, they saw Hagrid running with something in his arms, his long strides too fast for Umbridge and her minions. A spell flew close to him, illuminating his massive beard and outlining his body for a fraction of a second, and then he was gone, vanishing into the darkness.

Both boys yelped as the window slammed shut and they turned to see Madam Pince holding a finger to her lips and pointing with her other hand back to the table where they had previously been sitting.

"But-" Blaise began, but Madam Pince swiped the air with her hand.

"Be quiet, or leave," She hissed, and swept away.

"What on earth was that all about?" Blaise asked under his breath as they sat back at their table.

"I guess they were trying to sack Hagrid. Do you think McGonagall is okay?" Draco looked to the window again, biting his nail.

"She'll be fine," Blaise said confidently. "It'd take more than Umbridge to hurt her."

"Sneaking up on him in the dark like that," Draco shook his head in disgust, "Bloody cowards."

"Come on, then," Blaise said after a moment. "we've still got a History exam to revise for, no matter what goes on out there."

0o0o

"We're finished!" Theo was grinning as together he, Draco, Blaise, and Pansy walked into the sunny grounds. "No more exams!"

The history OWL had gone better than any of them had expected after Professor Bins' abysmal teaching, and even though he was tired after a night of extreme cramming, Draco felt light and happy. Their exams were over. They were free to do what they wanted, and that meant enjoying the
sun while it lasted and then getting very drunk at the post-exam party later that night. Better yet, he and Harry were meeting after dinner, and Draco had a good idea of how they were going to celebrate.

But for now, the sun was shining, the breeze was cool, and his friends - for they were his friends now, not merely allies to a familiar cause - were laughing together as they walked by the lake. Gladly, Draco joined in.

0o0oHarry0o0o

A high, cold voice came from Harry's mouth as he regarded the figure before him.

"And I ask again, Black. Tell me where it is."

The man in front of him stared at him defiantly. Shelves covered in glowing orbs surrounded them. They seemed to emit a faint humming. Sirius Black, bound to a dark wood chair by black chains, did not speak.

"Crucio!" Harry cried, and his long, white fingers felt the magic as it coursed from the wand to the man. A scream, terrible and agonised, filled his ears.

"You will break, Sirius," Harry smiled, as he watched the man before him panting from the pain.

"You'll have to kill me," Sirius Black muttered.

Lord Voldemort's mouth - *Harry's mouth* - twisted into a callous smile. "Oh, I will."

0o0o

"Harry! HARRY!"

With a jolt, Harry opened his eyes and sat up, looking wildly around. Hermione was kneeling by him, a hand clutching his shoulder. Ron was standing over him, looking worried.

"He's got Sirius," Harry said shakily, scrambling to his feet.

"What?" Asked Ron, incredulously.

"He's got Sirius, and he's torturing him!" Harry was already walking - almost running - back to the castle. Hermione grabbed his hand, forcing him to stop.

"What are you doing?!” Harry shouted, "We have to go and rescue him! He could already be dead!"

"But don't you see?" Hermione asked imploringly, "this might be what he wants you to see? This might be a trap?"

"Who cares?" Harry had to stop himself from pushing her away.

"Harry, you're being too rash," Hermione pleaded with him.

"No I'm not-"

"You are! I mean, you do have a bit of a thing about... saving people,"

Her face fell as she saw the look Harry gave her.

"Harry-

"I'm going to find Sirius." Harry began to move to the Castle once more, and once again, Hermione held him back.

"Just... check, at least. Check if he's in Grimmauld place before you trust what you saw. Please."

"Fine!" Harry snapped. "We'll have to use Umbridge's fire, though."

0o0oDraco0o0o

Draco looked on in horror as Umbridge interrogated Harry, while he and the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad held Ginny, Neville, Luna, Ron, and Hermione. Harry looked angrier than Draco had ever seen him. Standing in Umbridge's office, watching his boyfriend being borderline tortured, was not how he had envisioned this evening playing out.

"You were trying to contact Dumbledore, I presume?" Umbridge was simpering, not even attempting to hide her smile of triumph. "You were plotting against the ministry?"

"Are you stupid?" Harry sneered, and a loud crack sounded as she slapped him hard in the face. Draco's blood boiled and it was all he could do to resist hitting her. Just as Umbridge opened her mouth to speak, the door to the room opened, revealing Severus Snape standing in the doorway.

"Ah, Severus. Did you bring what I asked?" Smiled Umbridge.

"I'm afraid the last of my veritaserum stores were used on Miss Bell," He said, coolly. "Unless you wish to poison the boy - and I assure you, I would have the greatest sympathy if you did - then I am of no use to you." Snape turned and was about to disappear from sight when Harry shouted to him-

"He's got Padfoot! He's got Padfoot, and he's keeping him in the place where it's hidden."

Turning, Snape looked at Harry, and Draco saw something flit across his Godfather's face.

"What is he talking about, Snape?" Umbridge asked sharply, looking between Harry and Severus, who looked at her without emotion, then back to Harry.

"No idea," He said, and disappeared from the room.

"Well," Umbridge smiled at Harry, and turned the picture of the Minister for Magic to face downwards on her desk. "You leave me with no choice. Unless you tell me now, I shall have to resort to extreme measures." She brought her face very close to Harry's and hissed. "The Cruciatus Curse."

"But that's illegal!" Hermione shouted, struggling against Crabbe, who held her back.

"What Cornelius doesn't know won't hurt him," Umbridge looked overturned picture on her desk and raised her wand. "You have until three, Potter. One. Two-"

"Tell her, Harry!" Hermione shouted, and Umbridge turned to Hermione.

"Tell me what, Miss Granger?" She asked, a look of savage triumph on her face.

"Well if you won't, I will," Hermione continued, and looking at Harry, Draco saw confusion cross his face.
"TELL ME WHAT?" Umbridge shouted.

"The weapon," Hermione said. "It's in the Forbidden Forest. We can show it to you."

0o0oHarry0o0o

Harry and Hermione ran back to the Castle, leaving Umbridge to the centaurs, her screams growing fainter as they drew further away. Running towards them, they saw Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville.

"How did you get away?" Hermione asked and they met, all slightly panting.

"Puking Pasties," Ginny grinned. "It was Ron's idea."

"I said I was hungry and took out the sweets," Ron laughed, "Of course, they all told me to shove off and ate them themselves. It wasn't pretty."

"That was clever, Ron," Hermione said, and Ron coloured a little.

"No need to act so surprised," He said, smiling.

"So what's the plan?" Asked Luna, and all eyes were turned to Harry. His heart sank.

"Look, I really appreciate-"

"Don't you dare tell us we can't come," Neville said, darkly.

"But-"

"This is what the DA was all about!" Ginny said, hotly, "Fighting. We want to help!"

Harry looked around at them and knew that there was nothing he could do. Admiration for his friends filled him as he met their eyes, and he was suddenly overwhelmed with affection for them all. "All right." He sighed. "How do we get to the Ministry?"

Luna smiled. "We fly, of course."

0o0oDraco0o0o

The hospital wing stank so badly that, if he hadn't already thrown up everything in his stomach, Draco would have been sick. He, Crabbe, Goyle, and two other Inquisitorial Squad members sat on separate beds with buckets of sick in all of their laps, and only the occasional wretching sound to punctuate the silence.

Dazedly, Draco wondered if Harry was okay.

Madam Pomfrey didn't want the Slytherins to leave until she was sure of their health, and that meant staying the night. It wasn't so uncomfortable after a few air-cleaning spells had been cast, and after Manimi came and found him, Draco felt a little more at home. Exhausted by throwing up, and the continuous feeling of nausea, Draco was asleep by nine, barely two hours since the puking had begun. It was the fastest he had fallen asleep in a very long time, and as he drifted into unconsciousness he wondered, distantly, if he shouldn't be going to make sure Harry was okay. But he was too tired, far too tired to move even a finger, and soon enough he was enveloped by black.

The rest of the Slytherins soon followed suit, and Madam Pomfrey drew the curtains against the light summer evening. Darkness fell in the Hospital Wing.

0o0o
Draco was drowning. It was dark, and his entire body was filled with tears. He tried to move his arm and legs, to swim, but they wouldn't move. He tried to scream. Couldn't. Paralysed. No light source. No up or down. Only water, and death.

Gasping, Draco sat up in the hospital bed and heaved great lungfuls of air into his body. An overwhelming sadness was crushing him and when he touched his face, his hand came away wet with tears. He was sobbing. He had no idea why. He felt as though there could never be happiness in his life again.

Someone came. Draco didn't care. As he was taken from the main sickness bay, the sadness began to dissipate into a dull ache. They reached the door to a private room in the rear of the Hospital Wing and the tears began to dry into an uncomfortable salty residue as Draco took deep breaths of air. A potion was handed to him, and without a word, he drank. The ache didn't leave, but it was as though it had been covered with a blanket. Madam Pomfrey led him to bed at the side of the room and told him to lie down. Disappearing for a moment, she returned carrying Manimi in her arms and placed her at the foot of the bed.

"There now," She said. Her voice was motherly without its usual strictness. Draco didn't look at her. He was afraid he would start crying again. "The potion should help you to sleep. You just get some rest, Mr Malfoy. It's the best medicine." Quietly, she left the room, and Draco sagged onto the pillows.

It had been the ring. It had been Harry's sadness. Fear gripped Draco through the haze of the potion and he tried to get up but found himself unable to move. Something was cushioning his mind, blocking out the world. He fell into a fitful sleep.

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Draco woke to the streaming sun, and groggily rubbed his eyes. Something was nagging at him from the recesses of his mind, and he reached for it, trying to make it solid. Then he sat bolt upright. Something had happened to Harry last night. Something huge.

Soon he was out of the room and looking around the hospital wing, Manimi slithering behind him. Several of the Slytherins were still asleep, though the absence of some indicated that they were already awake and probably in the hall having breakfast. Draco's eyes fell upon a bed surrounded by curtains and he looked around to make sure Madam Pomfrey was absent before walking to it and peeping around the curtains.

It was Harry. Heart beating, Draco walked briskly over and held Harry's face in his hands, his eyes studying it for any sign of injury. Harry's eyelids fluttered open.

"...Draco?" His voice was husky from lack of sleep.

"You're okay," Draco breathed with relief.

"I'm alive," Harry corrected without a hint of humour.

Draco skipped the pleasantries. "Are you alright?" He asked, still looking Harry over.

"A lot happened last night," Harry said helplessly as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Draco saw the scar standing out on the back of Harry's hand, scratched into the skin in his own handwriting. I must not tell lies.

"I felt this really intense sadness through the ring last night," Draco prompted, and as he met Harry's gaze he saw something flicker in his eyes. "What was it?"
Harry shut his eyes. "I really, really don't want to think about it." He said in a small voice.

"Is everyone... alright?" Draco asked carefully, and Harry screwed his eyes shut even tighter, shaking his head. "...Who-"

"Please, Draco," Harry's voice took on an imploring tone, making Draco want nothing more than to hold Harry in his arms and protect him from whatever it was that was hurting him, to never let anything touch him again. "just thinking about it makes me feel like I'm going to shatter. Please, don't make me-"

"Shhh, it's all okay, I'm not going to make you do anything. You're alright."

"I feel like there's some sort of badness in me, something rooted in my soul, and it's eating me alive," Harry whispered, his eyes closed. "I don't know if I can hold myself together."

"You won't have to," Draco stroked the curls of Harry's dark hair as he spoke. "I'm going to keep you safe. I'll hold you together."

Draco whisked around as footsteps came, drawing nearer to the curtain.
"Cloak's in the drawer," Harry muttered, pointing at the bedside table. "I'll see you once I'm out,"

"I love you," Draco said in a rushed whisper as he pulled the drawer open.

"I love you too."

The curtains drew back just as Draco settled the cloak over his head, and without a sound he edged around the nurse and made for the door, wanting nothing more than to turn back and stay with Harry until it was all okay again.
"I want to tell you what happened," Harry said, quietly.

It was the evening of the second-last day of school, and they were in the Guest Room. Harry was lying across the sofa, his head resting on Draco's crossed legs and Manimi curled into a knot on his chest. Five days had passed since they had spoken in the hospital wing, but this was the first time Harry had mentioned the events of that night. Draco stroked Harry's hair softly, and he closed his eyes.

He told Draco about the prophecy, the fight, the terrible, the terrible loss of Sirius. And when he had stopped crying, he told him that there had been a moment after Dumbledore had fought Voldemort when he had felt Voldemort's mind encasing his own like a snake crushing its prey until, through love, through pity, through pain, Harry had forced him out.

Softly, Manimi hissed something, and Harry nodded, hissing back.

"After we left the ministry," he continued, without explaining his exchange with the snake, "Dumbledore took me back to his office, and I went mad. All this anger, everything I pushed away for God knows how long, just bubbled up inside me and I just started breaking things."

"You broke Dumbledore's stuff?" Draco asked in shock, and Harry nodded, wincing as he remembered.

"Eventually I calmed down enough that he could properly talk to me, and so he explained some things to me. About my past and my connection to Voldemort. I can't really talk about that in detail, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. As long as you're safe."

Harry smiled at him. "So yeah. Then I went to the hospital wing and as you know I only got out of there yesterday. So. That's what happened."

For a long time after Harry stopped talking, neither said anything. Draco continued to stroke Harry's hair, thinking over what Harry had told him.

"You shouldn't have to fight this war. You're too young. We're all too young." He said at last.

"That doesn't change the fact that I have to do it."

"I know," Draco sighed. "You're so brave. So incredibly brave."

"It helps to have you. And Ron and Hermione. You're the reasons I haven't gone completely mad."

"Funnily enough, you're my reason too," Draco smiled.

They remained together, talking gently over the events of several days ago, until finally, Harry shifted.

"Do you have to go?" Draco asked huffily. Standing up, Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, and so do you,"

"But do I though?" Draco slouched down into the sofa and gestured with his hands. "In the grand
scheme of things, does anything we do really matter?"

Manimi hissed something, and Harry laughed. "She says you're insufferable."

"Ugh."

"Come on," Harry held his hands out to Draco, who reluctantly allowed him to pull him to his feet. When Draco was standing, Harry kissed him on the nose. "See? How hard was that?"

"Hard enough that I deserve a proper kiss,"

"Always fine by me," Harry smiled, pressing their lips together.

As they pulled apart, Draco took Harry's hands. "I need to know that you're okay. Really okay."

"I'll be fine," Harry bit his lip. "As long as you're okay, I'll be fine."

"Good." Draco smiled, before dropping Harry's hands and scooping up his schoolbag. "C'mon Manimi. Harry's right, we need to go."

"Hey," Harry called as Draco started to open the door.

"What?"

"I love you,"

Draco grinned. "I love you too."

0o0oHarry0o0o

Emerging onto Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters, Harry found himself walking alongside Draco, with Ron and Hermione next to him on his other side. He cleared his throat, causing Draco to turn and realise who he was walking next to. He didn't return Harry's smile.

"What are you doing, grinning at me?" He spat with a sneer that didn't quite reach his eyes before walking briskly away from Harry and into the arms of a regal-looking woman with long silvery hair who could only be Narcissa Malfoy. Harry looked at the man to the left of Draco and Narcissa, and felt his stomach contract as his eyes met the dead stare of Lucius Malfoy.

"He's pissed off because you named him as a death-eater," Ron said, following Harry's gaze. "Blimey, if looks could kill, eh?"

"Should he really be out here after being named as a follower of You-Know-Who?" Hermione asked, leaning around Ron to look.

"Maybe he thinks if he ignores it, it'll just... go away?" Ron shrugged. "That's how dudes deal with most problems."

They lost sight of the Malfoys a moment later as they were swallowed by the crowd, and within moments they had emerged out into King's Cross Station. Saying their goodbyes, the trio went their separate ways - Hermione running to meet her parents; Ron and the other Weasleys being engulfed in hugs from Mrs Weasley; and Harry, stomach sinking, trudging back into the iron clutches of Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four, Privet Drive.

End of Part Three
Draco stopped suddenly outside the door to his room, which hung gapingly and abnormally open. It was wrong - Draco always locked his door behind him, always kept the key with him, didn't even allow the house elves in there without his presence. Someone had broken in. Setting his jaw, he stepped inside.

Lucius was sitting on the bed, looking completely out of place in Draco's bedroom. He was holding a piece of parchment in his hands, reading, and did not look up as Draco entered. Draco watched him, saying nothing, until finally, Lucius looked up. He held the parchment out to Draco, who took it wordlessly and, with a rising sense of dread, began to read.

**Draco,**

*I get what you mean about art not having enough importance in school - it's the same in the muggle world. I mean, I can't draw for shit so I'm kind of glad, but it's true that...*

Draco looked at his father, who stood up.

"This letter is signed: *With love, Harry.*"

"I-"

"Why is it signed: *With love, Harry*?"

Draco couldn't breathe, let alone speak. It felt like an iron hand was closing around his throat.

"Why would Harry Potter, with whom I told you not to interact, be writing letters to you detailing how much he misses you?"

Again, Draco was speechless.

"Why is there a pile of these letters, dating as recently as last week, hidden under your bed?"

"I-"

"Why, in one letter, does Potter say that he misses the feeling of kissing you?"

Draco's face was hot. He clenched his hands to stop them from shaking, creasing Harry's letter.

"The Dark Lord, Master of Occlumency, dwells in our house, and yet you do *this*? " Lucius hissed into Draco's face, his anger finally becoming apparent. "You are a stupid, worthless freak who I am ashamed to call my son. You are not normal, understand? It is not normal for two wizards to be together, it is as disgusting and wrong as being a mudblood, and if you were not my only heir I would kill you, just as I would to any other of your kind." Lucius was breathing heavily, inches away from Draco's face.

"You came into my room," Draco said, quietly. He blinked rapidly. "You looked through my things."

"This isn't your room. It is the room inside *my house* that I allow you to inhabit, you ungrateful brat. You think you can tell me what is right and wrong?" Lucius sneered at him. "You're

"What?" Draco asked in surprise.

"Are you so stupid that you don't understand English? Fetch the snake."

Draco's heart beat faster. "Why?"

"You dare question me, Boy?!" Lucius yelled. "Go!"

Draco shook his head, and Lucius squared his shoulders, raising his wand. Waiting to hear Crucio, Draco closed his eyes. But to his surprise, all he heard was the growled "Imperio," before everything became silent in his head, peaceful and numb. Lucius watched Draco exit the room, and return a moment later with the snake wrapped around his wrist, trusting Draco's artificial calm and unaware of what was occurring between the two Malfoys. Waving his wand, Lucius caused the door to slam and lock behind them, and the snake hissed at him, low and long. As if waking up, Draco started and looked down to see Manimi, horror crossing his face.

"Put the snake on the ground, Draco," Lucius demanded quietly.

"No, no-"

"Do it, Draco. You know I can simply use Imperio if you don't comply."

Draco turned and grabbed at the door, pulling the handle with all his might in his efforts to escape the monster that was his father, until suddenly the curse hit him, and fire consumed his body. It was too painful to even scream. He fell to the ground, causing Manimi to release from his wrist and move out of the way of his writhing body, unable to do anything but watch. As suddenly as it started, the pain lifted and Draco gasped, instinctively curling into himself as his muscles continued to spasm from the torture they had been put through.

"Stand up."

Unable to defy his father any longer, Draco shakily pushed himself to his feet and forced himself to lock eyes with Lucius. He watched as his father raised his wand, and pointed it at the snake on the ground as it slithered away from him, trying desperately to push against the door. Tears were burning his cheeks.

"Father, please," Draco's voice came out as a croak, and Lucius did not even look at him.

"Avada Kedavra."

A flash of green light filled the room. Manimi's lashing body went still and fell to the floor in a heap of coiled green flesh, and Draco couldn't stop the scream from ripping from his chest.

Before Draco could reach the body, Lucius had pointed his wand once more. Draco watched in horror as the snake was engulfed in flames, leaving no trace that Manimi ever existed. Slowly, Draco turned to Lucius.

"You're a monster," He hissed, his voice breaking on a sob. Lucius ignored him.

"If you ever contact Potter again, if you even look at him in the wrong way, I will have no choice but to treat you the same as any other of your kind." He said, as though he was talking about the weather. "I will see you at dinner, and I expect you to act politely and normally."
The door clicked shut behind Lucius, but Draco did not move. He stood staring at the space Manimi had inhabited only a moment earlier.

*She was gone.*

Walking to the corner, Draco crouched down and put his hand out as if he thought he would feel her there, as if he could pull her back into his life. But nothing was there.

Draco sank into the corner, and felt himself shatter inside.

0o0o

Footsteps echoed loudly in the tiled corridor as Draco followed his father through the bowels of the Manor, Lucius' heavy treads accompanied by the sharp rap of his cane. In another life, Draco might have felt fear. But he had realised now that there were worse things than death. He bunched his hands into tight, angry fists, and felt the conspicuous absence of the silver ring. Then he cleared his mind and thought of nothing.

Finally, a door of ebony loomed out at them and Lucius knocked with the serpent-shaped head of his cane.

"Enter." A high, cold voice sounded from behind the dark wood, and Lucius swung the door open, allowing his son to walk through. He watched with dead eyes for a mere moment, then pulled the door sharply shut.

Draco looked at the creature before him without emotion. It smiled, a noseless face cracking open at the mouth.

"Draco," It crooned in its serpentine hiss. "I have a task for you."
"Morning, Mrs Weasley," Harry said, sliding into his usual seat and grabbing a slice of toast from the rack in the centre of the table. Hermione and Ron sat down opposite him. "Has Hedwig come back?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot to say. She got back this morning. But she didn't have a letter, I'm afraid. She's in Erol's cage just now, having some food."

"She didn't bring a letter?" Harry asked sharply, his toast stopping halfway to his mouth.

"Not that I could see, dear," Mrs Weasley looked at him closely. "Are you alright?"

Harry shared a look with Hermione. "I'm fine, thanks," putting down his uneaten toast, he stood up. "I'll just go and see her, if that's okay."

"Of course, dear!" Mrs Weasley laughed, looking bemused. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Harry didn't reply and walked briskly to the living room where Erol and Hedwig were eating owl pellets, no letter in sight.

"Nothing?" Asked Hermione, following him into the room. Harry shook his head. "Maybe it's just a mistake. I mean, Hedwig might have dropped it or-"

"It isn't that," Harry answered flatly. "It's something to do with what I felt through the ring the other day. Something's happened to him."

Hermione bit her lip. "You haven't felt anything since-" "No." Harry looked at the gold ring on his hand. "Nothing."

"Do you think Draco might have taken it off?"

"I don't know, Hermione." Harry snapped. "Let's just go eat breakfast."

Ron looked at them both, bemused, as they re-entered the dining room.

"What was that about?"

"I was just checking that Harry was okay, which he is," Hermione said lightly, and Ron, happy with the half-truth, shrugged and continued to attack his scrambled eggs.

As he forced himself to eat, Harry remembered the drowning sense of despair that had come over him several days previously, coming and going rapidly, and clearly emanating from the golden ring he shared with Draco. His blood boiled when he imagined what might be happening, with Draco forced to live with Voldemort, being tortured by his own father, unable to escape his own personal hell.

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"So that's books done, and stationary replaced," Hermione listed as they walked through the crowded Diagon Ally, "how about robes next? Madam Malkin's is just along there,"

The three were school-shopping, as were many of the other teenagers in the crowded cobbled street.
Harry and Ron agreed and together they walked into the Robe Emporium, a bell chiming as they entered. Harry glanced around for Madam Malkin and felt as though his heart stopped. She was measuring a tall blond boy for robes, and waved for them to take a seat and wait. Harry didn't move. He stared at Draco, taking in the thin arms, the pallid skin, and the hollow cheeks, and felt something contract inside him.

"C'mon, Harry," Ron appeared at his side, "Malfoy's gotta get his new dress fitted nicely."

Draco looked up from where he had been pointedly staring at the floor, and for the first time, their eyes met. Harry flinched. Something in Draco's eyes had changed. For a moment it reminded Harry of the time, so long ago, when Draco had insulted his mother. Then, it had been like an emotionless stone mask was covering his face. But this was different. Draco looked, not emotionless, but hopeless. The bright grey eyes that Harry had fallen in love with had lost their shine, and now looked tired, like clouds hanging heavy with rain, or the thick fog that rolls in from the sea.

"Go on, Potter," A shadow of a sneer crossed Draco's pallid face, and he jerked his head towards Hermione. "The way you're staring, you'd think you were in love with me or something."

Harry felt as though he'd been struck across the face. Ron snorted. "How could anyone love you, Malfoy?"

Grabbing Harry by the arm, he pulled him away, and soon Harry found himself sitting down with Hermione, who discreetly squeezed his hand, with Ron relaxing into the seat next to him.

"Just let the prick finish up, then we'll get ours," Ron said, undisturbed by the exchange they'd just had. Harry didn't reply. Instead, he watched as Draco batted away Madam Malkin's hand when she attempted to roll up his sleeve. A sick feeling crept into his stomach.

As Madam Malkin finished up, Draco stepped off the stool used for measuring people, and without a word, left the shop. Madam Malkin shook her head. "Strange boy," they heard her say to herself.

Ron needed several inches added to his robes, while Harry and Hermione found they could just buy new versions of the same sizes, as they hadn't grown. Soon they were leaving the shop once more, this time heading for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, excited to see the twins' shop for the first time. If Harry hadn't been preoccupied with Draco, he would have been bowled over by the joke shop. It was fantastic, chock full of various magical trinkets, charmed sweets, and enchanted robes, plus more objects that Harry's couldn't even categorise. The twins appeared, identical grins on their faces.

"Hello, ducklings," Fred beamed.

"What do you think of our humble trickery shop?" Continued George.

Harry, Ron and Hermione all confirmed that it was amazing, and the twins' smiles widened.

"Do feel free to browse," George said loftily.

"But be warned," Said Fred.

"The Pygmy Puffs have-"

"-been known to bite."

Harry gave a half-hearted smile, and turned to look around the shop. However, it was something outside the window that caught his eyes. Ron, following his gaze, said;
"Where's that little blonde twit going, d'you reckon?"

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"Malfoy's looking shifty. Well, shiftier than usual."

"Isn't that the way to Nocturn Alley?" She asked, joining them at the window.

"Yeah, it is," Ron agreed, sounding a little excited. "Shall we follow him?"

Harry was already pulling the cloak out of his bag. "Let's go," He said, heading towards the door.

Hermione had been correct- Draco was going to Nocturn Alley. They watched him glance around, his eyes passing right over where they stood hidden by the cloak, before disappearing into a badly lit shop.

"That's Borgin and Burkes'," Harry exclaimed, and continued in answer to their questioning glances, "It's where I came out when I first used the floo network and didn't say the words right."

"Oh, I remember that!" Ron said, "Hagrid found you."

"Come on, then. Let's get to the window before he finishes," Hermione said, pulling them forward.

Draco was clearly annoyed with Borgin, the wirey, stooped man behind the counter. They leant in closer, pressing against the glass. They could only hear snatches of the conversation.

"...But... fix it? When?...Don't...father..."

"Who bets he just said 'my father will hear about this'?" Ron laughed, but the other two shushed him fiercely, still listening closely. Draco seemed to get more and more frustrated, gesturing towards a section of the shop, and then, to Harry's shock, he pulled up his sleeve and showed something on his arm to Borgin, who visibly flinched. Finally, Draco placed a small drawstring bag on the table, most likely containing money, and departed, looking irritated. He almost collided with them as he strode away.

"So he wants something fixed," Hermione thought aloud. "You know what? I think I'll go in and see if I can find out what it is."

"You sure?" Ron asked, looked doubtful. "I mean, a place like that..."

"I'll be fine," Hermione shrugged, and ducked out from the cloak. Harry and Ron watched her enter the shop, and instead of approaching Borgin, who watched her suspiciously, look around the area of the shop Draco had gestured to. Borgin approached her, and after barely a moment of talking, Hermione left, walking right past Harry and Ron, and only stopping when they got back to Diagon Alley.

"Why'd you leave us behind?" Ron asked as they caught up with her, removing the cloak.

"It would have looked a bit suspicious if I disappeared, wouldn't it?" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Did you find anything?"

"Nothing. The stuff in that area was a necklace, a very old cabinet, and a really horrible glass eye," Hermione shuddered. "Plus some other stuff that I didn't recognise. I'm not sure what it is he was talking about, Borgin certainly didn't tell me."
Disheartened, they made their way back to the joke shop. Harry voiced the terrible nagging worry that was eating at him.

"Did you see how he showed his arm to Borgin?"

Hermione looked at him appeasingly. "Harry, I don't-"

"What if-" Harry continued, not really wanting to say aloud what he was thinking. "What if he's been... marked."

"Marked?!" Ron exclaimed, lowering his voice when the other two shushed him. "You mean as in, the Dark Mark?"

Harry nodded, and Hermione shook her head.

"Why would You-Know-Who want a kid in his circle?" She asked, pointedly. "Only a very select few are ever marked."

"Still," Ron said darkly, "I wouldn't put it past the slimy git."

"It won't be true," Hermione persisted, "just trust me. It'll be something else."

Harry decided to drop it. But a worm of doubt had been planted, and it ate away at his mind.

0o0o

"Harry?"

Harry looked up from the fire to see Ginny standing in the doorway, wearing her pyjamas. Quickly he cleared his mind and put on a smile.

"Hey. You're up late."

"So are you," She smiled, coming to sit cross-legged with him by the fire, both leaning against the sofa facing the warmth. "Can't sleep?"

Harry shook his head. "You?"

"Same thing, I guess. I usually come down here when I can't sleep. Looking at the fire really makes me feel calm."

He nodded, watching the embers glowing softly. Neither spoke.

"What's up?" Ginny asked finally.

"Huh?"

"Something's wrong, Harry. Anyone could see that."

Harry sighed. "I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

Ginny looked at him, her brown eyes warm in the firelight. "Maybe I can help? You don't have to tell me what's going on, but you could give me an idea of the problem."

Harry thought about it. "I'm worried that someone I care about is being hurt, and I can't do anything to stop it."
"I see." She thought for a moment. "When's the next time you'll see them?"

"When we go back to school."

"You can't send them a letter?"

"One: they're not replying; two: I'm scared it might make it worse."

"Right." Ginny was silent momentarily. "That is a tough problem."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "Tell me about it."

"At least it's not too long before school starts again. Only two weeks."

"I guess."

Again, they were both silent until, eventually, Ginny ventured;

"You know, they say a trouble shared is a trouble halved. Even if it's not me you talk to, you should talk to someone."

Harry nodded, continuing to stare at the fire.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with things like this so much. It's not fair."

Harry looked at her, taking in her worried, kind eyes and hair that seemed on fire in the red light of the flames, and put an arm around her. She leant her head against his shoulder and, together, they gazed at the fire as it slowly burnt itself out.
The train clattered rhythmically over the tracks, a soft whirr emitting from the wheels as they sped towards Hogwarts. Harry, hidden under the invisibility cloak, tried to keep his balance as he moved quickly through the shaking carriages, following Blaise Zabini. They had both just left Professor Slughorn's compartment, having been called there with several other students who seemed to have potential in various subjects. Hoping to find Draco, Harry had followed Blaise when he'd left the dull meeting. Blaise eventually stopped and dipped into a compartment, and Harry just managed to slide in before the doors closed.

Draco was slouching on the seat next to Pansy, while in the corner, Crabbe and Goyle were stuffing themselves with sweets off the trolley. As Blaise took the seat opposite Draco, Harry backed into the luggage storage, almost displacing a trunk as he did so and freezing, barely daring to breathe. Draco, catching the movement in the corner of his eye, looked straight through Harry at the bag, staring intently for a moment. A flash of surprise crossed his face, and then, as if nothing had happened, he slowly turned away. Heartbeat normalising, Harry relaxed a little. He leant against the trunk, and stared at Draco.

If he had seemed broken in Madam Malkin's, it was nothing compared to now. A cut across Draco's cheek, from by his ear almost to his mouth, seemed to emphasize the sunken cheeks and thin skin of his face; he'd clearly abandoned the pick-me-up spells he'd told Harry about, as the skin under his eyes was as purple and blotchy as a stormy sky. His hair drooped, his clothes hung off his body, and his eyes flitted around constantly, nervously, as though he thought something was hunting him. Apart from his eyes, the only part of him that moved was his leg, which jiggled up and down constantly.

"How was Slug Club, Blaisy?" Pansy asked, sounding bored.

"How'd'you think?" Blaise smirked. "Tear-jerkingly boring."

"Who else was there?" Draco asked, not looking at Blaise for long but continuing to look around the carriage. It was the first thing Draco had said since Harry had been in the carriage. His voice matched his appearance.

"A few of our lot. Noticeably few Hufflepuffs, but that isn't surprising. The Weasley girl was there, and Granger," Blaise looked at Draco closely, "And Potter."

Draco's knee momentarily stopped moving. His gaze flickered to the spot where Harry stood for a snatched second, then continued to roam the compartment.

"But of course Potter got invited, he's the bloody saviour of the wizarding world," Pansy spat.

"He's not looking too good," Blaise continued, eyes never leaving Draco's face. "Bags under his eyes rival yours."

"Great."

The train sped on, and Harry barely blinked for the whole journey. All he could do was drink in every detail of Draco's face, and listen intently to every word that was spoken. Draco spoke rarely, but the conversations were intriguing. Though the Slytherins all spoke in what amounted to code, one thing was clear: they were all preparing for the same war as Harry was - but their lot fell on the opposite side.
As the train pulled in at the station, Harry quickly moved out of the way of the Slytherins collecting their trunks. As the group began to head out of the door, Pansy and Blaise hung back.

"You coming?" Prompted Blaise to Draco, who had remained exactly where he had been sitting for the whole journey.

"You guys go on. I want to check something."

Blaise and Pansy exchanged a look before Pansy shrugged and, together, they left the compartment. Harry's heart was in his throat. Neither he nor Draco moved until the door closed behind the pair. Draco then got up, and pulled the blind down over the glass.

"Harry? Are you here?" He asked, turning around and looking over the compartment. Harry pulled the invisibility cloak off, letting it drop to the floor. It took no time at all to close the distance between them, and pull Draco into a desperate embrace. It felt like hugging a bag of bones.

After a moment, Harry realised that Draco wasn't returning the hug. Confused, he took a step back, still holding Draco's sides, and looked at him.

"What happened to you?" He whispered, placing a hand on Draco's cheek.

Draco blinked and looked down at the floor.

"Draco," Harry's voice was intense. "A few weeks ago I felt this awful sadness from the ring, and then this horrible pain. I know something happened to you, something really bad."

Draco breathed a sudden, shaking breath and shook Harry's hands off his arms, walking to where the window showed the deserted platform and looking out, hugging himself as if the chill air from outside had blown into the train.

"Please, you have to let me help," Harry pleaded. He reached out to touch Draco's shoulder, "Draco-"

Draco whisked around and met Harry's gaze, lip trembling slightly. "Please don't hate me," his voice barely more than a whisper.

"Why would I hate you?" Harry asked, "Please, just tell me what's going on,"

Closing his eyes, Draco took a deep breath. "Father found the- the letters. He found your letters."

Harry felt as though his heart had stopped beating.

"No, no, he didn't-"

"He was so angry," Draco's eyes swam, and Harry could tell that he wasn't seeing the carriage, or Harry, but that he was back in the Manor with his father, reliving the events of that day. "He was so angry that he didn't even hit me, didn't even use crucio. At first."

"What?" Harry whispered, "What did he do?"

Draco made a sound halfway between a gasp and a sob, squeezing his eyes shut. Instinctively, Harry moved towards him, to protect him, to hold him- but Draco pushed him away.

"Draco-"

"HE KILLED MANIMI!"
The silence following Draco's shout pounded Harry's ears.

"I- No, he-"

"He made me bring her to him, used *imperio,*" Draco suddenly began to speak very fast, "Made me hand her over to him to die!" He looked at Harry, eyes pleading with him to understand, "I tried to escape but I couldn't, he locked the door to my room, he kept us in like rats in a cage. And when I tried to get away he used *crucio,*" Draco shuddered. "When I couldn't fight anymore-*" Dracco's words caught in his mouth. "And she was... gone," He whispered. "Dead.*"

Suddenly, Draco slid down the wall to the floor, hugging his knees to his chest as a sob racked his thin body. As Harry put his arms around him, Draco finally leant into him, for the first time allowing the contact between them.

*Manimi was dead.*

Harry couldn't believe it, didn't want to believe it. He felt his lips tremble as silent tears burnt his cheeks. It was all he could do not to fall apart himself as he held Draco tight, trying to keep him from breaking. Finally, he whispered;

"We'll get through this," He nodded, then swallowed. "together, we always get through."

"Don't you understand?" Draco's voice came out in a broken croak, and it seemed that he had no tears left to cry. "We can't do this *together.*"

A hand of fear clutched at Harry's throat, and he could barely breathe. He drew away from Draco.

"You're not saying-"

Draco looked at him, his face that of utter despair. "Please don't hate me, *please,"

Harry was shaking his head. "No, no, Draco, you can't,"

"The Dark Lord can read minds. If I'm with you, he'll find out and he'll torture me for information about you, he'll use it to hurt you," Draco shook his head, "If you were killed because of *me,*" the words caught in his mouth. "And if my father finds out, he'll murder me. My own father will actually kill me."

"You can't leave," Harry sobbed, "Please-"

In a sudden, desperate movement, Draco pulled Harry towards him and smashed their lips together, kissing him as though his life depended on it, as though he only had minutes left to live.

When they broke apart, Draco pushed something into Harry's hand, then stood up.

"No!" Harry shouted, scrambling to his feet. "Please-"

Draco took Harry's face in his hands. "Harry, listen to me. I love you. I'll never love anyone else."

His voice broke as he spoke. "But you have a destiny, and so do I."

"*Please-*"

But Draco was gone, the glass door to the compartment sliding closed behind him.

Through a haze of tears, Harry looked down at what Draco had pushed into his hand. It was a plain silver ring.
And that was the moment that Harry’s heart broke.
Harry, Ron, and Hermione fidgeted uncomfortably in their dress robes, the stuffy air in the court room making them claustrophobic. It was the second hearing of the day, but while Hermione and Ron were bored, Harry was anxious. While it wasn't uncommon for him to get nery before a hearing, especially one that involved a criminal who brought back bad memories, this was different. This particular hearing was one Harry had been dreading for weeks, and the memories this defendant brought back were very different to the usual flashbacks.

Because of their involvement in the defeat of Voldemort, the 'Golden Trio' (as the newspapers had dubbed them) were needed to testify in almost every court case relating to the War. In the two months since the Battle of Hogwarts, their lives had consisted of little more than press conferences, court hearings, and preparing statements and answers to interrogation questions. Not only was it monotonous, but it was impossible to forget the War when every other day they had to talk to someone who had tried to kill them multiple times. Harry would have given almost anything to just erase it all from his memory. Thankfully, most of the War trials would soon be over, and hopefully, by the end of July, they could all focus on getting their lives back to normal - whatever that meant.

"Harry?" Hermione's voice broke through the spell of the warmth. "You alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione's worried expression reminded him of Mrs Weasley. "Well, this is... you know, his hearing."

"Hermione, we've been through this. I'll just say my bit, the case will be closed, we'll get out of here. Like every other hearing."

"I still don't get why you're defending him," Ron said huffily from behind Hermione.

"Because he saved our lives."

"Dobby saved our lives, not-"

"Oh, shut up, both of you," Hermione said with the exasperation of someone who has heard the same argument a hundred times. "It doesn't matter now."

As Hermione spoke, a bell chimed and everyone stood up, a hush falling over the room. The door at the back of the room opened, and three figures appeared - as always, two guards leading a prisoner.

The three reached the front, and the guards sat the prisoner in a chair at the front the room, before standing to attention behind him. After a moment, the Minister spoke.

"Draco Malfoy," Kingsley boomed, "You have been charged with three attempted murders, all targeting Albus Dumbledore; involvement in Tom Riddle's, otherwise known as Voldemort's, inner circle; and being an accessory to the kidnap of Garrick Ollivander and Luna Lovegood. How do you plead?"

In a flatly robotic voice, Draco said: "Not guilty."
"Will the claimant please approach the witness stand to be examined?"

Draco walked up to the podium, and Harry watched closely as he answered the numerous questions from the defending and prosecuting lawyers. He soon realised that Draco was doing what he always did in the face of a potentially emotional situation: becoming emotionless. He answered all the questions that were thrown at him in the same, slightly tired deadpan. In fact, everything about Draco had the same air of tired monotony. Moving a hand to his robes, Harry checked again that he had his statement with him. As usual, Harry was there as a witness, as were Luna and Ollivander, who sat together a few seats away, and that meant giving a statement to either condemn or support the defendant. It was the part Harry hated most about the hearings.

After both lawyers had examined Draco, Kingsley spoke again.

"Will the first witness for the defence please stand?"

This was Ollivander. Leaning heavily on a walking cane, he made his way to the stand.

"Garrick Ollivander, do you swear to tell only the truth for the duration that you are in this courtroom?"

"Yes."

"Do you confirm that you are indeed Garrick Ollivander, the Wandmaker?"

"Yes."

"Do you confirm that you were held captive in the Malfoys' family home, commonly known as Malfoy Manor?"

"Yes."

"Please give your statement now."

Olivander swallowed. "For the duration of my kidnap, Draco Malfoy continually risked his own safety by bringing me food and drink, as well as blankets when it was cold. He even went as far as to make me healing potions when V-" He breathed a steadying breath. "When Voldemort tortured me. He did this in full knowledge that he could be tortured or killed if he was discovered. I have no doubt that I would have died in that place had it not been for him."

Harry watched Draco, who was looking blankly ahead. He hadn't known that he had helped Olivander, but the knowledge didn't surprise him.

After Olivander's interrogation by the lawyers, Luna gave a statement backing up Olivander's. Soon enough, it was Harry's turn. As he had done at every trial, Harry walked to the podium and, after being asked the same starting questions as Olivander and Luna, he gave the statement he had prepared.

"On the night that Albus Dumbledore died, I was in the tower with Dumbledore, concealed under an invisibility cloak. I was watching as Draco prepared to cast "Avada Kedavra", and I saw that he wouldn't do it, despite the pressure on him to do so. Draco has impressive magical skills, and it would have been perfectly within his abilities to kill Dumbledore, so ask yourselves: how come he failed three times? Because he didn't want to succeed. The only reason he attempted to murder Dumbledore was that Voldemort had threatened to kill him and his family if he didn't. However, he never actually committed to the murders and set the attempts up for failure. In a way, he was saving
the man's life. I believe that blackmail is the reason for his attempted murders, as well as his involvement in Voldemort's inner circle, and the kidnap of Mr Ollivander and Luna.

"Additionally, Draco is responsible for saving the lives of myself, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Dean Thomas, Luna Lovegood, and Garrick Ollivander, because he did not identify me when we were captured by Snatchers and brought to Malfoy Manor. He caused speculation about my identity, which gave us the time to escape. I have no doubt that, if he had not purposefully misidentified my in Malfoy Manor, we could not have escaped, and would have died as a result. I, and the others I have mentioned, owe Draco our lives."

Harry glanced at Draco for the first time. He was looking up at Harry, face almost emotionless. The only thing that gave him away was a tear streak, shining on his cheek.

Both side's lawyers asked questions, to which Harry responded as truthfully as he could, before returning to his seat. Hermione squeezed his hand, and he smiled at her briefly. There followed some more talking from both sides, and finally both Lawyers gave summary statements. A break was then called for the jury to convene. Draco, accompanied by the guards, was lead from the room. He nodded to Luna and Ollivander, and then to Harry, on his way out. Harry nodded back.

Due to the high number of court cases the Ministry had had to deal with in the past two months, juries had a two day limit on discussion before a conclusion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the courtroom together, planning to go to the cafe nearby as they always did after trials. As soon as they left the stuffy room, a swarm of reporters gathered around them. Harry didn't even hear them anymore, he was so used to the press buzzing around him, and together they barged through the huddle of reporters and climbed into the fireplaces, using the Floo network to disappear and then reappear, almost on top of each other, at the Thanks a Latte Coffee Shop. Sue, the tiny woman who ran the cafe, had to jump out of the way as they spilt out of the fireplace.

"Really, you'd think they would have come up with a way to improve the flu by now," she said crossly as she lead them to a table. "All this falling on top of each other nonsense, I don't know," She shook her head, and took out her notebook. "The usual?"

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"So," Ginny started as the bartender handed her a pint, "you never told me how the trial went today."

"Oh, you know," Harry took a gulp of his own beer, "it happened."

"You've been worried about this one for weeks, don't pretend it doesn't matter now." Harry looked at her, and she rolled her eyes. "Really, you've always been a terrible actor. It wouldn't have taken Sherlock Holmes to see you were freaking about it."

"How come you read me so well?"

She smirked. "Pure skill," Then said more seriously, "So, was it okay?"

Harry examined his beer, thinking about how he could phrase how he felt. "It's difficult," He said eventually, "wanting to save everyone and knowing you can't. Knowing that your statement could save or condemn someone is a lot of responsibility and I'm scared I fucked up."

Ginny covered his hand with hers. "I know you're scared, but you have to think logically. I know you tried really hard with that statement, and I really doubt they're going to overlook your point of view, considering who you are. That said, you have to remember that you aren't the most important person in that courtroom. Even if you messed up, it might not matter as much as you think. There are
many components to a jury decision, not just yours."

"You think?"

"I know." Ginny cocked her head to the side. "Anyway, since when did you care so much about Malfoy? Didn't he almost get you killed?"

"He didn't want us killed. Crabbe and Goyle were the ones who tried to kill us. And Draco saved my life as well as several others. He's innocent. No innocent person should have to suffer prison."

"Well, I hope he appreciates how much you've put into this. And Harry-" She squeezed his hand, "I'm sure it'll come out alright in the end."

"Thank you," Harry looked at her gratefully, and Ginny grinned.

"Now stop worrying about it!" She laughed.

Harry returned her smile. "I'll try."

"Good." Ginny kissed him quickly on the lips, and then took a drink of her beer. "So, let me tell you about what happened at the shop today."

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The next morning found Harry back in the same seat in the courtroom, the jury having reached its verdict. As usual, he arrived with Ron and Hermione early, and as soon as Ron got up to go to the bathroom, Hermione rounded on him.

"Harry- no, don't tell me you're alright, I know you're not. You're quite clearly on the brink of a panic attack, you need to have this," She thrust a water bottle into his hands.

"What is it?"

"Water and anxiety potion. Please, drink it. You've gone very pale."

Harry did as she said, having learned over the years that it was usually in his favour to trust Hermione on things like this. The diluted potion took effect immediately, and he felt the jumpy feeling he'd had all morning reside slightly. He drank some more.

"I hate this," He said as he handed Hermione the now-empty bottle. "I hate how much control he has over me, even now."

"Well, it's hardly surprising, is it?" Hermione put the bottle back in her bag and turned to look at him properly. "You were in love with him for, what, two years? And arguably more, considering how long it took you to recover after... well, after everything backfired. It's not something you just bounce back from."

"I don't like caring this much." Harry continued, unswayed by Hermione's logic. "It makes me feel vulnerable."

"I know. But I don't think you ever stop caring about someone you once loved. Not really. You just have to accept it." Hermione paused. "I'm sure it's going to be fine."

"Hm."

At least it's going to be over soon."
"I guess."

Ron returned and, sitting back down, looked quizzically at Harry.

"You alright?" He asked, cautiously, "You're looking pretty stressed."

Harry forced a smile. "Fine. Thanks."

Ron continued, "You know, even though I don't get why you did it, you gave a good statement yesterday. I think the jury's on our side."

"Thanks," Harry smiled a little more genuinely at Ron this time.

The chiming of the bell broke through the room, and everyone stood up as Draco was once again walked into the room by his guards, looking shaggier than he had the day before, but as emotionless as ever. Kingsley spoke:

"Those wishing to review yesterday's hearing may find the transcript on request from the front desk at the department of mysteries. We are here today to hear the jury's verdict on Draco Malfoy. The jury's verdict is final and unanimous." He looked to the jury. "Mr Graile, your verdict, please."

A thin man in a tailored suit stood up and cleared his voice. Harry could hear his own heartbeat echoing in his ears. A second of ear-splitting silence passed. Then, the man spoke:

"This jury has found the defendant, Draco Malfoy... not guilty."

Harry breathed out and grinned at Hermione, who returned his smile with twinkling eyes. Kingsley turned and muttered something to the woman sitting beside him. She nodded, and he turned back to address the room.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy has been declared 'not guilty', and will, therefore, receive no additional sentences. However, by the New Wizarding Decree of Court Sentencing, 1998, anyone bearing the Dark Mark must undergo a minimum sentence of seven months, and in accordance with this law, Draco Lucius Malfoy is sentenced to seven months of prison time in The Alastair Moody Reform Institute, with no bail or early release." Kingsley tapped the gavel three times. "I pronounce this case: closed."
Everything about The Alastair Moody Reform Institute screamed 'new', from the sterile white walls to the smell of paint in the visitor's waiting room, where Harry sat warily watching the clock tick towards nine. Harry was one of several people waiting to see a prisoner (or patient, as the guards called them), and around him sat worried mothers and fathers; and girlfriends, sometimes jogging a baby on their knee to keep them quiet. It didn't help Harry's nerves that many of them stole glances at him, one woman whispering to her toddler: 'Look, sweetheart. It's Harry Potter!'. They were all here to see people they loved. Harry hoped he wasn't.

It had taken the Ministry about three minutes into the first post-War hearing to realise that Azkaban couldn't be the correct punishment for everyone - but that a fine or public service couldn't be an alternative to every minor crime. So they came up with the Moody Institute, modelled on Muggle prisons, by way of punishing the criminals who were worse than petty thieves, but not so bad as murderers. It was now home to about one hundred criminals, split into two separate buildings: one for the men, and one for the women.

The woman next to Harry, an elderly lady with kind eyes, smiled at him.

"You here to see a friend?"

Harry didn't have a correct answer to her question, and ended up saying awkwardly, "In a way, I suppose."

She smiled. "The War must have complicated things for you?"

He nodded, and after a moment of silence, asked:

"Are you here to see your son?"

"My husband." She shook her head, "Silly bugger got caught shoplifting one of those sneakerscope things while the War was on. They were desperate times," She looked at him sadly, "Though I'm sure I don't need to tell you that, Mr Potter."

Harry grimaced. "How long's he in for?"

"Only a month, thankfully. How about your friend?"

"Seven."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," She said, patting his knee.

At nine o'clock on the dot, a guard opened the door and told them that they could come through. Harry walked in and saw Draco immediately, his unusual blonde hair easily standing out. Draco was staring at his linked fingers resting on the table, and only looked up when Harry sat down. As Harry's eyes met the icy blue of Draco's, a memory flashed through his mind. Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Finding Draco sobbing over the porcelain sinks. Draco's curses shooting past his head, and he, Harry, shouting *sectumsempra*, and watching in horror as the cuts appeared, and the blood began to pour out.

"Potter?"

Harry blinked and realised he'd been staring at Draco, who was watching him in confusion.
Attempting to erase the past from his mind, he tried to speak. Harry had rehearsed what he wanted to say several times while he'd waited, but now all the words seemed wiped from his mind.

"Hi," He managed. Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Hi."

An awkward silence fell between them. Why the hell did I decide to do this? Harry thought angrily.

"I didn't think you'd want to see me," Draco said eventually.

"I had to say thank you," Harry said, relieved that Draco had started talking. "About the Manor. About not betraying us."

Draco shrugged. "You would have done the same."

"Still."

Silence again.

"You were very brave, to have lived in the Manor all that time. To have helped Ollivander like you did."

"Again," Draco sighed, "You would have done the same. And anyway," He gestured vaguely, "What did I have to lose at that point? My life?" He laughed mirthlessly, "I didn't care about my life anymore. I just didn't want my mum to die."

"I wanted to save you," Harry said, with no idea why he was telling Draco anything. "When Dobby was apparating us out. I wanted to grab you and take you with us." Harry met Draco's eyes. "I'm so sorry I didn't."

Draco looked to the ceiling. "Potter, you have a saviour complex."

"That's what Ginny says."

Draco blinked, and looked down at his hands. "So it's going well with her, then?" He asked, quietly.

"She's going back to Hogwarts after the Summer. I'll barely see her. I don't know how that's going to work." Harry bit his lip. "But right now, when she's at the Burrow, yeah. It is going well."

"I'm glad," Draco said, tonelessly. "So, is that all you came for? To say thanks?"

"No, not just that. I was wondering if you want to see Teddy."

Draco looked genuinely surprised, and Harry continued,

"I mean, he is your cousin."

Draco nodded, thoughtfully. "He is, isn't he? Do you really want him seeing me here, though? It might be a bad influence."

"I think he'd be fine, it would only be once a week, when I have him round."

Draco thought. "I've never met him before. He might not like me."

"He's a baby, Draco. I don't think he really likes and dislikes people yet." Harry shrugged. "It's fine
if you don't want to see him, I was just asking."

"No, I do want to see him," Draco said quickly. "Sorry, I was just surprised, that's all."

"No problem, I'll take him this time next week, if you want?"

Draco looked like he was about to smile for a moment, but didn't. "Thanks."

"No worries."

Harry was just wondering how soon he could politely leave when Draco said, suddenly;

"How come you call me Draco?"

This surprised Harry. "Because it's your name?"

"You called me Malfoy right through sixth year," Draco pointed out.

"Well, I needed to disassociate. I was pretending you were never 'Draco' in the first place."

"Oh," Draco didn't meet Harry's eyes. "What changed?"

"I don't know," Harry said irritably. "I realised there was no point in pretending what happened didn't happen? I had other stuff to think about? I mean, why do you still call me Potter?"

Draco blinked at the outburst. "I call you Potter because it hurts less. I'm still disassociating."

Harry grimaced. "You should probably sort that out, it's a very unhealthy way of dealing with things."

"I'll be sure to take it up with my therapist," Draco said sarcastically.

Harry looked around for something to change the conversation to. "What's it like here?"

"Comparatively, pretty good. I've lived in tougher prisons." Draco said it like a joke, but the humour didn't reach his eyes.

"So you're not telling me how you got those cuts on your face?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. Draco subconsciously touched the freshly healed lines on his cheek.

"When you're in a prison full of people who were driven to crime by the war you were a part of, a few slashes to the cheek is to be expected."

"Does it happen often?" Harry asked sharply. Draco chuckled.

"Saviour complex, Potter," When he saw Harry's expression, he added, "No, it doesn't. Some people are too scared, some people want me on their side, some people understand that I didn't want to be a part of it. So few people actually hurt me."

"But they still do."

Draco sighed. "I've got the dark mark. I think it's reasonable to be punished for that. And anyway-" He cut Harry off, "There's nothing you can do about it. So I appreciate your concern, but really. Cool it."

Harry raised his hands. "Fine, sorry for caring."
"I think we both know it's easier if you don't care," Draco pointed out.

"Whats that supposed to- whatever, you're right." Harry sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "So I'll bring Ted next week, then?"

"Yeah. Cheers."

As Harry pushed his chair in and turned, Draco spoke again.

"Thank you. For giving a witness statement, and saving my life during that fiendfire thing, and in the Battle of Hogwarts, and... everything," Draco coloured, and didn't meet Harry's eyes. Harry shrugged.

"You would have done the same."

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Harry walked part way home instead of apparating, because he liked feeling the air move around him as he pushed through it. It calmed him down; helped him to think.

He thought about Ginny, and the warm comfort of being around her - the familiarity and friendship. He thought about how it had felt to hold her hand through the crowded streets of Diagon Alley, not caring about the people who stared at him because he was happy. He thought about kissing her, and the way her nose wrinkled up when she grinned. It was all amazing. And yet...

And yet.

There had been nights when he, Ron and Hermione had been on the run where Harry thought he'd go mad from how much he missed Draco. It had surprised him more than anything, that one year after it had ended, and after Ginny had blocked it out a little, it had come back with such force. It had been like someone digging into his skull, constant, and aching, and completely uncontrollable. Lying in his bunk bed, he'd replay scenes from the Guest Room again and again, and wonder why he couldn't just stop it, just let go. And then he'd defeated Voldemort, and gone back to the Burrow, and when Ginny had kissed him it felt like the space Draco had left might be filled, and maybe those nights in the tent had been the product of too much time and too little to occupy his mind.

Harry wanted to believe that he didn't care about Draco anymore, but the truth was that he did. It was like Hermione had said: you can't ever truly stop caring about someone you once loved. And that might be okay. If he wasn't so scared of hurting Ginny.

Jesus Christ, Potter, he thought, you defeat the Dark Lord and what do you do? Go back to moping after some boy who broke your heart, and in doing so push away the only other person who might be able to fix it. Go figure.

Harry comforted himself with the fact that it didn't really matter if Draco was inside his head. Ginny was who he was with, and that was that. There was a wonderful simplicity in having your mind made up for you.

_A/N: Hey guys, hope you're enjoying the new parts... I know they're a big change but please give them a chance. I want to ask you all a favour: could you take a couple of minutes to write a review? It doesn't have to be long, but just say what you like and, especially, what you dislike about my writing. That way I can improve! It would mean so much to me. Thank you, as always. -E_
"Here's to never having to attend a hearing again!" Neville yelled, a little drunkenly. "Hip hip!"

"Hooray!" Chorused the other DA members. They all sat in the Three Broomsticks, and despite their large circular table, there was only just enough space for everyone. Harry was uncomfortably squashed in between Ginny and Ron.

It had been Luna's idea to go out for a drink after the last hearing. Most of the members of the DA had seen almost as many court cases as Harry, and now that the very last one was out of the way it was as though a huge weight had been lifted off their shoulders. Hopefully, they could now focus on getting their lives on track and leaving the war behind. Ginny would be returning for her final year at Hogwarts at the end of August. Ron and Hermione had been managing Weasley's Wizard Wheezes because Fred had barely left his and George's old room since the Battle. Neville wanted to be a teacher and had already started training, and Luna had joined her father in writing the Quibbler full time. It seemed they all had a plan - or at least knew their next steps. Harry took a big gulp of his firewhisky, enjoying the burning sensation in his stomach. He had no idea what he was going to do. He didn't even know where to start.

The door banged open, and the DA members at the table jumped, whipping around to face the sound. It was Dean and Seamus, late as usual. Everyone relaxed, even laughed a little, and stood to greet them, squeezing up even more to make space for them. Harry, realizing that he had his wand out and pointing at the new arrivals, turned red and quickly hid it in his pocket. Ron, noticing, nodded.

"I do that too. Don't even realise. A car exhaust popped outside the shop yesterday and before I knew it, Hermione and I were hiding behind the counter and grabbing our wands, like we thought we were being attacked."

"Oh yeah? Glad to know I'm not the only one," Harry grimaced.

"Hermione said that Muggles had a name for it. PTD, or something like that. Hermione?"

"Hm?" She turned from her conversation Neville.

"What did you say muggles called that trauma thing?"

"You mean PTSD?"

"That's the one," Ron smiled, and turned back to Harry. "It happens to lots of people who go through stuff like we did."

"I got it after first year," Ginny said suddenly. Harry hadn't realized she'd been listening. "I used to have nightmares all the time about being possessed or trapped. I get them now, too. So does Harry. I've woken up to him yelling in his sleep before."

Ron looked uncomfortable at the hint at Harry and Ginny's relationship, but didn't mention it. "Me and Hermione get the same. I should think everyone here does, to some extent."

"Feels like the War's still following me around," Harry muttered, staring at his drink. "I just want to forget it ever happened."

"Think we all do, mate," Ron smiled a little sadly. "It'll get better, though."
Harry smiled at him. "Let's hope so."

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"Aren't you an early riser?" Harry tried to sound cross but couldn't in the face of Teddy Lupin's toothless, dribbly grin. "Loving the red-hair look, by the way. Very Weasley."

Teddy gurgled happily as Harry lifted him out of his crib and carried him through the messy apartment to the kitchen, where he sat him on the high chair by the table.

"For someone who can't speak, you really talk a lot, don't you?" Harry grinned, tapping Teddy on the nose before turning and looking in the cupboard for baby food. "What are you feeling? I got carrot and pea, and sweet potato, both of which look exactly the same. You know, I think it's a carrot and pea day, don't you?"

Harry liked having Teddy around. He looked after his Godson one night a week to give the Lupins some time off, and despite the lack of sleep, he loved every minute. Teddy seemed to enjoy it just as much as Harry did and constantly babbled in an illegible stream of baby talk, to which Harry replied as though he were having a full two-sided conversation. In all honesty, he found his Godson to be better company than most people.

After a game of 'Here comes the aeroplane' - something which had completely baffled all the purebloods who'd seen him feed Teddy, but which Teddy loved - Harry brought Teddy back through to the spare room, which had quickly become Teddy's bedroom.

"Do you know who we're going to see today?" Harry chatted as he changed Teddy's nappy and put on his day clothes. "We're seeing your cousin Draco! Isn't that exciting?" Teddy kicked his chubby legs about and waved his hands in the air for Harry to pick him up. "And we have to go by taxi because you can't apparate or floo. Aren't you an annoying little thing?" Harry said affectionately, placing Teddy down into his play area. "Now you wait here while I get changed."

Ted and Andromeda hadn't liked the idea of his bringing Teddy to a prison, but something in Harry made him adamant that it was the right thing to do. Draco didn't have much family left - his mother was in prison for longer than he was, having been a Death Eater, and the rest of his family was in Azkaban - and seeing Teddy might make him happier, as it did with Harry. Moreover, Harry wanted Teddy to see that good people and bad people weren't always easily marked out from one another. It was a lesson that had taken him too long to learn, and one he intended to pass on.

And so it was that Harry and Teddy found themselves in the waiting room of the Moody Institute, and if people had stared at Harry before, it was nothing compared to how they reacted to a baby with hair that had rapidly changed from yellow to pink to green as they waited to be allowed in. With the same punctuality as the previous week, the guard appeared and the visitors filed in, the room looking exactly the same as it had the last time Harry visited.

"Hey," Harry said, sitting down.

"Hi," Draco was watching Teddy curiously. Teddy had gone oddly quiet, staring back at Draco with round, solemn eyes. "I'm guessing this is Teddy."

"It is indeed," Harry held Teddy so that he stood on Harry's knees, though Harry supported his weight. "Teddy, this is Draco, your cousin."

They both looked at Teddy, who was silent for a moment before his hair turned firmly blonde. Draco's mouth fell open.
"I didn't know he was a Metamorphmagus!" Draco exclaimed.

Teddy giggled and moved his hands. Harry began to bounce him a little, which Andromeda had said he should do to strengthen his legs.

"He's great, isn't he?" Harry grinned as he looked down at his Godson.

"How old is he?" Draco asked, still watching Teddy who had begun his incessant baby-talk once more, happily bobbing about on Harry's knees.

"Seven months, but he's bloody precocious. Been crawling way before any of the other babies in his playgroup, and constantly talks gibberish, as you can see," Harry lifted Teddy a little higher into the air as though he was jumping, earning a squeal of delight. "That's part of the reason I look after him once a week. Andromeda and Ted couldn't deal with someone as high-energy as he is twenty-four-seven."

"So he coped well after... well, after the Battle?"

Harry looked at the energetic toddler on his lap. "We think he's dealing well, but we can't really be sure at this age. He doesn't really seem to cry that much though - unless he's hungry or something - so I guess that's probably good?"

"I guess you'll know once he's able to talk." Draco seemed mesmerised, watching his cousin babble to himself as Harry bounced him.

"Do you want to hold him?" Harry asked.

"Hold him?" Draco peered at Teddy suspiciously. "Won't he throw up on me or something?"

"Probably not, he's past that stage a bit."

Draco remained unsure. "I've never held a baby before."

"He does most of the work for you. Just hold him so that he feels like he's standing up, he loves that. He really wants to walk."

"Okay..." Draco held out his arms and Harry passed Teddy across the table. Teddy, finding this journey to be tremendous fun, giggled and kicked his legs through the air.

"He's not contagious," Harry laughed as Draco held Teddy almost at arm's length. Teddy reached a tiny hand towards Draco's face as Draco cautiously brought the toddler a little closer. Quiet with concentration, Teddy put his hands on Draco's nose.

"Why is he doing this?" Draco asked in a muffled voice as Teddy continued to explore his face, almost sticking a hand into Draco's mouth.

"Babies and toddlers learn about new things through touch," Harry explained. "He likes new textures."

"Ouch!" Draco yelped as Teddy grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled. "Merlin, kid, do you have to?"

"Yeah, he does that to me all the time," Harry grinned.

"What is he- his eyes look like mine now!" Draco laughed. "That was disconcerting."
"He must like you, he's trying to look like you."

"How flattering," Draco smirked.

"I'm glad you get on," Harry said smilingly. Draco cocked his head, still looking at Teddy.

"He's cute, I guess."

"How complimentary of you," Harry laughed.

"So how's life?" Draco asked, bouncing Teddy as Harry had been doing. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh, you know," Harry shrugged.

"No, I don't."

"Nothing's been happening," Harry confessed. "I haven't been up to anything."

"Surely you've done something," Draco pressed. Harry thought.

"I did an interview for the Daily Prophet. Again."

"How did that go?"

"Better than Rita Skeeter's old interviews used to," Harry shrugged. "I don't know, I kind of go on autopilot when the press is around."

"Do you get lots of attention from people?"

"They stare, or come and ask for autographs. A surprising amount just leave me alone now. It's not as bad as it was for the first few weeks. I could barely leave the house then."

"Must be annoying."

"Eh, it's not so bad."

"Ha!" Teddy exclaimed, reaching back to Harry. "Ha!"

"That means Harry," Harry explained, reaching across for Teddy. "Here, pass him over."


"How's prison?" Harry asked, looking back up at Draco.


"Do you get other visitors?"

"Blaise. He never got involved in either side of the war so he's free. He comes on Mondays, that's the only other visit day."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

Harry cleared his throat. "Well..."
"Yeah," Draco sat up. "You probably have places to be."

Harry nodded. "Do you want me to come back next week?"

"Sure. I mean, yes, thank you." Draco gave a small smile. "Take care."

"You too," Harry smiled. "See you."

_A/N: I had a bit of trouble writing this one - the words weren't wording very well. I hope it reads okay._
The flat smelled of warmth and cooking, reminding Harry of the Burrow. It was a comforting, homely feel, unusual for his cold, impersonal flat. He was checking the lasagna one last time when a pop outside the door announced Ginny's arrival.

"Hey," She smiled, giving him a quick kiss, "What've you made? Smells amazing."

"Lasagna. Your mum gave me the recipe, but I made a few adjustments of my own. And for dessert, I got Ben and Jerry's."

"You what?"

"A Muggle brand of ice cream - Jesus, when are wizards going to start using Tesco like normal people?"

Ginny laughed as she walked into the flat, but the sound died away slightly as she looked around.

"Bit messy," She commented. Harry sighed.

"I know."

"You said you were going to clean up."

"I... I never really got round to it."

Ginny's eyes hardened. "Harry, I'm a bit concerned that you haven't 'got round' to anything for about three months now."

"Cleaning just didn't seem like the most important thing to do."

"It's not about that, is it? It's about you not finding a job, about you barely leaving the house, about you not trying to move on."

"I just-" Despite Ginny's anger, Harry spoke quietly. "I just wanted us to have a nice dinner together. I feel like we haven't been doing anything recently."

Ginny's shoulders fell a little, and she sighed. "Okay. Sorry. Let's just have dinner."

Awkwardness permeated their conversations like damp air as they ate the meal, which, Ginny commented, was delicious.

"It's surprising your mum lets you come over here," Harry said as he went over to the freezer to get the ice cream. "Isn't she worried we're having sex or something?"

"It's a bit late for that, isn't it?" Ginny smiled properly for the first time since they'd sat down to eat. "No, she's not that worried. She likes you, and she trusts you, and anyway, I'm old enough to do what I want now, so she can't really stop me."

Usually Ginny might have stayed the night, but neither the idea of sex, nor of talking, seemed very enticing to either of them at that moment. Ginny slipped on her leather jacket, thanking Harry for the dinner.

"My pleasure," Harry said. "Glad you enjoyed it."
As Ginny was about to leave, she turned back, biting her lip. "I'm worried about you. You seem stuck. You're not doing anything."

"There's nothing to do."

Ginny sighed.

After she'd left, Harry gathered the plates together and put them in the dishwasher. He looked around at the flat, which still didn't feel like a home despite the fact that he had lived here for several months.

He went to bed.

0o0oDraco0o0o


"Well, I'm still in prison," Draco smirked. "I would rate my stay two stars out of five: food's alright but beds are uncomfortable and the room service is simply appalling."

They both laughed.

"So," Draco continued. "How's Pansy?"

"Single," Blaise said triumphantly. "I dumped her a few days ago when she threw a tantrum about - get this - me blinking too much."

Draco snorted. "My good man, you made the right choice. Welcome back to the real world."

Blaise shook his head, smiling. "I guess after a while I was just liking her out of habit, I never really stopped to consider why. But as soon as we started going out it was like being slapped back into reality. I think the only reason it lasted as long as it did was sex."

"Good?"

"Very. In some circumstances, it isn't a bad thing to be crazy."

"I bet. So, you got your eye on anyone else?"

"I think it's polite to be single for a while before moving on. I'm taking a break. I want to work on the career."

"Oh yeah? What do you want to do?"

"Journalism."

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I never knew you liked writing."

Blaise shrugged. "I want people to know the truth. I thought I could even start my own newspaper. God knows I don't want to work for that rag, The Daily Prophet. Which, by the way, is almost out of business."

"Good," Draco wrinkled his nose in disgust at the Ministry-owned newspaper. "They deserve to shrivel up after taking his side in the War. Well, Blaise, I hope your ambition is realised."

"Thank you," Blaise smiled. "So, has Potter still been visiting with Teddy?"
"Yup," Draco smiled. "I've seen Teddy twice now. He's amazing, you know? I never realised I like kids but he's so brilliant. Harry says he's much further ahead than any of the other kids in his nursery - he's almost walking now!"


Draco shook his head. "No one could meet this kid and not like him."

Blaise raised his eyebrow. "And what about Potter? I noticed you're calling him Harry again."

"Yeah, well, times change. He's becoming something dangerously close to a friend."

"You sure you don't mean something more than that?"

"Blaise, he's with Ginny. I'm not going to try to come between something that's making him happy."

"But do you still like him?" Blaise and Draco had both automatically lowered their voices as they began to talk about Harry. Draco set his jaw.

"Of course I still like him," He said, finally. "I never stopped liking him. You know that."

Blaise grimaced. "When you guys were younger I thought you were just saying you loved him because... well, you know, I thought you and Potter were young and stupid. I didn't realise how much you meant it."

"Well, I guess I did. He moved on, though, and I'm glad because I think Ginny seems nice."


"Don't say shit like that, it doesn't help." Draco said flatly.

"Okay," Blaise raised his hands. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Draco smiled to elevate the tension. "So, have you thought about how you're going to become a journalist?"

Hostility averted, the two lapsed into the usual easy conversation once more. By ignoring the guards and the hospital-smell, Draco could almost imagine that they were getting lunch together at a cafe somewhere in London.
"And how is my little monster of a cousin?" Draco eagerly took Teddy from Harry and started bouncing him on his knee, speaking to him the way Harry did - as though he were having a full conversation. Teddy babbled back to him in fluent baby-talk, sometimes in such a serious voice that he sounded like he was really speaking. Something about his cousin made Draco happier than most anything else, even when the kid was crying.

Finally, he looked up at Harry. "How's he been?"

"One word: teething." Harry winced. "He's doing okay right now, but he's been grizzling and crying on and off ever since last week."

"Isn't there a spell or a potion for that?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you? But apparently, it's bad to use too much magic on babies. So he's just got a teething ring instead."

"Well, he'll probably be passed this stage soon, at least."

"One can only pray," Harry smiled. "On the upside, he's started using his first words."

"Really?" Draco asked excitedly, "What's he said?"

"Andromeda is 'Ga-ma', and Ted is 'Ga-da'."

Confused, Draco raised an eyebrow. "Those aren't real words,"

"Apparently, anything used to label one specific person or object is considered a word, as long as they use it repeatedly."


"No way, he's saying my name first," Harry grinned. "You can say that, can't you, Teddy?" Say, Harry."

Teddy pointed at Harry. "Ha!"

"Close enough," Harry reached across the table and ruffled Teddy's hair.

"Ha, Ha," Teddy burbled happily. His hair, which had been yellow since they had arrived, now turned messily brown. It still caught Draco off-guard when Teddy changed his appearance like that.

When Draco looked back up at Harry, he noticed strain in the skin around his eyes. He looked tired.

"You okay?" Draco asked.

"Why?"

"You don't look too good."

"Thanks," Harry laughed a little, but Draco persisted.

"I know you, Harry. I can tell when you're feeling down about something."

"I'm just tired. It's nothing, really."

"My arse."

"Language! Young ears are present, Draco."

Teddy, sensing they were talking about him, giggled at Harry's chastising tone.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine," Draco continued, "But don't bother lying. You've never been good at it."

Harry's jaw clenched. Then he started to talk. "All my life, there was a purpose to my existence, and I knew what I needed to do, and why. I had to defeat Voldemort, and then I could live my life. Then I did it, and now, I'm stuck. There's no reason for me to be alive. There's no plan. Just me, eating out of habit, sleeping for something to do. Existing. I'm watching my friends leaving me behind, carrying on their lives like they know what to do. And I can't fix myself."

Draco met Harry's eyes, and something jolted inside him. He didn't know what to say.

"You're..." He searched for the right words. "You're only feeling like this because you're not used to normal life. For everyone else, there's never been a plan. They just get on with what needs to be done at the time. You feel like they're leaving you behind, but really they're just doing what they've always done. They can't understand that you don't know how to do that."

"Ha," Teddy agitated to be given back to his Godfather, and Draco obliged, passing him to Harry, who held him tightly to his chest.

"That doesn't help me learn to do it," Harry said.

"You'll get there. Really, you will. Of course, you're going to have to adjust for a while. We all are. But it will get better."

"When, though?" Harry readjusted his hold on Teddy, who was beginning to grizzle. Draco threw his hands up.

"I don't know. Hell, I'm still trying to figure myself out. You think I don't sometimes lie awake at night, knowing that if I died right then, it wouldn't matter even the tiniest bit? You think other people don't wonder what their purpose is? You'll find something that gives you a reason eventually. I mean, you've got Ginny. Surely that helps?"

Harry surprised Draco by looking even more tired at the mention of his girlfriend.

"Ginny-" He sighed. "She wants to move on from the war. She can move on from the war, and it pisses her off that I can't. I can't blame her. It's hard for her with me holding her back."

Teddy started to cry. Harry reached into the bag he'd brought with him and handed Teddy a teething ring.

"Sorry to hear that," Draco said.

"Not your fault," Harry looked at Teddy. "Is that better now?" He asked, looking his godson over with a tense expression. Draco had an idea.

"Surely you can see Teddy as a reason to live? He loves you, and he needs you now more than ever,
after losing his parents. Maybe see if you can have him over more or something, that might help?"

Harry thought for a moment, then gave Draco a small smile. "That's a good idea. Thanks."

Draco smiled back. Then found himself feeling something dangerous. Practically beating back his emotions with a stick, he ignored the intrusive thoughts that snuck through his mind as he and Harry continued to talk for a while. Eventually, however, Teddy became too restless to stay still and Harry started getting ready to leave. Just as he started to walk away, he stopped and turned back to face Draco.

"You're the only person who I've talked to whose actually understood how I'm feeling right now. You have no idea how much it's helped to talk to someone who doesn't think I'm just lazy or something. Thank you."

Draco smiled a little. "It helps that I'm feeling pretty much how you are right now. Glad to know I could be of service."

"I'll see you next week then?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

Harry smiled. "Cool."

0o0oHarry0o0o

Despite the general chatter around the huge dining table at the Burrow, Harry felt as though he and Ginny were sitting in a bubble of silence. Across the table, Ron and Hermione were chatting animatedly to them, hands tightly intertwined between them as they ate their dessert single-handedly. They were saying something about the shop - no, now they were discussing... Harry shook himself, trying to remain focused. But even if he'd fallen asleep, he doubted they would have noticed. They were talking more to each other than to him and Ginny.

Harry couldn't help comparing his and Ginny's relationship to the way it had been with Draco. Even a few days ago, when he and Draco had been talking while Harry visited, Harry had felt more understood than he had done in quite a long time. He hadn't felt lazy, or stupid. He'd felt normal.

After dinner, he and Ron sat by the fire, alone together for a moment. Harry was reminded of another time he'd spent sitting by the fire, talking to Ginny in the dead of night. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"How's George holding up?" He asked Ron, who's face instantly became taught.

"All of us miss Fred, obviously. I mean, I catch mum crying sometimes when she thinks no one sees her. I do too, I think we all do. It's been better since the funeral, I think. But George-" Ron breathed out heavily through his nose. "I don't know how to help him. I'm scared we'll never get him back."

"Do you even see him now?"

Ron shook his head. "He barely allows anyone into his room. Mum brings him food, and sometimes he eats it. But we couldn't get in there even if we tried. He's too sad and too good at magic for us to even get close to his bedroom."

They shared a look, years of friendship making it easier to communicate without words.

"He'll get better," Harry said eventually.
"Yeah."

Neither of them sounded convinced.
When he'd imagined this moment, Harry had guessed that he would feel sad. Lonely, maybe. Unwanted. Lost.

He hadn't prepared himself for feeling nothing.

Across the coffee-stained table, Ginny watched him with her big brown eyes, trying to spot in him an emotion that couldn't come forward. He searched for the right thing to say, but didn't find any of the words he needed.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, eventually. "Okay?"

"Fine," Harry managed, and attempted a small smile. "It's okay. Don't worry about me. I think we both knew this was happening."

"I don't want us to be awkward, or to stop talking," Ginny said. "I love you a lot, even if it's not-"

"Yeah, I know." Harry smiled more genuinely this time. "I feel the same way about you, Gin."

"It was fun while it lasted."

"Yeah."

"I'm sure you'll find someone who-"

"Ginny, really, don't bother."

She smiled apologetically. "Sorry."

An awkward silence fell between them.

"So," Harry said, with a sense of finality.

"Yeah," Ginny stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

"Have a great year."

"You too. I'll see you at Christmas probably, at the Burrow."

"Yeah."

"See you."

"Yeah."

He watched her walk away, her dazzling hair making her seem brighter than everyone else in the crowded cafe. She walked with a boyish confidence that somehow made her femininity even more alluring, her muscular arms balancing out her curves. She was beautiful, anyone could see that. But Harry saw more than just her looks. He saw his sister, the girl he had watched grow up - with whom he'd had conversations late at night about life and death and all in between, but also had furious quidditch matches in the mud and pouring rain. He saw the girl who had kissed him so fervently when the war had ended, but he also saw the face of his best friend's mother, his own surrogate family, when she laughed and when she cried.
He saw a girl who could never have stayed with him, and he knew that in the end, this was how it had to be.

After Ginny had disappeared from view, Harry sat and slowly drank the remains of his lukewarm hot chocolate, staring out of the window into the rain outside. Eventually, he stood, and walked out into the angry winds and clinging rain, not bothering to pull his jacket around him.

Alone, again.
Harry grinned at Draco when he entered the meeting room, feeling pleased when the gesture was returned. The simple exchange would have seemed out of the question when Harry had first started visiting, but over the months since he’d been seeing Draco, a friendship had solidified between the two. Before Harry reached the table where Draco sat, he placed Teddy on the ground, and watched proudly as he walked on shaky legs towards his cousin. Grinning, Draco reached out to Teddy as he neared the table, and as soon as he was close enough, swung him up into the air.

"You clever, clever little thing!" Draco said, "You're the finest walker I ever saw!"

"Certainly an improvement, isn't it?" Harry said happily, remembering the last time Teddy had attempted to walk while they visited Draco. "No nosebleeds today, fingers crossed."

Draco grimaced, settling Teddy onto his knee. "Let's hope so. How've you been?"

"Actually... pretty good," Harry smiled. "I'm going to start coaching twice a week now."

It had been Draco who'd suggested, a week or so after Harry and Ginny had broken up, that Harry should try volunteering to give him something to do. It was the first time anyone had thought of it - most people just told Harry that he needed to just get a job and stop slouching around - and when Harry had seen an advertisement for a volunteer to help coach a kid's Quidditch team, he'd taken it as a sign. A month and a half later, it still surprised him how good it felt to be doing something productive.

"I'm so glad you're enjoying it," Draco smiled. "I don't want to say I told you so, but..."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry rolled his eyes. "I know you did."

"One of these days, you'll finally realise that I am always right."

"Oh, step off," Harry waved Draco away good-naturedly. "So. How're things on your end?"

"Same old, same old, I guess. I saw Blaise on Monday. Did I tell you he's starting a newspaper?"

"Yeah?"

"He got into the idea of journalism, but he's the sort of guy who likes to be his own boss, so he wants to actually own the company, and that means creating it himself. Never one to do things by halves, old Blaise."

Harry nodded, impressed. "I hope he's successful. A good newspaper is a rare and brilliant thing."

"If anyone can do it, he can. But he needs sponsors and investors, and he seems to be having trouble finding them."

"Really? You'd think that everyone would be a bit more careless with money now, when the post-war feeling is all about."

"Thing is, a lot of people want to start their own newspaper at the moment, seeing as the Profit's gone, so it's hard for him to stand out."

"I see." Harry said. "Well, hopefully he'll get something sorted. I'm sure he will."
"Yeah. He'll figure something out." Draco focussed on playing with Teddy for a few minutes, before saying off-handedly; "In other news, I started seeing a psychiatrist."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Why?" Draco snorted. "Harry, I'm about as fu- messed up-" Draco corrected the swear word for Teddy's sake, "as a human being can possibly be."

"What do you mean?"

"Want a list? PTSD, childhood trauma, daddy issues, paranoia," Draco ticked off on his fingers. "Hey - that rhymed. Maybe I can put them in a song so I'll remember them better."

Harry couldn't understand how Draco was being so lighthearted. "You don't seem like you...

"...Have issues? Neither do you, from just talking to you, but I'll bet you're a psychologist's wet dream. Surely you can't believe anyone in our generation could come out of the War with no damage done to them? And you're probably the worst affected of all of us."

Harry mulled over Draco's words. "When are you seeing this psychologist?"

"I saw Emma for the first time yesterday, and I'm seeing her again tomorrow."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she's really nice. She seems to know her stuff."

"What do you even do in a counselling session?"

"Well, this one was mostly just an introduction. There's a lot of talking. I think sometimes we'll use a pensive to look at important memories. My main priority right now is to stop the nightmares."

Harry blinked. "You get them too?"

Draco nodded. "Almost every night. Or at least, every night when I can even get to sleep."

"Reliving memories?"

"Kind of. They're like a distorted version of events. She doesn't want to diagnose me with anything yet, but Emma said I might have something called 'Complex PTSD'. I'm not sure exactly what that is yet, but I guess if I have it, I'll learn about it."

Something clicked in Harry's memory. "Ron said something about PTSD ages ago. We were saying how we keep reacting really strongly to normal things like a loud noise, or lights flashing-"

"For me, its worst when people raise their voice," Draco said. "Something about shouting seems to trigger things in my brain, and it's suddenly like..."

"...Like it's all happening again. Like you're back where you were, and you can't escape."

Draco nodded. "You can see why it can be difficult to deal with in a prison environment."

"Oh, yeah," Harry bit his lip."That really sucks."

"Eh. I'm just glad I'm not in Azkaban."
"I guess," Harry shrugged, not really convinced.

"Draco."

Harry and Draco stared at Teddy.

"What was that, Teddy?" Draco asked. Teddy pointed at him.

"Draco."

Draco and Harry looked at each other in amazement. Then, a huge grin lit up Draco's face.

"He knows my name!" Draco laughed. "Teddy, what's my name?"

"Draco," Teddy said, again.

"He really knows it!" Draco hugged Teddy to himself and looked up at Harry with a thrilled expression. Something deep inside Harry lurched.

PTSD forgotten, the conversation moved on to other topics. It was almost as easy to talk to Draco as it was for Harry to think, and unbidden, the conversation brought back memories of the hours they had spent talking during their time at Hogwarts. In the end, it was only Teddy's restlessness that made Harry reluctantly stand, and gather his things.

"Hey," he said before he left, "I'm... uh... really proud of you. For getting help for everything."

Draco smiled as he stood up to leave too. "Cheers. Emma said that if you accept that you need help, you're halfway there. So I guess that's comforting."

Harry bit his lip.

"What is it?" Draco asked, and Harry breathed out heavily.

"Are you gonna... I mean, will you tell her about..." He looked at Draco, whose eyebrows rose in comprehension. They were both turning red.

"Um," Draco swallowed. "I guess I hadn't thought about it? I mean, do you think I'll need to?"

It was the first time they'd mentioned their relationship in over three years. It felt wrong to be talking about it here, in a prison meeting room, with Teddy Lupin grizzling as he looked between them both, sensing the unease.

"Look, could you just... not tell her? I mean, if it does come up, for whatever reason." Harry asked, finally.

"You're still scared?" The phrase was a question, but it sounded more like a statement.

"Of course I'm still scared. Aren't you?"

Draco's eyes seemed to pierce through Harry as they watched each other.

"I won't tell her," Draco said, at last, and Harry nodded.

"Thank you."

"But can I ask why?"
Harry thought, trying to explain why he felt the way he did. "Because," He was finding it difficult to look at Draco, and concentrated on the floor, wishing his face would cool down. "What happened between us... It's ours. And..." He tried to put the sentence together, but couldn't. "It's ours," He repeated, eventually. He looked back up at Draco, who nodded.

"Okay."

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Teddy cried for the entire journey back to Andromeda and Teds' house, and by the time he handed the bawling kid over to his grandparents, Harry felt wiped out. Apparating back to his apartment, he walked in, closed the door, and stood.

A million tangled emotions raged inside him, but he didn't have the energy to sort through them. When his thoughts approached Draco, a swell of feeling made them skitter away again in fear. Maybe it was the fact that they'd discussed what had happened between them - albeit in a roundabout way. Or maybe it was just the new familiarity they had found. Whatever it was, it was terrifying. With sudden decision, Harry approached the large mirror Hermione had insisted he place in the living room (to make it feel larger than it actually was), and closely inspected himself. With practiced ease, Harry cast several spells which changed his appearance just enough to cause uncertainty about who he was - lighter hair, brown eyes, and most importantly, the disappearance of his scar. It was the same alter-appearance he'd worn in the weeks following the end of the War to avoid the press, so he barely had to think to cast the spells. Grabbing his keys, muggle wallet and jacket, Harry headed briskly out of the door.

The Lion was only a couple of streets away, and Harry reached it within minutes of leaving the apartment. The rainbow flag in the window stood out in the grey, dreary light of pre-evening winter, and Harry was grateful for the warmth as he pushed open the door. Walking to the bar, he sat down and looked around.

The bar was small enough to feel personal, but large enough not to be cramped. The energy in the room was infectious.

"Hey," A voice came from Harry's side, and he turned to see a handsome guy, about his age, with dark skin and short dreadlocks framing his face. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Harry smiled. "Absolutely."

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Hermione groaned, covering her face with her hands. "You idiot..."

"I know, I know," Harry grimaced. "I just got scared."

"And then what happened?"

"I woke up after him, so I couldn't sneak out. He'd made breakfast. We talked a bit and he's really nice, but I told him I didn't want anything... anything else. And he was fine with that, so I went home."

Sitting back in her chair, Hermione took a long drink of coffee. Then, she smiled.

"What?" Harry asked, a sheepish smile picking at the corners of his own mouth.

"It's just a very Harry thing to do, that's all. Look, you're acting like this is a big deal, but it really
isn't. Actually, what you did was a really normal thing to do."

That surprised Harry. "Running off and having sex with a random guy to forget about someone else?"

"Well... yeah."

"Okay, but what do I do? About Draco?"

Hermione shrugged. "I guess you'll just have to do what you think is right. But, I mean, say you did decide to ask him out... what's holding you back? His dad's not an issue anymore, the war's over, and you're both adults now."

Harry shook his head, something in him panicking when he thought about what Hermione was suggesting.

"But why not?"

"I just... I don't know."

"Is it because he broke your heart last time? Because you know it's different now. That situation was out of your control, but-"

"Hermione, stop! Please, I just don't want to talk about it. I'm just going to ignore it, and carry on."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That is the dumbest-"

"Really, drop it."

"Fine," Hermione purses her lips. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

Harry decided to change the subject.

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**A/N:** I think that no matter how much effort someone puts into describing a house layout or something similar, it's still impossible to make people really get it without images. So I put a picture of the floorplan of Harry's apartment on my wattpad account, which is the same story under the same name, if you want to see it. I would have put the link to it on here, but there was no direct link to the picture that I could find, unfortunately. Also, please feel free to review if you have time! It's really good to hear criticism, and very rewarding to hear praise. -Evie

**Link to my WP:** 475811241-what-if-drarry-chapter-ten

(Let me know if it doesn't work)
A gasp tore from Draco's throat as his eyes snapped open and he sat up, looking wildly around before finally, realisation dawned. It had all been another nightmare. He was eighteen and in his room in the Moody Institute, not a terrified sixteen year old trapped in the Manor. In the blueish half-dark of the early morning, Draco lay back down on sheets that were damp from sweat, and took deep breaths.

*It was just a dream, Draco. It's not real. You're not going crazy. It was just a dream...*

Reaching up, Draco wiped a hand over his face and tried to clear his head, and when his heart rate had slowed to a more normal tempo, he looked at his watch. It read twelve minutes past six. He wondered why they hadn't been roused by the alarm yet - which usually went off at six - and then remembered in one big rush what day it was.

*What a great way to start Christmas, Draco thought, angrily. Falalalala lalalala.*

Not even prisoners were expected to wake up at six on Christmas day, but, lie in or not, there was no way he was getting back to sleep. He pulled back the covers, got out of his narrow bed, and dressed in the black overalls that were standard to all the inmates of the Moody Institute. Charlie, with whom he shared his room, was softly snoring on a bed identical to Draco's, beer-belly creeping over the edge of the mattress. Charlie was a big, gruff man with a heavy North London accent who had gone down for three years after using crucio on a gay couple one night when he'd had too many drinks. Their relationship was uneasy at best. Thank God the man was a heavy sleeper - God knew what he might hear if he wasn't.

The room was something between a cell and a cheap hotel room, with its only furnishings being a bed on each side, a tiny desk and hard chair at the foot of each bed, a cabinet at the head, and a thin window stretched across the top of the back wall. The automatic lights hadn't gone on yet, and Draco could only half see as he sat down at the desk and pulled a notebook and quill towards himself.

Magic is a powerful thing. It can heal almost any physical injury with relative quickness, and it can alleviate pain and suffering with the simple brewing of a potion. But Draco had learned that one of the few things more complex than magic itself is the human mind. There were no spells for the flashbacks he kept on having; no potion to end the tremors that started with loud noises. In the field of psychology, it was wizards who copied muggles. There were, of course, some ways in which magic could be used - anti-anxiety potion, sleep draughts and reliving memories through a pensive all helped to put a bandage on the problems - but when it came down to it, the mind took no shortcuts. It appreciated hard work, not pretty spells.

As Draco had told Harry several visits ago, the psychiatrist he was seeing was called Emma. Emma was Muggle-born, the daughter of a psychologist and a surgeon, and had trained in both the Muggle world and the magic. It had been clear from the minute Draco had walked into the Psychiatric wards of the Moody Institute that she was someone who knew what they were doing. She didn't seem to mind the Mark he bore like a curse on his forearm, and didn't seem bothered by the fact that three attempted murders hung over his head. She had smiled, and then she had started to help him.

Draco began to write, as he did dutifully every night, every single detail of the dream that he could remember. This was one of the techniques Emma had taught him in an effort to stop the flow of nightmares from plaguing his sleep. The dream hadn't been much different from the other ones - just another distorted memory resurfacing and doing its best to drive him insane - but he wrote it down anyway. When he'd finished, he took a new line and wrote the dream again, this time changing the
ending to turn out positive. This was the most important part. This was the step which, hopefully, would help his brain gain control over the memories. A small desk lamp helped him see - no wands meant no Lumos - but by the time he'd finished, the day had aged sufficiently for him to see without it. He stood up, stretched, and wondered how much longer he'd have to wait before breakfast.

The answer came fifteen minutes later in the form of a loud beeping noise, which seemed to come from the very air of the room. Despite how familiar the sound was after hearing it every day for six months, Draco still had to consciously stop himself from reacting to it, as muscle memory could often cause him to take cover or reach for a wand that wasn't there at any abrupt noise. A spell meant that the alarm only stopped when every last prisoner was up and dressed - a clever little detail which forced efficiency from even the hardest night owl. As soon as the door to his cell was unlocked, Draco walked through the corridor and into the mess hall. Hands in his pockets, eyes on the floor, he tried his best to be invisible as he made his way to the self-serve, collected a slice of toast and an egg, and sat down at the very edge of the large room as the beeping noise fell silent, signalling that everyone had woken up.

Draco didn't have any friends in the prison, nor did he want any. He preferred to stay on the sidelines, to watch the world go by as an observer instead of a part in the play, because if they didn't notice him, people probably wouldn't be so tempted to do bad things to him. Cut his face up, for example. He'd played that one down for Harry and Blaise. Played it all down, in fact, because there was no point in worrying them. But people simply couldn't ignore a Death Eater, and fair enough when many had lost family to Voldemort's cause. Maybe he deserved the punches and kicks, and God only knew he felt guilty enough not to complain.

Draco didn't have very high hopes of his name being called, though Blaise might possibly have bought him something. And he was hoping for a letter from his mother, who was currently in the female section of the Moody Institute.

An hour later found Draco lying fully clothed on his bed, staring at the ceiling in a stupor born of boredom. Lazy thought drifted through his mind in half-formed sentences, but he couldn't be bothered to follow any of them through. Because Charlie usually spent his daylight time out of their room, this was often how he spent his time unless he was running the track that circled the whole of the Men's courtyard, which he found to be a mediocre replacement for flying - something which they weren't allowed to do for obvious reasons. When Draco had come to the prison, he could barely run two laps. Now, it took closer to ten to tire him. Emma had been delighted when he'd told her about the running, because according to her,

"Exercise releases a load of really good hormones into the brain. Oxytocin, for example, is the same chemical released when you hug someone and makes you feel happier, as well as reducing stress. Plus, you can give yourself a goal to work towards, which will give you something to do."

Draco had simply shrugged. "I just like that I don't think when I'm running. It gives me a break."

"All the more reason to do it. Just be careful not to overdo it and hurt yourself."

Today, however, the freezing cold and the sleet which tipped from the sky had somewhat put Draco off the idea of running. It was another half hour before, finally, the voice called-
"…And Draco Malfoy, please come to the collection booth for your gifts."

Unbidden, a smile rose to Draco's lips. _Blaise, you genie_. He rolled off the bed, walked briskly to the mail collection booth in the northern end of the institute, and stood in the queue with the other men, all feeling the same impatience that a child might feel when waiting for their parents to wake up and give the go-ahead for the present opening. When Draco got to the front, he was surprised by the two packages he was presented with, and was even happier when he saw that his mother had indeed sent him a letter, and it was waiting for him in his mail slot. Gathering everything up with an excited, child-like grin, and fighting the urge to run, he walked quickly back to his room.

First of all, he read the letter from Narcissa. It was, as usual, several pages long and very well-written. They almost never mentioned the fact that they were both in prison in their letters, preferring instead to discuss what they might have talked about if they were able to speak in real life - books, news, ideas they had, or anything else which piqued their interest.

Once he finished the letter, he placed it back in the envelope and onto his desk where he would soon write a reply. He then looked at the packages. He knew which one was from Blaise because of the letter addressed to him stuck on the top of it, written in Blaise's hand. But the other one wasn't so easily identified. Draco peered at his name, written messily on a letter stuck to the package. The writing looked familiar.

Suddenly, Draco understood, and couldn't believe he hadn't recognised the writing faster after reading dozens of letter's worth of it before. The package was from Harry. It had been a long time since he'd received a letter from him, and since his father had burned almost all of them - and he hadn't dared look at the ones he'd saved - it had been just as long since he'd read one. But he would know that scrawl anywhere.

Resisting temptation, he opened Blaise's letter first.

_Dear Draco,_

_It read._

_Wishing you a very merry Christmas, and eagerly awaiting your return to the real world. Only 44 days to go!_  
_Hope you like this gift - I didn't know if you were allowed magic items, so I played it safe. If they don't fit, we can get them changed._

_-Blaise_

The package contained a cardboard box with the word _NIKE_ written in bold white across the red top. A tick shape underlined the name. Draco had no idea what a _NIKE_ was - he knew that Nike was the Greek goddess of victory because he'd had a book about the Greek Gods as a child, but this clearly wasn't the same thing. A note attached with spell-o-tape to the top said, in Blaise's writing:

_For the running. Hope you don't mind the muggle brand._

Draco raised the lid of the box, and was presented with a pair of shoes. They were plain black, apart from the same tick that was on the front of the box, which stood out in bold white on the sides, and were made of a material unlike any that he was used to. Kicking off his usual prison-issue shoes, he pulled the _NIKES_ on and stood up. They felt very light, and bouncy compared to the usual thin-soled shoes which he wore. He would thank Blaise profusely next Monday - this was going to completely change the game. He'd have to find out if he was allowed to use the shoes, though. Maybe he could get Emma to write him a note saying it would be 'good for his mental and physical health to wear...
running shoes' or something like that. He'd worry about it later. Right now, he wanted to open Harry's letter.

Pulling the unopened package towards himself, he removed the letter taped to the top and opened it, frowning slightly as he deciphered the writing.

Draco,

Merry Christmas! Hope it's not too depressing to spend it in prison... At least you'll be out soon, right? Anyway, you said you're bored all the time, and I thought these might help.
See you soon.

-Harry

Draco stared at the short message for a few seconds after he'd read it, feeling oddly emotional. He thought back to the hours he'd spent reading letters from Harry, sitting in his room at the Manor, and how the words had made him feel a little less alone. They'd been the only happiness he'd had during the summer, except maybe his books. When he got out perhaps he'd find the ones which he'd managed to save. He had put them in one of his sketchbooks to keep them safe, and seeing as he didn't really draw anymore, he hadn't seen them in years.

Putting the letter aside, Draco tore the wrapping paper off the gift, and covered his mouth with his hand. A smile crept across his lips. In his lap sat four beautiful editions of books - 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte in hardback; 'The Old Man and the Sea' by Hemingway was clearly a very old copy, with yellowing pages which smelt sweetly of old paper; 'The Potion Master' (Author unknown, and the only non-muggle book present); and 'Oliver Twist' by Charles Dickens - fully illustrated. They were his four favourite books of all time. He had no idea how Harry had remembered - Draco couldn't even remember telling Harry that he liked the books - but here they were, in all their glory. he'd missed reading all his time in prison, wishing he had something, anything to distract him from the monotony. And now, here where the four books that had made him who he was. Draco felt stupid as he wiped a tear from his eye, laughing a little. He kept picking the books up and turning them without thinking until eventually, he put them into his cabinet and sat down to write a reply to his mother.

For the first time since he'd arrived at the Moody Institute, he smiled as he did so.
Draco was surprised when, on the sixth of January, Harry walked into the meeting room without Teddy toddling next to him. The absence of his godson made Harry seem oddly unbalanced. He was wearing his most recent Weasley jumper - maroon with a golden 'H', like every year. Draco raised an eyebrow at Harry as he sat down across the table.

"It's his birthday," Harry explained. "I would have told you, but I forgot - Ted and 'Dromeda threw a party for him, so obviously he couldn't come. I thought you might appreciate some company, though, so here I am."

"What's the point of throwing a party for a baby?" Draco asked, incredulously. "I mean, can they even understand the concept of birthdays yet? Are they able to understand any sort of time at all?"

"Barely a minute I've been here, and already we're discussing the philosophy of time in relation to infants. Take a break!" Harry grinned. "It makes Ted and 'Dromeda happy, so I think it's worth the time. But I can go if you want, or-"

"No, no! Stay. I didn't mean it like that." Draco reassured. "I'm always happy to have company."

Smiling, Harry relaxed a little into the chair. "Glad to hear it."

Mirroring Harry, Draco sat back more comfortably in his chair. "So, did you have a good New Year's?"

"Eh, I guess," Harry shrugged. "Ron and Hermoine threw a party, and all the old gang came and brought their new friends, so there were a lot of people. Ron and Hermoine's flat isn't all that big, but we managed."

"I'm surprised you went. You're not really that into parties at the moment, are you?"

"Honestly, I wasn't planning to," Harry admitted. "But in the end, I decided, what the hell? I need to get out of the house more, and coaching two times a week doesn't really count as socialising. I'm glad I did, too - it was actually okay." Then, seemingly as an afterthought, he added; "Ginny was there."

"Oh?"

"I mean, it would have been weird if she hadn't been there, so it's not like I wasn't expecting it. It was fine: we got most of the awkwardness out of out systems at Christmas dinner, and anyway, we barely saw each other the whole night."

"Did you get a kiss at midnight?" Draco asked, hoping he sounded casual. Harry shrugged.

"Yeah, but I don't really remember who from. I'd never met her before, and I was a bit drunk by that point." Harry cocked his head. "How do you celebrate New Year's in prison?"

Draco doubted it would have been a good idea to say: 'Truthfully, Harry, I spent a good portion of it imagining how much better it would be if I was with you and hoping that the fireworks looked pretty wherever you were.' So he just went with: "Well, it's not really considered a holiday like Christmas is, so we don't officially do anything. We do do something though - I don't know how it started - but of course, everyone stayed awake, and those with watches kept the time, and soon as it reached midnight, this godawful noise swelled up. Everyone basically just hits the doors and stamps their feet.
and makes as much racket as physically possible. It's kind of weird, but you get so caught up in it that you don't realise you're doing it too until you find yourself hammering your fists against the door."

"That sounds... kind of surreal."

"It was - especially when the whole prison is pretty much pitch black. But it died down as fast as it started. I said Happy New Year's to Charlie and he said it back to me... and then we both went to sleep, and that was the end of that."

Harry whistled. "Interesting way to start the new year."

"That's one way to put it," Draco laughed. "Can't decide if it's a good omen or not."

"I guess it'll be what you make of it," Harry shrugged. 'Hopefully, it'll be good, because you'll be getting out- actually, that reminds me: do you have anywhere to go when you're released?"

Harry sounded nonchalant as he spoke, but Draco noticed that he watched him closely as he waited for an answer. Caught off guard by the change of subject, it took Draco a moment to gather a response.

"Honestly... no," Draco said. "I don't really know what I'm going to do when I'm out - I'm definitely not going back to the Manor."

"No, of course not," Harry was silent for a minute. Then, haltingly, he said; "You know, I was thinking... well, I have a spare room in my apartment, and I thought - I mean, if you've not got anywhere to go - I could always let you stay at my place for a while, while you get things on track."

Draco was silent as he processed what Harry had said. He imagined what it would be like to live with Harry; to come home at the end of the day to a house full of him; to eat meals with him. On the one hand, it sounded perfect. On the other, it sounded like torture. He looked at Harry, who had turned a little red during the silence.

"I mean, you probably wouldn't want to," Harry started, "it's pretty small so I understand if-"  

Draco cut him off. "You know, I think that might actually be a pretty good idea." He nodded, thinking through the proposition. "You live in a muggle part of London, right?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

"Well, that's great because I'm banned from using magic for a year after my release, so it'll be much easier to live in the Muggle world during that time... of course, I'll only live with you until I find a place to stay myself, but in the meantime, I'd really, really appreciate that." Draco cocked his head to the side. "Why are you so surprised?"

Harry blinked. "What?"

"You seem surprised by the fact that I said yes."

"I think I'm more surprised by the fact that I asked," Harry grinned in an embarrassed sort of way.

"Well, of course, if you don't think it would work I'll find somewhere else," Draco said hastily, but Harry shook his head.

"No, no, it'll work fine. Don't worry."
Draco smiled. "Glad to hear it. To tell you the truth, I've been pretty worried about what was going to happen for a while now, so this is a big weight off my-" Then Draco remembered something, and his mood dropped like a stone. "Shit."

"What?" Asked Harry, worriedly.

"My dad still legally owns all the Malfoy gold. How the hell am I going to pay rent? Or for food or anything? I barely have two sickles to rub together!"

"Draco, don't be stupid," Harry cut in. "You don't need to pay me, I'm perfectly well off. You can get a job and start saving, and by the time you get your wand back, you'll have some money in the bank. Really, it's no big deal," He reiterated. Draco bit his lip.

"It feels wrong to live in your house and eat your food and not pay you."

"Well, if you really insist, you can pay me back the money when you have it. But I don't care, honestly." Harry's eyebrows furrowed. "Your dad still owns everything?"

"Pretty much," Draco said darkly. "Everything in the Manor, and everything in the Gringotts vault. My mother might have a few galleons stashed in another vault, but," He gestured. "that's about it."

Harry grimaced. "Maybe, when your mother gets out- she'll file for a divorce, right?"

"I bloody well hope so."

"Well, you might be able to get a lot of your stuff back when that happens - also, what if you filed a case against your dad for abuse? You might get reimbursed if you win."

Thinking over Harry's suggestions, Draco nodded. "I guess I'll bring it up with Mother and see what she says." Then, he added, "If the worst comes to the worst, I'm sure that we can take some stuff from the Manor. The money is protected, but my father is serving a life sentence in Azkaban, so I doubt he'll find out if we take what's ours." The fact that he might have to steal his own possessions from the prison that had been his home was slightly nauseating - as was the concept of returning to that hell-hole. Harry had noticed Draco's expression, and said, quickly-

"I'm sure it won't come to that, and we don't need to think about that now." Then, clearly thinking of a change of subject, "Tell me how you're getting on with the books."

"Yeah, okay," Draco forced a smile. He'd been reading almost as much as he was running. Of course, he'd started with Jane Eyre because it was his favourite, and now he was just about to finish it. Draco got the feeling that he'd told Harry about the book several times before, back during their time at Hogwarts, but Harry didn't seem to mind and listened actively as Draco talked fervently about the story, finding that before long he had completely forgotten his father. The more he talked, the more there was to say. But then Draco paused for breath, and when he met Harry's eyes, something moved in him.

"Don't look at me like that," He said, without thinking.

Harry blinked and shook his head a little. "Hm? Like what?"

Draco looked Harry for a moment, then sighed. "Sorry. Nothing."

Harry looked worried. "Was I making a face? I promise I wasn't bored or anything, I just look grumpy when I'm concentrating."
"Seriously, it's fine," Draco shook his head, "I just- it was nothing."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "If you say so."

They talked until it was the end of closing time, and then, reluctantly, Draco got up. "I guess it's time for you to go, but this has been good. Thanks for coming."

"You don't have to thank me - I wouldn't come if I didn't want to."

"Well, still. And thank you for the apartment offer - it's going to save me a lot of stress."

Harry smirked, and said airily, "Well, what can I say? I guess I'm just a saint - I can't help my compulsion to good deeds."

"Oh, piss off," Draco said good-naturedly. "Give my love to Teddy."

"Of course. Have a good week."

"You too."

000oHarry0o0o

"You did what now?" Ron gasped.

"What? He's my friend."

While Ron's jaw fell gapingly open, Hermione cut in.

"Ron, you know that Harry and Draco are friends now. Why is this news?"

"I knew that they were talking, not that they were friends! I thought it was just for Malfoy to see Teddy?"

"It was at first," Harry said, "But I guess we also became friends at the same time - I mean, we see each other a lot, it kind of makes sense that we're on better terms now."


"Ron, really. Harry is an adult, and he is capable of making his own choices. You really need to get past this Malfoy stigma. Yes, his dad is an arsehole. Yes, he was a horrible bully to you a lot of the time in school. But people change!" She took his hand. "Just give it a chance. What's the worst that can happen when he isn't even allowed to use magic?"

Ron looked at her, and then at Harry, and sighed. "Okay. You do what you think you should do, mate. And if he's really changed, well," He gestured vaguely, "let's just hope you're right."

"Thank you," Harry nodded. "Anyway, it's not really a permanent arrangement. Just until he finds a place of his own." Hermione raised an eyebrow but didn't elaborate.

"Maybe he'll get the apartment in shape while he's there. Undoubtedly he has a better idea of interior design than you." Was all she said, with a smirk.

"Hermione, I'm feeling very attacked right now."

"I can't help it if its true," She grinned.
"To be fair, you've lived in that apartment for almost a year and it still looks like you moved in last month," Ron pointed out. Harry had to admit that they had a point.

"Well, fine. I'll give him free reign of home design if it'll shut you both up."

"Cheers to that," Ron grinned, and they tapped their takeaway coffee cups together. "May your flatmateship be prosperous... but not too long." They all laughed.

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**A/N: Hey, you: can you answer me these questions three?**

1: **Do you think there is too much dialogue in the new chapters? Should I flesh it out a bit more instead of just having a lot of talking?**

2: **Are there any things I do when I write that make the story harder to read/less immersive? Be honest, I won't get offended!**

3: **Do you remember any quotes from this story, and if so, what is your favourite?**
At half-past five, on the morning of the ninth of February, Draco rose out of his prison bed for the last time. He dressed fast, and then spent five minutes packing his possessions into the trunk he had been issued with for personal belongings. While some prisoners had many items sent to them during their stay, Draco's sum total of his seven months came to a pile of letters tied with a spare shoelace, several books, a cheap razor and shaving cream, and a pristine pair of Nikes in a red shoebox. He was planning to leave his toothbrush. He would have only the clothes on his back until he reached Harry's apartment, where his other legal possessions were waiting, neatly packed in boxes sent by the Prisoner Rehabilitation Department of the Ministry of Magic. He had just finished stripping the bed when a voice could be heard outside casting the spell to unlock the door, and he turned to see two guards - who clearly weren't ecstatic about how early in the morning it was - walk into the room. The taller man gave him a sharp nod.

"Ready to go, Patient?" He asked. He was a familiar face - one of the stricter guards, though not unkind. Draco nodded.

"Let's go."

He followed the guards through the bowels of the Institute, carrying his trunk under one arm until eventually, they reached administrations: an area of the prison which was fronted by a reception desk and which housed the offices of all senior employees behind it. They headed to the 'Interview Room', which was used for most employee/patient meetings, and Draco was sat down in front of a small pile of paperwork and a quill.

"We need you to fill these out before you can leave." The shorter guard said. "Remember that the parchment can detect any lies written on it, so don't bother trying to trick us, it'll just cause trouble for you. Once you fill in all the papers, you will have a brief meeting with your therapist. You should be out by half seven at the latest, as long as there are no complications. Got it?"

Draco nodded.

"Breakfast will be brought to you here." Added the taller guard. "What would you like?"

Draco shrugged. "I'm not really hungry." Then, he remembered something he'd heard from the other inmates about it being bad luck not to eat one's breakfast on one's last day, and that those who neglected the meal would one day return to eat it during another sentence. "I'll have a piece of toast, though, please," He added, hastily.

It took Draco a good half hour to work through the stack of parchment. Once he'd finished, the papers were taken away and replaced by Emma, who entered five minutes later. She smiled at him.

"It gives me great pleasure to see you out and into the real world, Draco," She said as she sat down across from him. As always, she looked perfectly arranged, from her sleek straight hair to each of her perfectly painted fingernails. "Not that I'm 'glad to be rid of you', as such, but it's high time you went back." She studied him. "How do you feel?"

"Nervous," Draco admitted. "I'm not sure why, though."

"It's only natural - you're about to go through a big change. Do you know how you're getting to Harry's apartment?"

"Well, Blaise is actually going to meet me and we're going to go get lunch in London somewhere. I
think he's got some things planned to do to celebrate my freedom. Then we're going to meet Harry and he'll apparate us back to his."

"Sounds like fun - it'll be nice to eat something that isn't prison food, right? Well, I won't keep you too long, don't worry." She pulled a file out of her bag and placed it between them. "These are your patient notes. I can't give them to you because they are prison records, though you may request to see them anytime once you've left the prison, should the need arise. Today we're just going to look at a few pages." She opened the file and flicked through a few sheets of parchment before stopping. "This is your pre-treatment file, highlighting the problems you were facing before you started seeing me.

"I diagnosed you with complex PTSD because you were suffering from dissociation, nightmares, flashbacks, and regular prolonged periods of sadness." She got out parchment and a quill as she spoke in order to take notes. "My question is, do you think that these symptoms have abated during your stay at the Moody Institute?"

Draco thought for a moment. He pointed to the first word of the list on his pre-treatment page. "Dissociation. I still get that, but less now. The grounding techniques help."

"And it's still the feeling of being in a dream or some sort of stimulation? I believe you put it as 'seeing the world as if you were watching a pensive memory'?"

Draco nodded.

"That's pretty normal. They may well continue on for some time. I want you to continue using the grounding techniques. This-" She handed him a piece of parchment from her bag, "Is a copy of the list we already made of all your known triggers. You should keep it on hand, and add to it whenever you need to. As I've said before, knowing is half the battle. And, as soon as you think you are ready, try to find another therapist outside the prison. If you choose to put them in contact with the prison - which I suggest you do - they can have access to your files and help you more. Dissociation takes a long time to cure, and you're doing very well under the circumstances."

Draco nodded, taking the parchment from her. "I'll remember. Thank you." He pointed to the next words. "Nightmares and flashbacks. Nightmares have mostly gone. Flashbacks have got a little better, but still happen once or twice a week."

"You said that they were generally more emotional than visual - I'm guessing that that's still the case?" She continued when he nodded, "As with dissociating, you need to know your triggers, so again, keep the list with you and add to it. Do you always know when you're having a flashback?"

"Depends on what type I'm having. If it's one where I'm mostly feeling hopeless or sad, then it's harder to identify; but when it's one where I'm feeling scared and I start to panic it's clearer what's happening."

"And have you been practising the mantras when you've started experiencing flashbacks?"

"Uh, sometimes. But often I just don't have the energy when it's happening."

She nodded. "I know it's hard, but you need to try really hard because it will help you a lot. Can you tell me what your mantras are?"

Draco was trying not to be impatient with Emma, but he couldn't help but feel frustrated at being so close to freedom yet having to sit and repeat self-help sentences. "I am having a flashback," He said, tonelessly, "I am afraid but I am not in danger. I have people who care about me. I accept that I
cannot always control my emotions, but I can control my reactions to them."

"Great," Emma said. "Remember that you can always ask Harry or other people around you for help when you need it. I know it's hard to do, but it can be very good for you."

"I'll try."

"That's all I can ask of you," Emma said. "And finally, prolonged periods of sadness. How are those fairing?"

"Better, but not gone. They're shorter and much further apart, so they usually only last a few days to a week now."

"That's great, I'm really pleased with your progress. I think you'll find that you have more ways to help yourself outside prison. The best quick-fixes for sadness are exercise, as we've already talked about, and which you already do. It doesn't have to be a run, you could walk, fly, swim, whatever you want to do. You like flying a lot - try to get back into that when you feel like it. Make an effort to make contact with people even if you don't feel like it, because being around others help a lot. Do you think you can remember those things?"

Draco nodded. "Yeah, I'll remember."

She smiled. "I'm so proud of you."

It felt good when she said that, and Draco found himself returning her smile. "Thank you."

"Please do get in touch with me from time to time, and let me know how you're doing."

"I will."

Emma stood, and Draco followed suit, reaching out to shake her outstretched hand. "The best of luck to you, Draco. Now, I believe that your friend is waiting for you, so we'll get you checked and then you can be on your way."

"Thank you for everything," Draco said, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of leaving the security of the prison for a world that either didn't care for or despised him. "I couldn't do this without the help you've given me."

Emma smiled again. "I really hope that the world does good for you, Draco."

Draco was searched thoroughly by several spells and then watched each of his items get checked individually. Then, with no ceremony, he was lead from admin to the waiting room, where Blaise sat, his leg bouncing up and down, indicating that he'd been sitting there for some time.

"Hey," Draco said, and Blaise's head snapped up. A huge grin lit up his face, and he jumped up and wrapped Draco in an enormous bear-hug.

"Hey," He said. "Welcome back."

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"So, where's the flu?" Draco asked as they walked out of the prison together. Blaise gestured to a smaller building by the entrance gates - more of an outhouse than a full construction.

"We're apparating - that's where you can enter or exit the grounds by magic - elsewhere, there is no apperation, dissperation, or flu. They search you when you come in through it, leave by it, and enter
or exit the main prison - as you just discovered. You can't even use magic inside the prison grounds unless you're a guard, apart from in that building. It'd be a bitch to escape from - I guess that's the point." Blaise looked at Draco. "You're nervous."

Draco shrugged.

"Don't worry," Blaise said happily, "We're going to have so much fun that you'll forget what a prison is."

Blaise had clearly put a good deal of thought into what they would do that day, but before they did anything, they stopped inside the outhouse and Blaise turned and faced Draco.

"I'm gonna slightly change your appearance, okay? I don't want anyone who might ruin our day recognising you, as we are going to spend most of our time in the magic areas of London. I'm going to change your hair and eye colour to brown and added a few freckles to your nose, I won't be a minute."

The rest of the day was a blur. First, they apparated to a restaurant on the top floor of one of the wizarding department stores in mid-London to eat some 'non-shit' food, as Blaise eloquently put it. This second breakfast was amazing, especially in comparison to Draco's earlier prison breakfast of burnt toast, but more importantly, the coffee was strong, bitter, and made Draco feel almost as though he was a normal person again. After breakfast they descended a couple of floors and Blaise insisted, despite Draco's reluctance to allow him to, on buying Draco several 'welcome back' presents, the first of which was a new set of clothes which Draco put on in the department bathrooms so that he could take off his prison jumpsuit, which was attracting some strange looks. He also bought Draco a new shaving kit because "No, I won't allow you to put that cheap, probably infected razor anywhere near your face again." Then they left the store, apparating to Kensington Gardens where they walked and talked, clutching take-away teas from a kiosk to keep their hands warm from the cold late-winter air. For lunch, they headed to a cafe nearby, and Draco was once again shocked by how good non-prison food was.

By the time it started to get dark, Draco was absolutely exhausted and incredibly happy. Blaise said that he'd told Harry they would meet at one of the muggle bars near Harry's flat at five, so they apparated to a deserted backstreet. Blaise removed the appearance-changing spells on Draco, and then they both walked the rest of the way to the 'Feathered Dragon', where a crowd of men clutching pints of beer were crowded around a muggle device showing an image of people chasing a ball of some sort on a green playing field, and shouting at the screen unintelligibly every few seconds.

"Can I 'elp?" The barman asked with an accent similar to Draco's old prison roommate's, pulling Blaise and Draco's attention away from the odd group.

"Uh, yeah, can we get two half-pints of..." Blaise trailed off, staring at the unfamiliar muggle beer brands.

"Guinness," Draco finished for him, picking a name at random.

"Interesting style you lads have," The man commented as he slid two glasses towards them, clearly referring to their cloaks.

"We're going to a fancy dress party later," Blaise said coolly.

Draco felt more nervous than he'd thought he would as they waited for Harry, who, surprisingly, was only a few minutes late. Draco swallowed as caught sight of him, as always looking great in his muggle clothes. Harry smiled broadly at Draco as he approached the bar.
"Look who's not in prison," He grinned. "I forgot what you looked like out of dungarees."

"Hey," Draco smiled at Harry. "Nice to see you on the outside."

"It certainly is. Hey, Blaise, how are you?" Harry asked, turning to Blaise.

"Great, cheers. You?"

"Not bad, not bad." Harry turned back to Draco. "Do you feel like hanging out here, or shall I show you the flat?"

"I think I'd like to see the flat, please," Draco said, standing up. He wrapped Blaise in a tight hug. "Thank you for today. It was exactly what I needed. Thank you for the clothes and the food and for being my best friend," he said quietly, then moved away. "Take care of yourself," He added.

"Don't go getting soppy on my now," Blaise grinned as they walked to the exit having paid the barman. "I'll see you soon, yeah?" He added.

"Yeah, of course. Owl me."

"Or just drop by," Harry added.

"I will. See you guys," Blaise waved, and disappeared off into the street while Draco and Harry walked in the opposite direction.

"So, how was your first day?" Harry asked as they walked.

"Absolutely bloody brilliant," Draco said happily. "You have no idea how much I've missed-" He gestured vaguely, "everything."

Draco told Harry about his day as they walked, and before long they were outside the door to Harry's apartment. Harry didn't use a key to unlock the door - *alohomora* was more efficient. The door swung open and he flicked on the lights as they walked into the flat.

"You've been living here how long?" Draco asked, examining the living room. It had a large window at the front, looking out onto the street, and a big mirror hanging on the other side. Some sort of muggle devise - a big black rectangle, the same thing that the muggles had been watching in the bar - was mounted on the wall above the fireplace, and a worn-out sofa faced it. Other than the sofa, there was no furniture.

"A year in April," Harry replied, looking embarrassed. "I know. Doesn't look like it."

Draco turned from examining the room to face Harry. "I don't care what it looks like. You have no idea how much this means to me. I thought I'd have to live in Bed and Breakfasts, or even on the street, with how much money I have."

Harry gave a one-sided smile. "Well, I'm glad you like it. Want a tour?"

From the living room they walked to the kitchen, which doubled as a dining area. A small round table with four chairs sat in the centre with a bowl of fruit on it, and Draco was surprised to see that the kitchen counter was crowded with spices and herbs, as well as onions, garlic, and other raw foods in their own respective bowls. A couple of plates sat unwashed in the sink but other than that, the place was pretty clean.

"You like cooking?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow.
"I had to do it a lot at the Dursleys, but never realised that I actually liked it until I got my own place. Of course, you can't go wrong with a Weasley recipe book," He gestured at the dog-eared and well-used notebook on one of the shelves.

"Cool," Draco said, impressed.

After backtracking to the living room, they followed a short corridor, Harry briefly indicating the coat and shoe closet and utility room as they walked.

"This is the bathroom," Harry opened the first door. "It's the only part of the house that I bothered expanding with magic.

Draco whistled as he looked inside to see a relatively large room with white walls, a white tiled floor, and most excitingly, a large bathtub with a shower fixture above it.

"I'm not usually into 'living lavish' as such," Harry grinned, "But once you use the prefect's bathroom at Hogwarts, you don't look back."

"Agreed," Draco laughed. "If you were going to put effort into only one room, I'm glad you chose this one. God knows I've missed private bathrooms."

Next, they looked at Harry's room, which was similar to the others in the way that it undecorated and featured only a bed, a closet, and a nightstand. Draco's room was the same, though slightly smaller.

"I'm guessing that's my stuff?" Draco pointed at the two wooden boxes standing next to the bed.

"Yeah. I was surprised at how little you had, honestly. I mean, you'd told me, but still."

"Hopefully I'll be able to find a lawyer once I've earned some money, and challenge father to get possession of some of my stuff. But until then, yeah, I've got very little."

"Oh well, isn't minimalism meant to be rather trendy right now?" Harry said, brightly.

"That's one way to look at it," Draco shrugged.

"So," Harry said, "I thought maybe you could unpack while I get started cooking dinner?"

"A home-cooked meal?" Draco grinned. "You're spoiling me. Yeah, that sounds great."

Once Draco finished unpacking he wandered into the well-lit kitchen, which smelt incredible, and chatted to Harry while he cooked, enjoying the normality of the scene. It was weird to think that this time the previous evening he'd been in prison. It already felt like a long while ago. After some time, Harry placed a bowl of perfectly presented spaghetti bolognese in front of Draco, along with a glass of wine, and sat down to eat his own opposite him. Draco had eaten some good pasta in his life, but this was, without doubt, the best he'd ever had.

"Christ, Potter, how'd you do this?" He asked as he ate hungrily. Harry grinned.

"Started with Mrs Weasley's recipe, made my own adjustments, and here's the real tip - didn't use magic. Food seems to taste better when you don't take shortcuts."

"Whatever you do, it works," Draco laughed. "Thank you!"

After they'd finished, Draco helped Harry clear the table for dessert, which turned out to be blueberry tart - Draco's favourite, and, like the bolognese, absolutely delicious. Harry was modest, but Draco could see that he was pleased that the meal had gone so well. After they'd both stuffed themselves
they sat and talked for a long time about everything and nothing, and when those topics were exhausted, Draco helped Harry wash up before going to get his toiletries - and realising that the one thing he and Blaise hadn't done was buy a toothbrush. Mouthwash would have to do. Draco was pleased to realise that, in that moment, his biggest problem was the fixable issue of oral hygiene.

Maybe things were really going to get better now.
Draco opened his eyes and blinked rapidly to adjust to the bright morning light streaming in through the window. The absence of Charlie's snoring disoriented him for a moment, until he remembered where he was, and smiled.

It had been three days since Draco had moved into Harry's flat, and already they were falling into a routine. While Draco had quickly reverted from the prison's schedule back into his usual habit of lying in, Harry had always been a morning person, and Draco had yet to wake up before him. Sitting up, Draco mentally prepared himself for the coldness of the world outside his duvet for a moment before he stood up, pulled on some clothes, and followed the mouthwatering smell of frying eggs and bacon to the kitchen, where Harry stood at the cooker.

"Morning," He said, leaning on the counter next to Harry.

"Hey," Replied Harry. His hair was wet and curly from the shower he'd had, and the sun shining through the kitchen window illuminated the profile of his face and the stands of his hair, painting them gold. "You want some food, I'm guessing?"

"If I ever say no to any of your cooking, I want you to shoot me," Draco laughed, trying to ignore how good Harry looked - something he was finding increasingly difficult to do the longer he shared a home with him. Once Harry had finished cooking, they each carried a plate each to the sofa in the living room, as well as a cafetiere and milk which they placed on the floor due to the lack of a table. Like every day, Harry turned on the TV.

Television had fascinated Draco from the first time Harry had explained it to him. He'd found out that it didn't only show men running around on green fields - Harry had explained the principle of football to him, but he didn't understand the awe with which the muggle men seemed to regard it - but it also showed things like dramas, and comedy shows, and his personal favourites: documentaries. In the mornings, though, they usually watched the news. Draco didn't understand a lot of it - muggle terms were still new to him - but he liked watching the images, and was amazed that the muggles had come up with something so complex without magic.

"Sleep okay?" Draco asked absently as they watched, turning to look at Harry.

"I didn't really get much, as usual," Harry shrugged. "What about you?"

"Pretty well. I'm thinking I might start asking around for jobs today - I finished my CV yesterday, not that it had much on it that muggles look for."

"Good idea." Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly, pushing his glasses up his forehead. "Do you have any smart clothes to wear?"

"I don't know - what sort of thing does one wear for job enquiring?"

"Let's look at what you got," Harry said, standing and turning off the TV, leaving his empty plate on the sofa. "If it comes to it, you can always borrow something of mine."

Draco had unpacked everything that had been in the boxes from the Ministry, but it hadn't really changed the unfamiliar way his room looked because there was so little of it. The only additions he'd really made were clothes to the wardrobe, books to the bedside table, and a few more bits and pieces
that he'd had at Hogwarts. Everything at his father's remained untouchable. Opening the wardrobe, he and Harry stood side by side, regarding the mediocre selection of tops, jeans, and robes. Harry reached for a pair of black trousers and passed them to Draco.

"Black is a good formal colour. You want people to think you look nice, but not imposing, so maybe a coloured top? Blue's pretty neutral," He rifled through the hangers and fell on a simple blue T-shirt, which he also handed to Draco. "What jackets do you have?"

"I don't know... I have these," Draco gestured to the hoodies on the top shelf. Harry shook his head. "I have a denim one you can borrow, it'd suit you."

"Thanks."

After Draco had changed he wandered back to the living room where Harry sat, having turned the TV back on.

"Here," Harry said, passing a light blue denim jacket to Draco over the back of the sofa. Draco put it on, noticing that it carried Harry's smell as he did so - of the same cologne he'd worn since fifth year, and of coffee, and something Draco could never quite place his finger on.

"Thanks," He said, shrugging to get the coat to feel comfortable. "You got any plans today?"

"Coaching at five, but other than that no," Harry said, turning back to the TV. "I thought I might go for a walk after lunch, though. To get out of the house."

"Good idea," Draco nodded, relieved that Harry wasn't staying indoors all day, as he had yesterday. "I meant to ask - I was hoping that maybe I could watch you make dinner tonight? I need to start learning how to use muggle stuff if I'm going to live without magic for a year."

"Sure, I can teach you. It'll be fun."

"Thanks," Draco smiled. "See you soon, then?"

"Good luck. Just give them one of your dazzling smiles, you'll have a job before you can say 'Curriculum Vitae'.

"Let's hope so," Draco laughed, as he headed out the door.

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Something felt off when Draco got back, with two business cards in his pocket and the words 'I'm afraid we aren't hiring' ringing in his ears. The TV was on, and everything looked like normal except for the fact that Harry was nowhere to be seen. He wouldn't have gone out without turning the TV off - maybe he was in the bathroom? Setting Harry's jacket on one of the coat hangers next to the front door, Draco approached the sofa, and blinked. A glass had shattered on the floor in front of the sofa, water surrounding the shards in puddles and droplets invisible from his angle at the front door. Heartbeat quickening, Draco looked around, and made to check through the house when a sudden noise snapped his head in the direction of Harry's room - something between a sob and a gasp.

Draco was at the door in seconds, fumbling at the doorknob with shaking hands until he finally managed to fling it open. He barely managed to dodge the hex that flew at him in time, yelping as the flash of red light hit the wall behind him.

"Harry? Stop! It's me, it's Draco!" He yelled, raising his hands to show that he was unarmed. For the
first time, he fully registered what he was seeing.

Harry was curled in the corner of his barren bedroom, clutching his knees to his chest and pointing his wand squarely at Draco's chest with a quivering hand. Tears streaked his cheeks and his eyes were red as he looked at Draco, seeming barely to recognise him. Something in Draco's subconscious jerked at the sight of the wand facing him, his instincts screaming at him to run away from the weapon. *I am afraid but I am not in danger.* Automatically, the words Emma had given him sounded in his mind, and he took a deep breath.

"Harry?" Draco asked again, gently. Harry's green eyes flicked up to his, and an undefinable change flitted across his face.

"Draco?" He whispered. Then, he jumped as though waking suddenly from a dream. "What's going on? How did I get-" He looked about wildly, then at his hand and the wand clutched there with shock on his face. Slowly, scared that he would alarm Harry, Draco crossed the room and knelt down in front of him, placing a hand on his arm.

"Harry, look at me," He said, firmly, and Harry's head jerked up to face his. "You had a flashback, but you're perfectly safe, okay? You're not in danger. Look around, what are you seeing?"

Harry swallowed, looking around himself. "My room."

"That's right. You're in your flat. No one's here but us." Draco wanted badly to pull Harry to himself and hold him, but he held himself back. Seeing Harry every day was hard enough - he didn't want to get any closer in case he got caught. He contented himself with squeezing Harry's arm. "Deep breaths, okay? Breathe deep and slow. You're going to be okay."

Harry shut his eyes, doing as Draco said and slowing his breathing. He wiped a shaking hand over his face.

"God, I'm so sorry," He said in a rough voice. "I was watching TV and then this scene came on with people fighting and these sounds and lights all-" he gestured at his head, forming his hand into a claw, "Got in my mind... And suddenly it was like I was fighting again and..." He caught sight of the burn on the wall where his spell had missed Draco, and covered his mouth with his hand. "Oh my God, I tried to hex you!"

"It's okay, you didn't-"

"But what if I *had* hit you?" Harry's breathing was becoming fast and shallow again, and he dropped his wand as though it burned him. "It doesn't matter if I meant it or not, if it had hit you, you would still have got hurt!"

Draco was carefully trying to keep his own emotions under control, but he could feel his own panic rising. He wasn't scared of Harry, but the sight of another person's flashback and fear was pushing him towards an episode of his own.

*I am afraid, but I am not in danger. I am afraid, but I am not in danger.*

Reaching out, Draco took Harry's face in his hands and gently brought Harry round to face him. "Look at me, Harry," he repeated. Reluctantly, he complied.

"You didn't hurt me, and even if you could have, it didn't happen so it's okay. You're safe, and so am I. Do you understand?"

He'd forgotten just how green Harry's eyes were. They made him feel drunk, and he looked away as
soon as Harry had nodded his understanding, clearing his head.

"Come on," he said, standing up and offering Harry a hand. "Let's get you some water."

While Harry sat at the kitchen table, a blanket around his shoulders to ease the shivering, Draco cleaned up the broken glass and the water as well as he could without magic. Harry would have to deal with the singe marks on his bedroom wall - Draco couldn't possibly have fixed them without a wand. Then he went to sit with Harry, who was stubbornly avoiding eye contact.

"Has this happened before?" Draco asked, eventually.

Harry's jaw clenched and relaxed before he said, quietly, "Three times, not including this. But I thought they'd stopped."

"What happened the other times?"

"Ginny was there the first time. Scared the hell out of her, but she managed to calm me down. The other two times I think I lost consciousness eventually."

With a pang, Draco imagined Harry, alone and terrified, reliving the worst moments of his life as though they were happening again without a soul to help him. He realised that he knew exactly how Harry felt because the same had happened to him since he was a child.

"Do you have any calming potions?" Draco asked. Harry pointed to one of the cupboards.

"Good idea. I forgot about them."

After Harry had downed the contents of the phial Draco found, he began to look a little better. He stopped shivering, and his eyes lost the redness they'd had before.

"You okay?" Draco asked, at length.

"Bit better." Running a hand through his hair, Harry sighed. "Sorry. You shouldn't have to deal with this."

"Please don't apologise," Draco said. "Think of all the times you had to deal with me when things got rough back at Hogwarts. Really, I'm happy to repay the debt."

"I can't believe I almost hexed you," Harry persisted, sounding disgusted.

"Don't dwell on it, Harry. You didn't, that's what matters."

"It wouldn't be the first time, though, would it?" Harry said darkly. "Last time I threw a curse at you, it hit you. I promised myself I'd never cast another harmful spell in your direction again, and look," He held out his hands. "Look what I did."

Draco bit his lip, and without thinking, touched a hand to his chest where the scars from sectumsempra still stood shiny white against his skin. "That was different. You had no idea what you were doing-"

"You think that excuses what happened?" Harry cut across. "I almost killed you through my own pigheaded stupidity."

"We were both heartbroken and angry and frightened and in the middle of a war," Draco countered. "This was nothing like that time. You would never have thrown a hex at me now in your right mind - even then, you had no idea of the power behind that curse!"
And it had been a powerful curse. Unable to stop it, the memory of that awful day forced its way into Draco’s mind. Crying alone in the disused bathroom, flooded with guilt from almost killing Katie Bell in an attempt to curse Dumbledore. Harry finding him, knowing exactly what he’d done and looking like he hated him for it. It hadn’t taken long before Draco had thrown the first spell, but where he had missed, Harry’s curse had struck true. Draco winced as he recalled the pain that had ripped through his skin as sectumsempra had sliced him open, and waking up in the hospital wing with a note stuffed under his pillow. ‘Don’t forgive me. This is unforgivable. Only know I’ll be sorry for this every day that I live.’

"This is nothing like that time, Harry, and you know it." Draco finished, tearing himself away from the memories. He sighed. "I don't want to argue with you about it, it's pointless. I'm just glad you're alright. I've been through flashbacks too, though I've never felt like I was physically back where I was when things happened, and I know how scary they are."

Harry looked at him. "What are yours like?"

"I don’t get them much anymore - therapy helped a lot. But I would suddenly start feeling all the same emotions that I had felt in a situation that caused my PTSD, as if my mind was there but my body wasn't. Sometimes it was really serious, and other times I’d just feel upset or angry or scared without any good reason. Or I’d get these intense feelings of self-loathing - that might have been the worst types."

"I get that too," Harry looked as though Draco had handed him a lifeline. "What you just said - it's exactly what's been happening to me. I thought I was just... I don't know. It's good to hear that it isn't just me."

Draco thought for a moment, and looked at the time. "Did you have lunch?"

"I don't think so," Harry raised an eyebrow at the change of subject. "Let's make food while we talk, I'm starving and you definitely need to eat."

Caught off guard, Harry nodded and they both stood up. Harry decided to show Draco a simple recipe to ease him into the world of muggle cooking, and as he got the ingredients out, Draco resumed their conversation.

"So you thought it was just you experiencing your symptoms?" he prompted.

"Basically, yeah. I knew that people were jumpy, or had nightmares, but I didn't think that other people got it like I did."

"And you didn't ask them about it?"

"No." Harry placed a bunch of ingredients on the kitchen counter. "How much do you know about cooking?"

"Nothing. I've never cooked." Draco said, feeling a little embarrassed. Harry smirked - the first sign of a smile he’d shown since Draco had found him.

"Well, I feel privileged that you're losing your cooking virginity with me."

Turning pink, Draco let out a self-conscious laugh. "Thanks? I think?"

"Let's start," Harry said. He was already looking more like himself - Draco thought that maybe the distraction of cooking was exactly what Harry needed. "We'll just make a really simple sauce today,
and we'll start by peeling and chopping two onions."

While Harry showed Draco the right way to dice an onion, Draco decided to ask a question. "How come you never asked any of your friends, or even told them, about what was happening to you?"

The knife halted mid-slice as Harry thought, and then continued to chop. "They're all so happy. They're all doing something with their lives, and they've got other things to think about. I don't want to be a burden to them."

"Surely they would want you to tell them what's going on in your life?" Draco asked.

"Maybe, but they wouldn't like what they heard." Harry used the knife to push the chopped onion into the pot he'd placed on the stove. "You try now. Start by peeling it, like I did. Chop off the top to make it easier."

As Draco attempted - with many interventions from Harry - to chop the onions, he said, "Well, now you know - you aren't alone. In fact, you'd be much more abnormal if you didn't have some form of PTSD, considering what you went through." He finished one half of the onion, and huffed out some air. "Can't we use magic? This is tiring."

"Magic doesn't allow for the same control. Anyway, you're learning to live without magic, remember?"

"Whatever," Draco pretended to be annoyed as he haphazardly began to dice the other onion half. After a moment, Harry said:

"It's relieving. To know that there's not something 'wrong' with me."

He spoke off-hand, but Draco sensed the weight behind the words. "Now that you know, I really think you should consider seeing a therapist. They're incredibly helpful - look how much better I'm doing now compared with when you first visited me in prison!"

Harry nodded slowly. "I'll think about it. I don't know. Also, you need to cut the onions smaller than that. Take your time."

It seemed that they had finished speaking about the flashback for now, and Harry went on to show Draco how to cut up garlic and fry it with the onions before adding chopped tomatoes and herbs. Then they boiled the pasta while allowing the sauce to simmer for a while, and served up two bowls. Feeling oddly proud, Draco carried his serving to the table.

"That wasn't so hard!" Draco said happily as they sat down to eat. Harry looked at him, amused.

"I still can't believe you've never cooked before," He said. Draco swatted a hand at him.

"Oh, piss off."

0o0oHarry0o0o

Harry felt immensely better once he'd eaten something. He was still shaken, but as long as he avoided thinking about almost hitting Draco with a hex, he didn't feel too affected. What he'd have done if the spell had hit Draco, he had no idea. It scared him to even consider.

Not long after they'd eaten, Harry went to get changed into his coaching kit for Quidditch. The club had been underbooked when he'd first started volunteering, but somehow word quickly spread that Harry Potter was teaching the class - despite the fact that he was only an assistant coach - and before
long, the club was the most popular in the whole area. They weren't competitive - Harry's classes were ten to eleven-year-olds: too young to be allowed to play official matches by Quidditch rules - but they still held tryouts because the class was so overprescribed, and they needed to shortlist. Harry had found his love for teaching through Dumbledore's Army in sixth year, and loved helping to teach the class, but more than that, he loved the opportunity to fly. The pitch, of course, was concealed from muggles by magic as it was in a muggle district of London, making it much easier for him to go flying after classes without a swarm of wizards and witches accosting him after practice.

Once he'd changed, he headed through to the front door to get ready to leave. Draco came out of the kitchen where he'd been washing dishes, drying his hands on a towel.

"You sure you're okay to coach? You can always take the night off if you think you need to," He said.

"I think the thing I need most right now is flying," Harry said, pulling on his boots and walking to the coat closet, where he kept his Firebolt. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Well, If you're sure."

"Draco?" Harry added before Draco disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Hm?"

"I don't think I said before: thank you for looking after me. I really appreciate it."

Draco smiled and shrugged. "Glad I could help."

"See you in two hours, then?"

"See you."

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After the class had finished, and Harry had helped Ben, the head coach, pack away the equipment they'd used, Harry politely declined the offer of a pint at the local wizarding pub, as he did after every evening class. It was only after Ben had disapparated that Harry jumped on his Firebolt, and twisted high into the air, adrenaline pumping his veins. He warmed up for a while, diving and turning, before dropping back to the ground to retrieve a practice snitch. Giving the snitch a fifteen-second headstart each time, Harry started playing seeker's games, with time as his only opponent. When he finally returned to the ground, he was surprised to see a young, short man in smart clothes standing by the entrance to the pitch. Thinking that it might be the parent of one of the kids, Harry quickly packed away his equipment before walking over to him.

"Can I help you?" He asked.

"I was hoping you could," The man began, smiling at Harry. He held out a hand. "Rodger Whyte, at your service."

"Harry Potter," Rodger Whyte said, "I am a representative of the Chudley Cannons Quidditch Team - a talent scout, if you will, and of course when I heard that Harry Potter was a coach, I knew that I had to find out more. I must say, Mr Potter, you are a formidable flyer! I'm guessing you're used to playing seeker?"
Harry struggled to process the torrent of words that had come from the man's mouth, and it took him a couple of seconds to answer. "Yes, I played seeker at Hogwarts for Gryffindor," He managed eventually. Rodger Whyte nodded excitedly.

"You're an excellent build for a seeker, and clearly very skilled judging by your performance just now," He flashed a set of white teeth at Harry. "On behalf of the Chudley Cannons, I'd like to invite you to tryouts - I think you could make for a valuable asset to our team. What d'you say?"

"Uh..." Harry felt a little overwhelmed. "I uh... I don't know."

"Oh, don't worry, there's no rush to decide, sir, none at all. Tell you what," Rodger Whyte reached into his jacket and produced a piece of card, "Here's my business card. We are holding our annual tryouts next Saturday, so please get in touch if you decide you'd like to come."

Taking the card, Harry nodded. "I'll certainly think about it."

"Thank you very much, Mr Potter!" The man beamed. "And please, do give it a chance, I'm sure you won't regret it!"

The man shook his hand once more, said thank you, and disapparated, leaving Harry dazedly staring at the business card in his hands.

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_A/N: If you could change one thing about this story, what would it be? -Evie x_
"Come on Draco! At least be here to say hi?"

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes. "We've been through this. Weasley and Granger both hate me - and rightly so based on my actions at Hogwarts. I hardly think it's fair on any party involved to make us interact any more than we have to. Plus, I need to go out and meet Blaise."

"You don't need to meet Blaise for at least another half hour, and anyway I told you, they don't hate you. Hermione doesn't mind you and Ron dislikes you, but that's just because you haven't apologised to him for what you've said and done in the past."

"He's no saint."

"I never pretended he was. But once he sees that you aren't who you pretended to be at Hogwarts, I'm sure he'll come around. Please, Draco. For me."

Harry knew how uncomfortable Draco felt about the idea of seeing Ron and Hermione, but he felt that the longer this childish feud lasted, the sourer it would become. Better to get Draco and Ron to start resolving their differences now than to let it affect the future. What future? A small voice in Harry's mind asked snidely. Draco's going to be gone in a few weeks - what does it matter if they're still arguing?

Ignoring himself, Harry continued to watch Draco, who stared back for a moment before drooping a little.

"Fine." He said, looking like the word tasted bad. "I'll apologize, but only to prove that it won't make a difference."

Harry smiled. "That's the spirit. Now come and help me set up the table, they'll be fluing in any minute."

Ron and Hermione tumbled out of Harry's fireplace just as he and Draco had finished laying the table, and he quickly exited the kitchen to meet them, catching Ron in a big bear-hug.

"It's been too long, mate." Ron grinned, thumping Harry on the back, before Harry released him and turned to hug Hermione.

"It's really good to see you guys," he said, trying to put as much meaning into the words as possible. It had been a while since he had seen his best friends, and even longer since he'd actually felt like being around them. But somehow his reclusiveness had been gradually slipping away over the past month or so, and though it wasn't totally gone, it had lost its dominion over him. "Come on, lunch is ready and waiting!"

"It smells amazing, Harry," Hermione smiled as she and Ron followed him to the kitchen. "Oh, hi Draco," She added, clearly unsurprised by the sight of Draco in Harry's kitchen. "Did you find moving in okay?"
For all his earlier bravado Draco looked nervous, slightly hunching his shoulders in the way Harry recognised as an attempt to make himself appear smaller. He looked especially thrown by how unfazed Hermione was by his presence, and took a moment to reply. Ron was regarding Draco with suspicious eyes. "Moving in was fine," Draco said after a few seconds. "Made very easy by my lack of earthly possessions. And of course, by Harry's cooking."

"Ah, yes," Hermione nodded, "It can't be hard to live in a house where Harry makes the meals. I'd say you were lucky, but I think we all know that would be a little... what's the word? Obtuse?"

Draco, who had been tense for the whole morning up to Hermione and Ron's arrival, actually seemed to relax a little at that, and his mouth even gave the hint of a smile. Harry sent a silent thank-you to Hermione.

"I'm not staying for lunch," Draco went on, "I just thought I owed you both an apology."

Ron cocked his head to the side, regarding Draco.

"The way I acted while we were at Hogwarts was... horrible. You guys had enough to worry about without me insulting you every step of the way. All I did was make life harder for you and distract you from the important things. And there are a hundred times I could have done more to help during the war, and didn't. I'll never forgive myself for that. I guess all I can really say is that I'm sorry."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Then, Ron spoke to Draco for the first time since the Battle of Hogwarts.

"Some of the shit you've said to me, I don't know if I can forgive. But I can't pretend that I haven't done anything wrong, and I've said some pretty nasty stuff to you that I'm sorry for too." He bit his lip. "Look, Hogwarts is in the past. And I haven't forgotten what you did for us at the Manor, either. Anyway, Harry trusts you, so I guess..." Ron stuck his hand out towards Draco. "Truce?"

Draco looked at Harry, and Harry had to resist laughing at the shocked expression on his face. Taking Ron's hand, Draco shook firmly. "Truce."

"School was difficult for all of us," Hermione said as she, in turn, reached for Draco's hand. "I won't base my impression of you now off of who you were then."

"Thank you," Draco said, as he shook her hand. "It means a lot."

"You sure you won't stay for lunch?" Hermione asked. "There's enough spaces at the table for all of us." Draco shook his head.

"It's fine, really. I've already got plans. Thanks, though."

As Draco headed out of the kitchen Harry made eye contact with Ron, who raised his eyebrows, looking somewhat impressed, but said nothing.

"Please, sit," Harry gestured to the table, and Ron and Hermione took a seat while he headed to the oven and took out the quiche he'd made. The sound of the front door closing emanated in the room, and as if released from a spell, Ron and Hermione started talking.

"That was unexpected. He looked bloody terrified." Ron stated incredulously.

"I thought it was very sweet," Hermione said, more to Ron than Harry. "You're right, he did look very scared. Maybe he thought we'd just give him the finger?"
"Probably. I'm almost surprised we didn't, to be honest," Ron grinned, then added as Harry carried the quiche to the table, "Merlin, Harry, that looks amazing"

"Glad you think so," Harry smiled as he set it down. "It's a recipe I'm working on, so criticism is appreciated."

As they ate, Hermione said, "So, what exactly did you invite us over for?"

Harry smiled, tapping his nose. "Something's happened which I think Ron's gonna burst a vessel over."

"What?" Ron asked, interested.

"I got scouted by a Quidditch team! They found out I was teaching and sent someone along to see if I was actually worth anything, and apparently, they thought so because they asked me along to tryouts this Saturday. But here's the kicker - guess which team it is?"

Ron's eyes widened suddenly, and he pointed excitedly. "It- it isn't-"

"Oh yes, it is!" Harry grinned. "Chudley Cannon's, baby!"

"Oh Merlin, are you serious? You're pulling my leg- you actually mean it?" Ron stood up, and pulled Harry to his feet to give him another bear hug, clapping him hard on the back.

"Harry, that's wonderful," Hermione said, laughing a little at the awed expression on Ron's face. "Tell me you agreed?"

"Oh yeah, it took me about ten seconds to decide to go try out," Harry said. "Of course, I might no get the spot, but-"

"Are you mental?" Ron asked, "Of course you'll get the spot! You're Harry freaking Potter! God knows the Cannons need some publicity."

"Not that you're only being asked for your name, of course," Hermione added, shaking her head in joking exasperation at Ron, who grinned sheepishly. "You're an incredibly seeker - of course you'll get the position."

"Thanks, guys," Harry said happily. "And Ron, I was wondering: I'd like to have a friend with me at tryouts - I was hoping you'd come?"

"Oh, well, let me see... You know, Saturday's pretty fu- Are you stupid? Of course I'd like to come!"

Ron hugged Harry again, still grinning from ear to ear, before returning to his seat with a euphoric expression, and attacking his slice of quiche.

Hermione and Ron stayed for quite some time after they'd finished eating, and Harry was glad of the chance to catch up with them properly after essentially isolating himself from them. It came as some relief to him that their relationship had moved on from its honeymoon phase into relative maturity, because even though he'd been glad to see them happy before, it was easier to talk to them now that they didn't feel the need to play tonsil tennis every two minutes.

Well into the afternoon, while Ron was in the bathroom, Hermione turned to Harry secretively. He knew what was coming.

"So, have you guys fallen in love again yet?"
"Mione!" Harry exclaimed. "No, of course not!"

"Why not?" She asked, confused.

"I- I don't know how to answer that question."

"But do you feel it?" She said, gesturing vaguely at her belly.

"Feel what, exactly?"

"Don't play stupid to someone who can tell when you're playing stupid."

Harry breathed out heavily through his nose, then shrugged. "I'm trying not to feel it."

"Why?" Hermione threw her hands up. "Why are you so scared of this happening again?"

"Because of, I don't know, how badly it ended last time?"

"This isn't last time, though. And you do feel it, don't you?"

Harry allowed himself the briefest hint of a smile. "Yeah, of course I do."

"See?" She grinned, then, hearing Ron exit the bathroom, said quietly, "Promise you'll write to me about it all?"

"There might be nothing to write about - you don't know that he likes me back."

"Oh, please." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly."

When they'd left, something of their energy remained in the house. It felt friendlier, and Harry felt more comfortable in it than he had in a long time. However, the interaction had tired him out, so with no energy or motivation left to cook, he ordered a Chinese from a muggle restaurant, guessing at what Draco would want, before setting out to clean the house, feeling pretty good about the world.

0o0oDraco0o0o

"I'm just off to get Ted," Harry said offhandedly, grabbing his jacket off the coat hanger. It took Draco a minute to register what he'd said.

"Shit! I forgot it was Wednesday!"

"Well, surprise," Harry said sarcastically, as he readied to leave. "It'll take me a bit longer to get back than normal, seeing as babies can't use floo or dissapereation. You can come if you want?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't really want to see my aunt yet, if that's okay. She looks too much like Bellatrix."

"Cool. I'll see you in a bit, then."

Harry and Teddy arrived half an hour later, with Teddy, blue-haired and giggling, in a pushchair. When he saw Draco, he reached out to him with a toothy, dribbly grin. Harry passed him over.

"Dwaco!" He said, happily, and yanked a piece of Draco's hair with a small fist. Draco yelped.

"Jeez, kid, is it really necessary?" He said to Teddy, who looked at him with huge, innocent eyes. "I missed you too," He added, relenting.
They decided to go to the park, having first to put a special charm on Teddy to stop muggles being able to see his colour changing hair and eyes, because the sun was shining outside and they both needed some fresh air. The streets and park were relatively empty as most people were working on a Wednesday morning, and it occurred to Draco how much they looked like a family, taking turns pushing Teddy along in the pushchair. He didn't voice the thought, but allowed it to make him happy. Harry would never know, anyway, so what was the damage of thinking it?

They were pushing Teddy on the swings when it happened. Draco felt something small hit his face, and jolted, whisking round to see a group of muggle boys, looking about fifteen, walking towards them. One held a fist of wood chips from the playground.

"Oi, fags!" He shouted, and threw another chip, which missed. Harry now turned too, and faced them with a stoic expression.

"Shouldn't you guys be in school?" He asked, coolly. The boys exchanged looks.

"I don't think that's any of your fucking business," The same boy said. He seemed to be the ringleader. "And I won't let some queer tell me what to fucking do."

"I think you misunderstand," Harry said, and Draco was surprised by how unphased he seemed at this attack. "This," He gestured to Draco, "Is my friend. He's helping me look after my nephew. There's nothing 'queer' about that, is there?"

"Looks pretty fucking gay from where I'm standing."

"Could you not swear in front of my nephew?" Harry asked, tiredly.

"Fuck you."

"Wouldn't that make you gay?"

"Wh." The boy spluttered. "No, you- here, I'll break your face, you little-"

Harry's wand movement was so small and fast, Draco almost missed it. But the change was instant. The boy who had been leading the group fell silent, and looked around himself, confused.

"Where am I?" He asked. His friends looked at him.

"Chris?" Asked one of the group, and the boy, evidently called Chris, turned around. Harry turned while this was happening, and picked Teddy out of the swing. Teddy, who had sensed the tenseness of the situation, was grizzling.

"Come on, Draco. Let's leave them to it," Harry said, and Draco numbly grabbed the push-chair, and walked beside Harry out of the park. A couple of the boys shouted after them, but they ignored the cries. Harry kept on holding Teddy, who was beginning to calm down, in a tight grip that betrayed much more emotion than his face, which was smiling at Teddy.

"Shh," He said, stroking Teddy's hair. "Don't worry about them, Ted, they won't hurt you." Then he turned to Draco. "You alright?"

Draco shrugged. "Bit shaken. I thought for a minute I was going to have a flashback or something. Luckily you handled it really fast - good thinking with the confundus, by the way."

"Thanks."
"I had no idea muggles were so regressive," Draco continued.

"Unfortunate, but true. They haven't really caught on to the whole 'people aren't bad because they're different' thing yet. Hopefully, they will soon."

Draco felt calmer when they reached the flat, though he still gratefully accepted the cup of tea Harry handed him. The day got better after that, as it was mostly consumed by Teddy's antics as he crawled, or occasionally walked, from room to room, requiring constant attention lest he did himself or the furniture damage.

After dinner, they started getting Teddy ready for bed. He would be sleeping in a small crib in Harry's room, but first, he needed a wash and a bedtime story. Draco silently thanked whoever had invented self-cleaning nappies as he undressed Teddy for his bath, while Harry checked that the water was just the right temperature. It had seemed weird to Draco that Harry was giving Teddy his bath in the sink instead of the bathtub, but it made sense when he thought about it, being that the bathtub was huge and Teddy was tiny. Conversely, Harry had thought it was weird that Draco had never been given baths in the sink as a child, but considering Draco's less than usual upbringing, it wasn't all that surprising.

Once the bath was finished and Teddy was re-dressed in his babygro, Harry carried him through to his bedroom, then turned to Draco.

"Do you want to read him the story?" He asked.

"I don't know how to read bedtime stories," Draco laughed.

"It's easy. You just read. But out loud. I'm sure you'll grasp the concept." Harry handed him Teddy, and fished a book out of the toddler's overnight bag. "Here," He said, handing the book to Draco. "He's already pretty tired, so when you're finished reading just lay him in the cot really gently."

"You sure you don't want to do it?" Draco asked nervously. Harry smiled tiredly.

"You'll be fine. Stop worrying. Anyway, he loves you, so I'm sure you could speak gibberish for all he cares."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Potter," Draco smiled. "But... okay."

Reading the story to Teddy turned out pretty fun, especially as Teddy was tired from his day of activity and therefore content to sit quietly on Draco's knee. When he finished the story, Draco followed Harry's instructions, and laid Teddy down in his cot. The toddler was as already half-asleep, and barely stirred. Creeping from the room, Draco closed the door as quietly as he could, and walked through to the living room where Harry was reading on the sofa with a glass of wine.

"Looking after a baby is bloody tiring," He observed, sitting down with Harry. "It's only six and I already feel like it's midnight."

"Well, if you want some wine its on the counter. I find that usually helps after a day of Teddy-duty."

When Draco had poured his own glass of one of Harry's nice Italian reds, he rejoined him on the sofa, this time bringing his own book. They read in companionable silence, gradually turning on more lights as the sun fell outside, and they entered the soft glow of the evening.
"Nervous?" Ron asked as they neared the doors of the Chudley Cannon's training centre, which was disguised as a disused theatre for the benefit of muggles.

"A little," Harry admitted. A 'Dangerous building: No Entry' didn't help his nerves as they passed under the doorway and buzzed the intercom button. "I guess we'll just see how it goes."

"Identity and purpose?" A neutral female voice sounded from the intercom.

"Harry Potter, here for tryouts, and Ron Weasley, here to support Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter?" The voice asked with a tone of surprise. Then, as if to cover a mistake, "Enter."

"I can't believe I'm actually inside the Cannons' training centre," Ron said in an awed voice, looking around at the reception. "It's a bit underwhelming if I'm being honest," He added. Indeed, the reception wasn't the grandest entrance; a dingy room with a high ceiling and desk in the corner, at which sat a woman who looked like the room, personified. They walked over to her.

"You're here for tryouts, then?" She asked. She'd been the voice over the intercom.

"Yep," Harry nodded. "Well, I am. He's keeping me company."

"I have to do a couple of security checks on you both first, I hope you don't mind," She said, and, standing up, walked around the desk to face them. Before they could answer, she had started casting spells to check for fraud charms, weaponry charms, and several others which Harry hadn't heard of, but which he was sure Hermione could have explained to him. Once she'd finished, the woman said, quietly, "So. You really are Harry Potter."

"Yep," Harry confirmed, trying not to sound impatient. The woman, in the way Harry was so accustomed to, glanced briefly up at the lightning scar, then returned to sit behind her desk.

"You'll need visitor's badges," She waved her wand at a couple of bare pin badges, and writing appeared on both of them, each reading one of their names, as well as 'Tryouts' on Harry's and 'Support' on Ron's. Passing the badges to Harry and Ron, she continued, "If you just go through the doors and turn left, you'll find the waiting room. Tryouts should begin soon. Best of luck."

They followed her instructions and soon found themselves in the room she'd indicated. About forty people were there, and the familiar ripple of recognition passed through them all as Harry entered the room. He and Ron sat down in some empty seats at the back.

"Scuse me?" The man in the seat opposite Harry said, and reached out a hand, "Daniel Mayne, at your service."

"Harry Potter," Harry shook Daniel's hand. To his surprise, Daniel also turned to shake Ron's hand before continuing.

"Of course, I know who you both are," Daniel said. "It's a pleasure to meet you in the flesh. I'm really sorry - I'm sure you both get this all the time – but my son, he's eight, and it'd really give him joy if He could have an autograph?"

"Of course," Harry nodded. "Do you have anything I could sign?"
He took the writing pad and pencil Daniel gave him and signed it. When he'd given it back, Daniel held it out again to Ron, who looked surprised.

"You want mine too?"

"Of course! You're Ron Weasley!"

"Yeah, I suppose I am," Ron said, turning a little red and looking very pleased as he signed the writing pad.

"So, you'll be trying for seeker?" Daniel asked, putting the pad away.

"How'd you know?"

"I was in seventh year when you were in first," Daniel said. "Hufflepuff. Never actually met you, but I saw you catch that snitch with your mouth. Youngest seeker in a century, right? It's not something you forget very fast. You trying out, Ron?"

"Nah, I'm just here for Harry," Ron shrugged. "What are you trying for?"

"Beater. I was the beater for Hufflepuff from third year until the day I left, and I've been playing local matches since finishing school. That's how I was scouted."

"Well, good luck," Harry nodded, and Daniel smiled.

"You too. Playing aside, the Cannons need some good publicity."

"So I've been told," Harry said, with a look at Ron.

Before long, a large man appeared in the doorway with a clipboard and asked first the chasers, then the beaters, then on to seekers, to leave the room. As they left, Ron whispered frantically to Harry;

"That's Roger Keeks!"

"Who?"

"The training instructor for the Cannons!"

Harry looked at the larger-than-life man. He was big in every direction, though he wasn't fat, and looked like the sort of guy you wouldn't get in a fight with. "What's he like?" Harry asked.

"Not really sure. But I was reading an interview with him in *Quidditch Today* – he pushes his team pretty hard, apparently."

Only four other people were there for the seeker position, and none of them had people with them for support. They were all older than Harry. It was making him nervous. Keeks pointed them to follow the others, and they walked down a short corridor and out of huge double doors to find themselves in the Cannon's training pitch. Ron looked ready to burst. The other huddles of beaters, chasers, and keepers were already being taken off to different parts of the field.

"Seekers, you're with me." Boomed Keeks, his accent strongly Scottish. As Keeks strode out of the door towards them, Ron gave Harry a slap on the back.

"I'll sit on the side and watch. Good luck, mate."

As he walked to the sidelines, Harry turned with the other seekers to face Keeks and waited for him
to speak. For a moment, the big man simply looked each of them over. Then, he started speaking in what was clearly his 'training voice'.

"You have all been hand-picked because you show promise in your Quidditch speciality. This means you are good. But one of you is the best. Today, we are going to find out which of you that is." He made eye contact with each of them before continuing. "Quidditch isn't only about being a good flyer. It's about your ability to think on your feet, your knowledge of the game, your ability to work in a team, and above all, it is about your dedication. If ANY of you feel that you won't be able to meet the high expectations set by me, the manager, or the fans, please feel free to leave. Now."

No one left.

"Good. I'm glad to see you all followed instructions and came in clothes suitable for exercise. You will be put through three sets of tests: the first, ground-fitness to test your stamina, strength, and overall physical ability; next, you will show your skill as a seeker through seeker's games in a knock-out tournament; and finally, you will be interviewed by myself and the team's Manager, Ross Jones, to test your tactical knowledge and find out more about your Quidditch background. Questions? Good. Let's begin."

A basic fitness test followed, starting off with stretching, followed a brisk jog around the pitch, press-ups, crunches, and several other quickfire exercises. Harry could keep up okay, but he was surprised at how much his stamina and strength had declined during his months of inactivity following the war. Luckily, he was naturally athletic – otherwise, he'd certainly have failed. As it was, he made a mental note to start training more often. Maybe he could start running again.

"Seeker's games are a type of Quidditch practice in which two seekers race each other to catch the snitch." Boomed Keeks after they'd had a short break. "They are an excellent way of improving your skills as seekers. You will be paired up and each pair will play three rounds. The winner of the majority of the rounds will stay on, the loser will be eliminated. This will continue until there is one overall winner. Note that winning this does not guarantee you will be selected, though it certainly helps."

Harry Won.

As they trooped back to the waiting room in anticipation of their interviews, he was met with eyes that held jealousy, surprise, and even awe. It made him feel awkward, so he concentrated on talking to Ron. They were called individually to their interviews, and so they all sat in the waiting room while each person was interviewed. When it came time for Harry's, he left the room feeling more nervous than he'd anticipated. He knew he'd done well, so to mess up now would be a big disappointment.

"Mr Potter," Acknowledged the thin man sitting behind the wooden desk in the interview room, reaching out to shake Harry's hand. "I'm John Richardson, the manager of the Cannons, and you've already met my colleague, Coach Keeks," He gestured to Keeks, who sat next to him behind the desk.

"Nice to meet you," Harry said, "Thanks for asking me to try out."

"Please, have a seat." Richardson gestured to the single seat in front of the desk, and Harry sat down. "Would you like some water?"

"That's okay, thanks."

"Let's jump straight in, shall we? Coach Keeks tell me you won the knockouts. Well done."
"Thank you."

"However, you performed… underwhelmingly in the fitness assessment. Are you simply having a bad day, or is this your best?"

"Uh-" Harry stuttered, "I think my fitness isn't what it could be at the moment, sir. I haven't been doing as much exercise as I used to since the War. But I'm certain that I could regain my fitness quickly if I trained more," He added, hoping he didn't sound stupid.

"Would you say that you are naturally athletic?"

"Yes. I like exercise."

"Do you do any exercise other than Quidditch?"

Harry bit his lip. "Not at the moment, but I used to do a bit of running."

"I see." Richardson's face was a neutral mask that gave Harry no idea how well he was doing. "It says in your CV that you were chosen in first year to play seeker for Gryffindor. That would make you the youngest seeker in, what, a decade?"

"A century."

Richardson whistled. "Impressive. And you were promoted to Captain in your sixth year. I suppose this gave you some insight into tactics?"

Harry nodded. "I had to think a lot more about the technical side of Quidditch, which I hadn't done before, so I did learn a lot that year. Especially as I had to learn about other positions, not only seeking."

"So if I asked you to describe a Dagger Formation, could you?"

"Yes, it's when the chasers form a tight arrow with the beaters on either side. Usually, it's for breaking through defense."

"Very good," Richardson smiled approvingly, and Keeks nodded slightly. Harry bit back a smile. "A lot of formation moves don't apply to seekers, but it's good that you have basic knowledge of them." He shuffled his papers before continuing. "Mr Potter, Let's be candid. You clearly have some skill with Quidditch but beyond that, you are also, well… you're Harry Potter. At a risk of sounding materialistic, having you on the team would seriously improve our support and advertisement. You need to be aware that, were you on the team, we would be using your media potential to its capacity. Do you understand that?"

Harry thought for a moment. "I understand, but I also need to make it clear that I may not always agree to every meeting, interview, and all the other media commitments. I'll certainly try, but there is only so much one man can do."

"Of course, you are only required to do as much as the other players, and the rest is your choice. I'm sure that, were you selected, we could find a balance."

For the first time, Keeks leant forward in his chair and regarded Harry.

"I push my players hard, Potter," He said. "This isn't a place for someone who's scared of hard work."
Harry lifted his chin slightly. "I've never backed down because something was difficult." He said, staring back at Keeks unwaveringly. "I'll push myself just as hard as you'll push me."

For a moment, Keeks continued to look at him sternly. Then, a smile appeared on his lips, making him look somewhat younger.

"I like your spunk, kid," He said approvingly. Harry nodded.

"So," Richardson continued, "Any questions?"

"Nope, don't think so," Harry shook his head.

"Well, just before we wrap up, I need to give you these," Richardson handed him a few pieces of parchment. "You'll find a weekly and yearly timetable, and a copy of your contract. Read everything, make sure you'll be capable of attending all sessions, and make your own analysis of your contract. You can make additions to the contract or edit the existing contract. However, we can decide whether or not we agree to your terms, just as you can decide to agree to ours. Happy?"

Harry took the parchment and nodded. "Happy. Thank you very much for seeing me today."

"No problem. We'll be in touch within a week to let you know if you got the job."

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Ron insisted on bringing Harry to a nearby wizarding pub after the interview to 'celebrate', despite the fact that they didn't know how well Harry had done yet. In Ron's opinion:

"You did great, and if they don't choose you, I'll eat my own socks."

They chose The Dog's Beard, a muggle pub neither of them had been to before but which won out over the other pubs in its area by its proximity to the Cannon's training centre. They got some drinks and chose a table in the corner.

Ron and Hermione were still looking after Weasley's Wizard Wheezes in the absence of George. They seemed to like the job quite a lot, which was good because George didn't seem like he would be ready to return anytime soon.

"It's not all bad, though," Ron continued, "He came to eat with the family a couple nights ago for the first time since Fred. I wasn't there, but mum wrote to me."

"That's reassuring. And Hermione's okay with the joke shop?"

Ron sighed. "She's okay with it for now. I think she finds all the things Fred and George made really interesting, I mean, they are really magically advanced. But you know her. There is a lot she wants to do, and I don't think the shop is going to cut it after a while. She'll stay until she thinks George will come through okay, but after that, she has other plans."

"You okay with that?"

"Oh, yeah. No way I'm gonna hold her back."

Ron fell silent, and Harry didn't fill the gap because he could see that Ron was thinking.

"I love her, Harry," Ron started. "I mean, I really love her. It scares me sometimes. And I'm amazed that she actually loves me too – I have no idea why she does. But she does." Ron broke off and smiled. "Harry, I wanted to ask you first, you know, because you're my best mate."
"What's up?" Harry asked, though he had a feeling he knew what was coming. Ron took a big breath.

"I want to ask her to marry me." Then he added, "What do you think?"

Harry smiled. "I think that's great, Ron!"

"You think she'll say yes?" Ron asked, nervously.

"Course she will, she loves you!"

Ron grinned, looking as though a weight had been lifted off him. "Okay," He nodded, as though confirming to himself. "You'll be best man, of course."

"It would be an honour," Harry grinned. "How are you going to do it?"

"Not sure," Ron shrugged. "It needs to be really special. You know how girls are: They like their sentimental gestures."

"Have you met her parents yet?"

Ron nodded. "They're nice. We get on."

"That's good. Maybe you should ask Bill how to do it. He's the romantic in your family, right?"

"Good idea. Maybe I could ask Fleur too, seeing as she's, you know, female."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry grinned. He lifted his glass.

"To love."

Ron chinked their pints together happily. "To love," He confirmed.

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"How did it go?" Draco asked as soon as Harry apparated into the flat.

"Pretty good," Harry smiled. "Ron thinks I'll get the place. And guess what?"

"What?"

"He's going to propose to Hermione!"

"That's amazing! Do you know when?"

"No, but I'm sure we'll find out very soon."

"Exciting." Draco stood up from where he'd been reading on the sofa, and walked over to Harry, handing him a piece of parchment. "Read this!"

Harry unfolded the parchment and read. His eyes widened.

"Draco! This is great!"

"Well, it's just an interview, so let's not get too excited," Draco said, smiling, "But yeah, I'm pretty pleased."
"So looks like we're both on the way to having jobs," Harry grinned, handing the letter back to Draco. "Who'd have thought, eh? And I guess I have you to thank for the whole Quidditch thing: If you hadn't told me to volunteer, I might never have been scouted."

"Well, I think you made it back to me. You know? By helping me be not-homeless?"

They laughed, and the feeling of being in control of their lives – which neither was accustomed to – grew within both of them. It was security, and it felt good.

A/N: I thought we could do something a bit different for this chapter, what do you guys think?
QOTC (Question of the chapter): Who's POV do you like reading more, Draco's or Harry's? - Evie
"Explain it to me again."

"Oh my god..." Harry wiped a hand over his face and took a deep breath. "Okay. Look. You take two pieces of toast-"

"Yeah, I get that bit," Draco said irritably, "What I don't get is how the toast gets, well, toasted without fire or magic or anything."

"How did you make toast at the Manor?"

"I didn't. We had house elves in the kitchen, they made the food."

Harry sighed. "Right. Okay, let's backtrack. I explained about electricity, remember?"

"Yeah, it's the energy that muggles use instead of magic."

"Right. And it can also generate heat. So when we put the toast in here..." Harry plopped a couple of slices into the toaster and pushed the lever to turn it on. Understanding dawned on Draco's face.

"The electricity in the toaster heats up the toast!" Draco said excitedly.

"Yes," Harry said, "You got it. Well done."

"I got it!" Draco looked elated. Then, his brow furrowed. "But I still don't get what the electricity is?"

Harry groaned. "Look, I barely even know either. Electricity is complicated, you'd have to read a muggle studies book, or something. I don't know.

Draco looked bashful. "Sorry. I just don't really get muggle stuff."

"It's fine," Harry said, feeling tired. "You'll get there in the end. I guess it's payback for the hours of potions help you gave me."

"You're right, that was excruciating," Draco nodded. Then, after a pause, "So, what should we do with all this toast?"

They both looked at a plate piled with the slices of toast. Harry shrugged.

"Eat it?"

_A/N: I wasn't gonna post it because it was too short but then I thought: wait a minute... it's my own God damn book and I can do whatever I want, haha! Hope ya'll are feeling great and may this week be a good one! -Evie_
Blaise was sitting reading at the restaurant table when Draco and Harry arrived, both damp from the pattering rain outside. Waving away the waiter who attempted to accost them, Draco made his way to sit down opposite his best friend, Harry close behind him.

"You're late, kid," Blaise said, not looking up from his book. Draco snorted.

"Two minutes. And don't 'kid' me; I'm the same age as you."

"Fifty-one days older. Don't you forget it," Blaise said, and finally looked up. With surprise, his eyes fell on Harry. "Good to see you," He nodded, recovering. Then, looking between them, he added, "What's with the ambush?"

"Sorry to intrude on your evening," Harry said, "But Draco mentioned that you were still having trouble getting this newspaper idea off the ground and it gave me an idea."

Sitting up, Blaise's dark eyes took on an air of interest. "I'm listening."

"You need something that gives you an edge, right? Which no other newspaper has?"

Blaise nodded. "Of course, or else why would people buy it?"

Harry smiled. "Well, do you think an interview with the new seeker of the Chudley Cannons might cut it?"

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "The Cannon's aren't exactly world-cup level, Potter. And what's this about a new-' " Understanding dawned on his face "-Oh Merlin, it's you?"

"It is," Harry nodded. "Got my letter today. Already been asked to a couple of interviews, but I thought I might ask you first. What do you think?"

"You might want to close your mouth," Draco advised, smirking, "Your jaw's going to hit the table."

Draco couldn't help but smile as he watched Harry and Blaise discuss Harry's idea. Blaise had been waiting for a break so long, and now Harry Potter, who hadn't given an interview in months, was offering the perfect solution. It was all falling into place. They talked animatedly, Blaise's dark eyes glimmering with the new possibilities, and Draco realised that not only were going to help each other in business - they were going to get along, too.

Eventually, Harry slapped his knees and said 'Right!' in the traditional British way that meant 'I don't want to be rude but I really must go.' Blaise nodded and held out his hand.

"Thank you, Potter," He said as they shook. "You've saved my skin."

"Hey, I'm just glad I can help," Harry smiled and stood. "I'll be on my way then, and leave you to your meal?"

"Oh yes, please, shoo," Draco good-naturedly waved him away. "It's my turn to talk to Blaise now."

0o0oHarry0o0o

On the Sunday after Harry had been accepted to the Cannons, he and Draco were having a late lunch in the living room. With the addition of a coffee table - Draco's suggestion - the room had
gained some small sense of personality, and Harry had been considering doing some more
redecorating, hence the interior design magazines on the new table. They ate leftovers, as Harry was
tired out from his morning run and couldn't be bothered to cook. Both jumped (perhaps
disproportionately to the sound, but old habits cling hard) as without warning, a green flame burst to
life within the fireplace and tumbling out came Ron and Hermione, managing not to fall over this
time, though looking dishevelled from their floo travel.

"Ron? Hermione?" Recovering from the small shock, Harry stood up, pleasantly surprised. "What's
with this?"

"So sorry, we should have owled first, I know, but-" Hermione broke off, and looked at Ron with a
huge smile and soft eyes. Ron grinned back at her, and his freckles bunched up the way they did
when he was happiest.

"Show him," he said, and she lifted up her hand towards Harry, making visible a delicate gold band
around her ring finger, inlaid with a small cut diamond.

"You're engaged!" Harry exclaimed, looking between his two best friends who looked happily back
at him. "When did you ask her?" He directed the question at Ron, then added, before he could speak,
"Actually, come through to the kitchen, and we can talk there."

"Hi, Draco," Hermione smiled at Draco as the three of them walked through to the kitchen. "Sorry
about that."

"Don't be. Congratulations, both of you."

Both Ron and Hermione thanked him, then joined Harry in the kitchen where he was pouring
glasses of champagne.

"It's only two in the afternoon!" Hermione scolded, but Harry could tell her heart wasn't in it. Adding
a dash of orange juice to each glass, he brought them to the table.

"Now it's just buck's fizz - that's a day drink, right?"

"Can't argue with that," Ron laughed and took his glass.

"So," Harry said, sitting down,"Are you gonna tell me about it?"

Hermione looked down at the pretty little thing on her finger and twisted it, smiling in the way
people do when they're in love and can't wait to tell people about it. But it was Ron who spoke first,
covering Hermione's hand with his as he did so.

"I'd've liked to have done something bigger, but we don't have that much money at the moment," He
began, and Hermione interjected.

"Not that it matters at all, Ron. I know you love me, I don't need money to prove it."

"Well," Ron said with a small laugh, "Anyway, I asked her yesterday evening. I got a reservation at
the same restaurant we went to just after we started seeing each other because that was where we'd
had our first proper date." Harry loved the happy expression on his best friends' faces. "We had an
amazing meal, and just as we were finishing up," Ron looked at Hermione with a softness in his eyes
that he reserved only for her, "I asked her, and she said yes."

"It was perfect," Hermione said. "I couldn't have asked for anything more."
"I'm so happy for you guys," Harry grinned. "Do you know when you want the wedding, and where?"

"Summer, the Burrow," They both said at once. Hermione continued,

"We can have the ceremony in the garden, a bit like Bill and Fleur's but smaller, and we don't want a tent. We'd rather have it open air."

"Sounds like you've got that sorted," Harry laughed, and Ron shrugged.

"Honestly, I was surprised too. I thought we'd have to debate it for a while. But the Borrow just seemed like the perfect answer." They exchanged a couple's smile, then Ron turned to Harry with an earnest expression.

"I want you to be my best man. You're my best friend, I don't want anyone else."

"Of course," Harry nodded, "It would be an honour."

They talked for a while, enjoying their orange-juice champagne. At some point, Hermione called Draco in and, after some initial awkwardness, they found out that they had several books in common. It didn't take long for them to fall deep into conversation, leaving Ron and Harry to their own devices. Of course, they talked about Quidditch. Harry's first match was in May, so he had a month to get his fitness up to its peak before then. Aside from Harry, only two other changes had been made to the team: Daniel Mayne, who they'd met in the waiting room, had made it as a beater; and another man called Finnigan Pyke had been chosen as the new keeper. Harry got on with his team very well and was confident that they had what it took to work as one unit - something the Cannons had notoriously struggled with. Ron, who had received a fully autographed team shirt after Harry's first practice, couldn't have been happier with the arrangements.

Eventually, Ron and Hermione made their excuses and left for the Burrow, ready to break their news to the Weasley family at large. It was only once they'd gone that Harry realised he was tired: talking non-stop for two hours was hard work.

"I think I just made a friend," Draco said, happily, as they tidied the kitchen.

"Oh yeah, you two were going like the clappers. I'm glad you get on so well."

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"So, what do you want to do?" Harry asked once they'd finished cleaning the kitchen. Draco shrugged.

"I don't mind."

Harry thought for a moment. "We should watch a movie, I feel like watching a movie."

"Okay. But you know I can't help you decide which one - I don't know anything about muggle movies."

"Yeah, you're right," Harry said thoughtfully. "One thing you completely lack is cinema. We need to fix that."

"That sounds ominous."

"Not all right now, obviously," Harry added, "What to start with... Disney!"
"What's Disney?" Draco asked, confused.

"It's a film studio that makes children's stories into movies, basically. Most muggle children grow up watching those films, they're honestly so good that you can watch them whatever age you are, though. But which one... Have you ever heard of Alice in Wonderland?"

"Maybe? I don't really know."

"Let's watch it. I don't have any other Disney VHS tapes, and anyway, that one's my favourite."

"What's it about?"

"A little girl who gets bored and follows a white rabbit down a rabbit-hole, and has adventures."

"Sounds like a whirl."

Harry got the TV set up and they relaxed onto the sofa, having pulled closed the curtains for full immersion. Harry hadn't seen Alice in Wonderland in a long time, but he still liked it just as much as he had when he'd been seven and watching it from the doorway to the Dursley's living room, trying to be quiet and small so that they wouldn't notice him and throw him out. For a moment he thought about how very different this was - sitting next to Draco, relaxed, free of the tyranny of Mr and Mrs Dursely - and silently thanked whoever was listening for giving him a second chance at life.

They were just watching Alice and The Mad Hatter sing the un-birthday song when the phone - which they'd installed for Draco's potential employers to contact him - rang loudly from the corner of the room. As Draco went to pick it up, Harry paused the film.

"Hello?" Draco asked, holding the phone the way Harry had demonstrated earlier that week. "Yes, this is Draco. Uh huh." He paused. "Thank you so much!" Pause, "Are you serious? Sorry, that was unprofessional, I just- yes, I'm absolutely happy to start then." Pause. "Okay, I will. Thank you so much. And you. Goodbye."

He put the receiver down silently, and for a moment, he just stared at the phone. Then, just as Harry was about to ask him if he was okay, he punched the air.

"I got the job! Harry, I got the job!"

"Yes!" Harry jumped up from the sofa, "I'm so proud of you!"

Draco gripped Harry's arms excitedly as he spoke: "They said that I was just the type of person they were looking for- they want me to start tomorrow!" Suddenly he pulled Harry into a tight hug. "Thank you so much, Harry."

It had been a long, long time since he'd hugged Draco. It felt achingly familiar, even after all that time, and Harry's heart thumped in his chest. "For what?" He asked, quietly.

"For helping me write my CV? For giving me a roof over my head? For showing me how to make food? Everything!" Draco laughed into Harry's shoulder, and then pulled away to look at Harry, a smile lighting up his face. And Harry couldn't help it. He couldn't resist the pull one second longer.

He kissed Draco. For a second, Draco froze and Harry thought, dimly, that he'd really fucked up this time. But then Draco was kissing him back with all the longing of two years spent apart, and it was like the first time and every other time and so much more.

"I'm sorry," Harry breathed as they came apart, a finger tracing Draco's lips as he tried to understand
what just happened. "I shouldn't have-"

Draco broke him off with another kiss, one which was stronger, and this time Harry gave in completely, letting go of the doubts and savouring every second.

As the kiss deepened, they moved without thinking back towards the sofa, and Harry sat down heavily, the contact between their lips breaking for a split second before Draco reconnected them, straddling Harry and holding his face in his hands as they kissed. Harry's hands were tugging at Draco's clothes, and again they broke apart just long enough to pull each other's shirts over their heads before crashing down again. The feeling of Draco's bare skin against his as he leaned against the back of the sofa was enough to make Harry moan, and he could feel himself growing harder. Draco apparently felt the same way because Harry could feel Draco's erection pressing against his own. The sensation was wonderful. He bucked his hips against Draco's, and was rewarded with a moan which sent tingles down his spine. His hands found their way to Draco's trousers and he fumbled with the button, then unzipped them and pushed the fabric down Draco's legs. This time they stayed apart for longer while Draco stood and quickly took off his trousers, Harry doing the same sitting on the sofa - long enough for him to notice the thin white scars which snaked over Draco's body, shiny and paler than the rest of his skin.

"Oh, God," Harry said softly, reaching out and tracing one of the lines. Draco's breathing shook and stopped at this, and he stared at Harry's hand. "I did this to you."

The words, no more than a whisper, rung between them.

"I can't believe I- How could I have brought myself to-"

"Stop, Harry," Draco took hold of Harry's hands and moved them from his stomach as he repositioned himself, straddling Harry once more. "You didn't know."

"I'm so, so sorry," Harry said, gripping Draco's hands.

"I forgive you." Draco reconnected their lips, and Harry kissed him forcefully, emotions only making his lust stronger. Turning them so that Draco was beneath him on the sofa, he brought Draco's legs up over his shoulders.

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Explicit

"Is this alright?" He breathed, just before his hands started to pull at Draco's underwear. Draco nodded.

"Yes," He answered breathlessly. "Yes."

And suddenly, there were no more boundaries between them anymore. And it was Draco's turn to reach out and trace the scar that the locket had burned into Harry's skin, making Harry shiver. Wordlessly, Harry held out a hand, and a pot flew to him.

"If it hurts-"

"I'll tell you." Draco finished for him. Harry kissed him lightly, then unscrewed the lid and coated his finger in lube. Slowly, he pushed it inside of Draco.

"Oh-" Draco arched his back and moaned, making Harry's erection throb with need. "Oh Merlin, Harry,"
"More?" Harry asked huskily.

"Please," Draco nodded, and as Harry pushed another finger in he gasped again, gripping the pillow behind his head. Harry began to move his fingers, then as he felt Draco relax, scissored them, while Draco breathed, in short, gorgeous pants. Suddenly, Draco opened his eyes and gripped Harry's free hand.

"Harry, I'm ready. I want you inside me," He said, eyes dark with lust. Harry didn't trust his voice, so he quickly rubbed some lube over his erection and positioned himself at Draco's entrance. Just before he entered him, Draco's hand found his and intertwined their fingers, and with that, Harry pushed inside Draco, moaning as the tight heat wrapped around him. As he felt Draco relax more, he moved in deeper and faster, and then with a jerk, Draco shouted-

"There! Oh my God, right there!"

The sight of Draco writhing underneath him, the sound of him moaning and breathing Harry's name, was almost enough to push Harry over the edge. Controlling himself, he used the hand that wasn't interlocked with Draco's to grab hold of Draco's shaft, and started moving in time with his own thrusts.

"Aah-" Draco gasped, sounding almost in pain as his senses were overloaded with pleasure, and he bucked his hips up to meet Harry's. "Oh my God, Harry, you're gonna kill me."

Somehow, Harry didn't think Draco meant that in a bad way, and as he kept moving, he began to feel lightheaded. He wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer.

"Draco," he panted, "I'm close."

"Me too," Draco replied. "Let's try to get-" He took in a sharp breath, "To get them at the same time."

Harry moved faster still, and suddenly the pressure inside him seemed like it was going to burst him, and he screamed out Draco's name as he was engulfed, drowning in a wave of pure, perfect sensation. Somewhere far off, he heard Draco's voice screaming his name, and as they both rode the wave of their orgasms, he crashed their mouths together, and felt completely whole for the first time in two years.

Told you we'd be together in the end, didn't I?" Harry murmured as they descended the high. "I promised you." Draco was playing absently with Harry's hair as he replied.

"Yeah, you promised. I never believed you until now, though."

Propping himself up on his elbows, Harry looked Draco in the eyes. "Draco, I love you. I've loved you since we were fourteen. I tried no to, but it hurt, and I don't ever want to have to do that again."

"You'll never have to," Draco cupped Harry's cheek. "I love you too. Always."

And when their lips met again, it was as a seal to every promise they had made in that tiny guest room. A new light was in both their worlds: a light of love which was free and untried; a love which was theirs.
- Fin -

(Epilogue to come)
Once the first kiss was out of the way, many followed. It was as though an invisible seam between them had been broken, and now that it was gone, they could be in love without fearing each other - or anything, for that matter. Blaise heard about it very quickly, of course, as did Hermione. Neither of them were at all surprised, and both assured their friends that they'd known it was only a matter of time.

Harry broke the news to Ron not long after he told Hermione. He brought him to a pub - where else? - and explained everything, from Hogwarts right up until the present day. After Harry had finished speaking Ron was silent for several minutes, and Harry gave him space, knowing how much he needed to take in. Eventually, Ron nodded brusquely.

"I knew you liked blokes, Harry. Even if you like girls too, I always had an idea about... yeah. I don't care. You're my best friend, that's much more important." Then he added, "I'll need some time to process the whole... you know... 'Draco Malfoy was my secret lover for three years' bit, but..." He gestured passively, "Like I said, there are more important things than who you date. And anyway, Ma- Draco isn't even that bad once you get to know him."

They didn't tell anyone else until Ron and Hermione's wedding, which took place on a gorgeously sunny day in June. Draco had been terrified of going, and Harry couldn't blame him as he took in the expressions on his friend's faces as they saw just who his plus one was. A tense ceremony passed, but Ron's face was so happy and Hermione - who's belly was beginning to show a prominent bump - looked so beautiful that the atmosphere couldn't have been ruined. At the party afterwards, a smiling Luna approached Draco and happily asked him to dance. After that, the ice began to melt, and even Seamus had started to warm to Draco by the end of the night. They knew for certain that Draco had been accepted when, not more than a week later, an invite came for Seamus and Dean's wedding, addressed to both of them.

Under Draco's supervision, their flat became a gorgeously decorated home with expansion spells in each room, harmonic furniture, and plenty of bookshelves, which were soon filled. But most importantly, the home felt truly loved. Harry started having people round for dinner regularly, and Draco became rather good at cooking himself as he regularly helped out in the kitchen. With Draco's new job, they started splitting rent between them, and Draco started feeling as though the flat wasn't just a temporary stop, but his real home. Their real home.

The Chudley Cannons won the UK Quidditch league for the first time in half a century when Harry caught the snitch in the first ten minutes of the final against the Newcastle Bludgers. In a later interview with Blaise Zabini of Magic Today, Harry called it the third-happiest moment of his life - the first being when they won the war, and the second, mysteriously, being a secret.

One day Draco asked Harry to come on a walk with him, so they climbed up a hill on the outskirts of London. It was a warm day in early autumn, and the sun was painting the sky strong, beautiful colours as it set over the hazy city. They stood for a long time, watching the sky change. Then, quite suddenly, Draco turned to Harry, and took hold of his Hands.

"I want to tell you something."

"You okay?" Harry asked, looking concerned. Draco smiled.

"I'm fine. I'm amazing." He squeezed Harry's hands. "I wanted to tell you that sometimes I think about how much I love you and it makes me want to cry, not because I'm sad, but because I'm so
intensely happy."

Harry smiled, and his eyes were bright as they reflected the sun.

"I was thinking about us," Draco continued. "We've been drawn to each other from day one, haven't we? Even back on the train that first day of school, I chose your carriage out of hundreds. And whatever happens - I mean, God knows it hasn't been smooth - we find our way back to each other." He paused. "I like to think that this time, we won't have to 'find our way back' because from now on we'll just stay together. There's nothing else I want in the world than to be with you, forever," And, getting down on one knee, Draco produced a box from the pocket of his jacket. "Harry, will you marry me?" He asked, and opened the box to reveal two rings, one gold, one silver. Harry laughed, his eyes shining brightly, and nodded emphatically.

"Yes, of course!"

He held out his hand and Draco slid the gold ring onto Harry's ring finger, and then, standing up, slid the silver ring on his own. Linking their hands, he kissed Harry very softly.

"I know I'm not meant to wear a ring too, but- well, I was curious," He said, quietly. "so the other day I tried to accio the rings we wore back in Hogwarts. And they just flew into my hand." Draco smiled at Harry. "I knew I had to ask you after that."

Their's was a winter wedding. Narcissa, newly released from the Moody Centre, walked Draco down the aisle, and Harry thought that Draco had never looked more beautiful than he did then, in the suit which matched Harry's own. Teddy was the ring bearer, and to his credit, managed to stay solemn enough during his part of the ceremony, though he spent the rest of the time running around the feet of the guests, his hair turning every bright colour imaginable. Hermione, by that time heavily pregnant, would later proclaim emotionally that it was the second most beautiful wedding she'd ever seen, before bursting into tears. Ron assured them that it was only hormones, and to just take the compliment.

It was at the Potter's wedding - 'Potters', of course, because Draco snatched the chance to lose his father's surname at first grab - that a certain newly-Hogwarts-graduated Weasley girl got into conversation with the renowned head of the wizarding newspaper Magic Today, and rather unexpectedly found herself deeply in love with him - a feeling which went fully reciprocated. Blaise and Ginny were soon known as the power-couple of the '90s Hogwarts kids, a formidable force of nature not only in life but also on the page, as Ginny joined Blaise in reporting for Magic, both working hard to bring light on all that went on in the world of Wizarding Britain. Ginny remained a steadfast friend to Harry after they got over the awkwardness that had followed their break-up (which both agreed was completely justified, and even became something of an in-joke within their circle).

Seventeen Years Later

It was just getting dark when Harry got through the garden gate, and walked the path leading to the big London house that he and Draco had moved to seven years ago. The flat, while comfortable and familiar, could never have accommodated Lily, and when she was conceived they'd both known it was time to move. A warm yellow light beckoned him forward as he made his way to the front door,
which stood slightly ajar in anticipation of his arrival, and he was welcomed home by a wave of warmth and the smell of good food. Paintings, mostly done by Draco after he and his mother had won the lawsuit against Lucius Malfoy, decorated the walls along with Lilly's drawings, of which there seemed an endless supply.

"I'm home!" Harry called, hanging up his jacket and dropping his training bag and broom by the door.

"Dad!" the shout was followed by the appearance of Lilly from the kitchen, her muggle school uniform still on and her bright blonde hair in two bunches. Harry crouched down and opened his arms, laughing as his daughter flew into his arms and he swung her up high. Draco appeared at the door to the kitchen, a spatula in one hand and a grin on his face.

"Hello stranger," He said, but raised a hand as Harry leant forward to give him a kiss, Lilly still in his arms. "Not until you've had a shower."

"I think sweat makes me sexier, don't you. Come on, won't you give me a kiss?" Harry smirked, and Lilly buried her face in his neck.

"Dad..." she groaned.

"What? Don't I look sexy?" Putting Lilly down, Harry imitated a female model and posed, and, mortified, Lilly ran back to Draco.

"Da! Tell him to stop!"

Draco and Harry exchanged a look and both burst out laughing.

Lilly had been made half by magic, and half by science, because however much magic advanced, no one had yet figured out how to make a baby without a male and a female. Lilly had parts from both Harry and Draco, but she also had a mother: Luna, who had happily carried her for nine months. She had Harry's eyes - or Lilly's eyes, as many would say - and Draco's hair and skin tone, and something else that was altogether her's, a new spark.

Harry and Draco loved her more than anything in the whole world.
Hello, Evie here. I just want to say, thank you all so much for even considering reading this story. To all those who commented lovely things, or who pointed out my mistakes, or who PMed me, THANK YOU. You made writing this a joy.

This is the first proper long story I've ever written, and it certainly isn't perfect. What you've read is actually a first draft of what needs to be edited down, refined etc before it can be perfect. Publishing chapter-by-chapter can sometimes make things a bit difficult to edit in this way, though, so for memories sake, I'm leaving the story as it is. Writing this taught me so much (I've changed it now, but you should have seen what my first chapter originally was - UGH! I cringed so hard re-reading it!). I really enjoyed it, even when it was really hard, and it's been a part of my life for over a year now, so it's hard to actually believe it's finished.

Towards the end, my heart wasn't in it so much. I still loved my story, and I did the best I could, but I feel that I've outgrown this book a little. It's been with me too long, and now I want something new. For my next story, I'm planning to write an original one, and instead of putting it online, the aim is actually to be published. Maybe one day, you'll see my name on a bookshelf! (Though you probably won't know it's me - you guys don't know my real name, mwahaha).

I started writing this when I was fifteen. I'm sixteen now. I've developed and matured with this story, and I've been told that my writing style visibly changes as the story progresses, which doesn't surprise me. God knows I've still got a lot of developing and maturing to do. This story has been one of my biggest achievements, and I'm grateful that so many of you came along for the ride.

So, yeah. This is Evie, signing off.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!