Epilogue II

by Reiko009

Summary

The Dark Lord has been defeated, but the world is still a little broken. Harry Potter returns to Hogwarts thinking that things will finally return to normal. But can they really? He is in denial about how much he has yet to heal - among other things - and a similarly broken Draco Malfoy starts to consume his thoughts.
Not So Happily Ever After

It was nearing evening and a cool breeze rustled the leaves above, signaling the end of summer.

“Harry?” Ginny pulled away to ask.

Harry didn’t respond right away, too dazed from their snogging session to realize Ginny was asking him a question. “Hmmm?”

“We are alone. It’s just us.” Ginny stated in a hushed whisper, as if it were a secret.

They were in a grove of trees not too far from the Burrow. Harry’s transition into normal life after the war seemed to be going well, even more so since receiving an offer from Headmistress McGonagall. He would be leaving in the morning on the train back to Hogwarts, two weeks earlier than the regular students to act as a student teacher for Defense Against the Dark Arts. It would allow him to finish his studies and take his NEWTS in the unusual capacity of a returning student at 18. Hermione and Ron were coming too, as were others from their class whose education had been disrupted.

Harry tried to focus on Ginny’s face – hoping it would give him a clue as to her intended meaning. “We are, aren’t we.” He replied lamely.

“And… I’ll miss you. We won’t see each other for two whole weeks.” She whispered back.

“We’ve endured worse. And then we’ll see each other every day.” Harry smiled back earnestly.

Ginny’s return smile seemed forced. “Harry… Don’t you want… Can’t we…?” Her cheeks flushed, seemingly too embarrassed to finish her question.

Harry just kissed her in response. She was still slightly shorter than him, thank heavens, after their long year apart. Her bright eyes and sharp reflexes still tied his stomach in knots. Her flowery scent enveloped him in a cocoon of familiarity and safety. And with the Dark Lord finally defeated, they could be together again. The danger was gone.

And Ginny’s kisses were sweet and firm. He loved kissing Ginny.

Ginny pushed him back into one of the trees, his shirt sliding up and the bare skin on his back scraping against the rough bark of the tree. She seemed more forceful than usual, pressing their bodies together so that there was no space between them. Harry kept trying to cup Ginny’s face with his hands, relishing the closeness.

But Ginny guided his hands down to her waist and gave a wanting moan. Harry was pleased. Could life get any better?

After a few moments more, Ginny pulled away again and caught Harry’s hands as he came away from the tree, reaching to pull her back into another kiss. This time, though, she guided his hands to her chest, palms out so that he could feel her breasts. She gave him a pleading look, looking deep into his eyes, as if searching for something.

Her breasts were soft, except for the small hard nubs of her nipples. They weren’t especially large, but they fit into his hands perfectly. Harry had only rarely snogged enough to reach mutual groping and was unsure on how to proceed. He pressed his hands against her breasts for a moment, acknowledging them, face burning, and then dropped his hands. He had often endured his dorm
mates talk of breasts, but he rarely participated. All women had them, and the heart beneath them
was more important, wasn’t it?

Instead, Harry grabbed Ginny’s hands, bringing one up to his face so he could kiss her palm and
the other to feel his heartbeat. Harry had spent the whole summer at the Burrow or at Hogwarts
helping mend everything that Voldemort had taken from them. Ginny and he had snuck off to snog
nearly every other day. To have her back was wonderful. He smiled into her hand, enjoying her
scent.

“Harry?” Ginny looked confused. She pushed him back against the tree their bodies perhaps even
closer than they had been before. She pushed her leg between his and pinned him in place. She
didn’t look as happy as she normally did after a good snogging.

“Is it time to go back?” Harry asked, awkwardly. Ginny was searching his eyes again, but this time
it made him feel small and vulnerable.

“Back?” Ginny whispered, almost too quiet for Harry to hear. And then louder – much louder,
“That’s it? I wait for you for a year and this is all you want?”

“What’s wrong, Ginny?” Harry felt like things were not heading in the right direction.

Ginny was almost shouting now. “A whole summer of snogging and that’s it?!”

“Ginny? I’m sorry… I… what did I do?” Harry pleaded.

Ginny did something then he was not expecting. She grabbed him between his legs and groped him
for a good three seconds before his mind registered, alarmed enough to slide away out of reach.

“Ginny!” Harry was shocked. He had always imagined being touched gently, passionately, while
snogging – not forcefully and without warning like this. “You can’t… I mean you just…” He
spluttered.

But Ginny face had become hard, her expression caught between triumphant and embarrassed. She
took a few steps back, ignoring Harry’s inarticulate protestations.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I wanted this to work.” Ginny was now speaking to the forest floor in a
controlled voice. “But I’m not going to force this. I think… I think it best if we break things off
here.” Her eyes became wet and full.

“Ginny… No. It’s just two weeks more… what is it? What did I do wrong?” Harry finally
managed, his chest burning at seeing her close to tears.

“It’s not that I couldn’t wait for you to be ready for more, Harry. I thought I was doing right by
letting you lead. But… this isn’t working. We don’t… You don’t want me the way I want you, do
you?” She finished, her voice growing more confident, the pool of tears receding back as she lifted
her head and again looked Harry eye to eye.

“What’s wrong?” Harry was getting angry now. “We have time to work this out, Gin. We have all
the time in the world. Tell me what I did wrong!”

“You didn’t do anything, Harry. I still really like you – love you even. But… this isn’t what you
want, is it? I’m not what you want.” Ginny’s shoulders fell and she looked back down at the sparse
grass and gravel.

Harry was so confused. Wasn’t this supposed to be their happily ever after? They had won! The
Dark Lord was gone for good. Why was Ginny making this so complicated? Just because he wasn’t ready to go further with her sexually after being reunited for only a couple months?

“Ginny, I… love you too. If you need some space, I can understand. It would only be fair.” Harry tried.

“No. I don’t like pretending. This isn’t working, Harry. I’m sorry.” And with that she Apparated away, leaving Harry gaping alone among the trees just as the sun set over the hills.

Should he follow her? Did she just need some time to herself? He didn’t know. Did she go back to the Burrow? Would he even be welcome back there tonight if she told everyone they had just broke up?

Harry admitted that they hadn’t been very public about getting back together. Harry had thrown himself into fixing Hogwarts, mourning his lost friends properly, and spending every waking moment he could surrounded by those he cared about most – wanting desperately for things to go back to normal.

And what was all of that about not wanting Ginny? She was a powerful witch, great at Quidditch, and was undeniably brave and beautiful. Why wouldn’t he want her? Was there something wrong with him that she just didn’t want to mention to spare his feelings? Was he that much of a fuck-up?

Harry groaned. His eyes stung. He was not going to cry. He’d cried enough already.

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Thankfully Ginny didn’t seem to have told on him when he got back to the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley asked if he wanted any more supper after his “walk”, which he declined. He went and sat by Ron and Percy on the sofa as Mr. Weasley attempted to get his newly enchanted television to show them more advertisements for muggle products he found fascinating. He kept tapping at the screen, making it change channels, speeding through movies and late-night talk shows without interest.

Harry wasn’t really paying attention to the telly, and he didn’t have the heart to tell Mr. Weasley that people usually surfed channels to avoid commercials, not the other way around. He also didn’t want to poison everyone else’s night with his problems, so he just sulked until a little while later when Ron started yawning – he yawned back, half faking, and suggested they head up to bed.

“Can’t wait to see Hermione.” Ron said happily as they mounted the staircase. “Not that I’m not pleased she has her parents back and all, but… it will be good to see her.”

Harry grunted in affirmation. Hermione had only visited twice over the break, first to tell them she had found her parents and effectively restored their memories – they hadn’t been very happy with her, of course, but they were safe and whole. And second, when she got an invitation from Headmistress McGonagall just as Harry and Ron had, to return to school. Her happiness was infectious, and remembering her smiles on both occasions cheered Harry a little out of his black mood.

“Although I’m still nervous about being put in charge of first years. Me? I’ll be lucky if I don’t accidentally step on one, right Harry?” Ron joked. He had grown even taller back under Molly’s care, now much taller than Harry who hadn’t gained an inch.

“I expect you and Madam Pomfrey will get right chummy before long.” Harry teased back, unenthusiastically. But Ron just laughed and shook his head.

Ginny had kept out of sight the rest of the evening. Harry assumed she had locked herself up in her
room. He felt a little guilty about it, now that he had had time to cool down. He hoped she would
show up to breakfast in the morning at least, to wish him and Ron off. Maybe this was just one of
those spats couples had now and then. She would get over it.

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But Ginny didn’t show up for breakfast the next day. Mrs. Weasley made a fuss over their trunks
gave them each a parcel of food to take with them for the train ride, kissing them on their
cheeks and giving them her all-encompassing hugs several times over, for luck. And before he
knew it, Harry was Apparating to King’s Cross and walking to the familiar entrance between
platforms Nine and Ten.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about her not showing. Was it really over, then? Was she going to
ignore him when she got to Hogwarts in two weeks for her final year? His nerves about becoming a
student teacher were squashed down with uncertainty. He hadn’t really thought about not
being with Ginny after the war. If she really didn’t want him back, what then?

“Harry!” a familiar voice called, and soon he was hugged tightly by none other than Hermione
Granger.

“Hermione! We thought we would meet you on the train. So good to see you.” Harry hugged her
back hard. No matter what was going on with him and Ginny, he wasn’t going to keep Hermione
from knowing how relieved he was to see her again.

“Pardon me, but I think that’s my girlfriend.” Ron said in mock hurt.

“Oh, Ron.” Hermione broke off her hug with Harry and met Ron with a quick peck on his lips,
which made him blush a rather brilliant shade of red, before giving him a hug too.

“I can’t wait to hear about your summer! Have you both got a teaching schedule worked out?” She
looked down her nose at them.

“Er, Hermione, I think that’s kind of why we are going early… to work that out with the real
Professors.” Harry stammered.

“Only teasing. But of course I’ve made one just in case Professor Vector doesn’t think I’ll be
taking this seriously. It’s only one lesson a week, after all. At least tell me you’ve thought about
what kinds of things you’ll want to teach? Still have your First Year Charms and Defense Against
the Dark Arts books as a reference?”

“Blimey, Hermione. We’ve got time for that later. Let’s just find an empty car on the train and
settle in for the trip first, alright?” Ron rolled his eyes.

Harry followed his friends through the gate and onto the train, noticing how few other passengers
there seemed to be compared to normal and how short the train seemed. Soon enough they reached
the last car, as the Express was only carrying what Hermione had dubbed the “Eighth Year”
students, and perhaps a few Hogsmeade travelers.

“Well, I guess this will be us, then.” Hermione said, opening a compartment and hauling her trunk
inside.

“I’ve got it, ‘Mione.” Ron said, and rather chivalrously bent down to lift her trunk up to the upper
racks. “Ouch. What have you got in here, a whole bloody library?” He panted.

Hermione blushed, but didn’t respond. Knowing her, it probably was packed full with heavy books.
Harry put his trunk up next and Ron tossed his up last, obviously much lighter than either Harry’s or Hermione’s. Ron took a seat by Hermione, leaving Harry to himself. He wondered for a moment if their newfound closeness would soon push him out of the picture. They would obviously want to be alone sometimes…

“What’s that face for, Harry? We haven’t even left yet. No need to worry – I’m sure you’ll be brilliant.” Ron seemed to be dealing with his own nerves by fidgeting with his sleeve.


Harry rolled his eyes. His friends meant well, he knew, but he didn’t really feel like spoiling the mood for them – they seemed so happy. “I’m fine, Hermione. Just jitters.”

“How’s Ginny, then?” Hermione asked with a smile. She seemed to catch on quickly though with whatever expression flashed across his face at the unexpected question, though. “Oh, Harry.”

“Er… we just had a row, that’s all.” Harry tried to brush it off.

“You what now? Why didn’t you tell me, Harry? Was this last night?” Ron asked, completely not helping.

“Harry, you don’t have to say… it’s just, if we can help…” Hermione offered.

Harry pondered this. The train began leaving the station with a small jerk. They were heading back to Hogwarts. If ever there was a place that Harry truly felt was home, it was there. He felt a little better as the train picked up speed. Ron and Hermione were giving each other worried looks while Harry debated on what to say.

“Do you think… I mean… what if Ginny and I just don’t work out?” Harry asked tentatively.

“Well, she’d be dumb to let that happen – been crushing on you since before First Year. Now tell me straight, is it her I need to hex or you?” Ron kicked Harry in the shin.

“Ow.” Harry scowled at Ron. “I don’t know. She wouldn’t say what was wrong, just kept going on about how it wasn’t working.”

“That’s nonsense. You two obviously care a lot about each other, and you have so much in common. I’m sure it was just her being nervous about being apart from you again, even if it is just two weeks.” Hermione replied sagely.

“Thanks, Hermione. Maybe.” Harry didn’t sound convinced. Her parting words had sounded pretty final. He hadn’t realized how much he had been relying on getting back together with Ginny to establish his new normal. Didn’t she know that sometimes getting back to her, having meals with her at the Burrow, having someone to share his secrets with once everything was over were what got him through some of the darkest parts of his life on the run the past year?

“You’ve still got us, mate.” Ron said. “But I still might have to hex you later, out of principle you know?”

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Harry didn’t know exactly who all to expect upon departing the train, but after the initial bustle to extricate themselves and their trunks from the last car he stopped to look around. There were twelve students in total, along with a few new faces that looked like they might be new teachers. Harry spotted a rather severe looking witch with long, straight hair and a rather portly middle-aged
wizard with an impressive mustache talking to each other to one side, obviously awaiting the Hogwarts carriages just like everyone else.

He was most surprised by the last group of people huddled together on the end of the platform – all Slytherins. Blaise Zabini, Gregory Goyle, and… Draco Malfoy of all people. Harry had thought he’d seen the last of him after the final battle. Harry hadn’t heard a word about the Malfoys in the papers, Lucius still considered dangerous and at large, but no one had seen them – he had assumed they had fled the country. But there was Draco Malfoy looking a bit anxious, but still as stuck-up as ever.

“Malfoy’s here.” Harry whispered casually to his friends.

Hermione and Ron looked to where Harry was glancing. They exchanged apprehensive looks. “I’m sure McGonagall knows what she’s doing.” Hermione offered, ever ready to defend a teacher.

“Is he seriously going to… I mean, after all he’s done?” Ron looked a bit red in the face.

Harry was surprised to see Malfoy, but he wasn’t angry. He never had a chance to thank Narcissa Malfoy for saving his life, after all. And Draco… well, as much as he was a git, he didn’t hate him anymore. Perhaps McGonagall was right to invite him back. Dumbledore would have.

“I’m more worried about Goyle. If we are all here to help teach lessons, what is that oaf going to teach? He’s as dense as a brick.” Harry giggled.

Hermione looked a bit affronted at Harry’s statement, but didn’t comment – probably because she knew he was right.

“Welcome, all, to Hogwarts! Good to see so many of you back. Sorry I’m late, the Thestrals demanded an extra feeding before pulling the carriages. On you all get, now – the Headmistress will be waiting for you.” Hagrid’s booming voice broke out over the crowd.

“Hagrid!” Harry beamed, his dark mood almost forgotten. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Hello, you three. Couldn’t get enough, eh? Promise you won’t cause any more mischief than usual this year. Not sure what McGonagall was thinking inviting you back.” Hagrid teased, giving them each a firm hug. “Good to see you too, Harry.” He whispered privately when it was Harry’s turn for a hug.

“Are you back to teaching Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid?” Hermione asked, nicely.

“You bet I am.” Hagrid beamed. “Got a batch of Jothpar eggs on the way for the new students to hatch. But, Shhhh, it’s a secret, eh?”

Harry had no idea what a Jothpar was, but knowing Hagrid it was probably ugly, dangerous, or both. He smiled at Hagrid anyway and mimed zipping-up his lips. Hagrid seemed to have forgiven them for abandoning his classes after Fifth Year.

They climbed into a carriage and started up to the castle. It looked much better than it had right after the last battle, but it wasn’t yet fully re-built. It would probably be years before it was whole again, but the worst of the scars were patched over. New stone shone bright against the old in the fading twilight.

Harry was actually surprised McGonagall was able to get so much done in time for the new school year. He had stopped in multiple times to help clean-up, but he did very little actual repairs. There were spells, enchantments, and protections that had been damaged far beyond his skill to do
anything about.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Harry murmured to himself.

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Headmistress McGonagall welcomed them herself at the door as they filed into the Great Hall. All the tables had been pushed back except for one, which was set out with glittering white plates and crystal goblets. “Please, everyone, take a seat. We will get started momentarily. Welcome!” She eyed Harry and gave him a nod and a smile.

Other teachers were already there waiting for them, sitting at the single low table rather than the higher staff table. It felt weird to sit down with them like equals – as if they were just getting together for a friendly meal. But then Harry’s stomach growled rather loudly, reminding him of the food to come. At least the kitchens were in perfect working order.

“I would like to introduce our new teachers before we eat. The rest can wait until after. Please welcome Professor Brandon Chase, our new Transfiguration instructor who has come to us all the way from America,” Here she indicated the portly man with the mustache Harry had noticed earlier, “and newly appointed Auror Janice Meek, who will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.” The witch with the long hair gave a polite nod as everyone gave them a round of applause. “And now, eat up.” McGonagall gestured to the impressively set table upon which food began to appear.

Harry and Ron both groaned in pleasure. “You know, as much as I love your mother’s cooking, I’ve forgotten how much I missed the feasts here at Hogwarts.” Harry elbowed his best mate before starting to dish himself up a mountain of potatoes, roast beef, and pudding.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” Ron replied, digging into a chicken leg.

“Oh, honestly.” But Hermione couldn’t keep the affection out of her voice.

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After the meal, McGonagall expounded upon everyone’s new role as student teachers. While many just wanted to move on from the horrors Voldemort had wrought, she seemed determined to encourage a healing environment. With the addition of twelve returning students, she was worried there wouldn’t be enough attention given to those who might need it, academically or otherwise. She didn’t elaborate, but everyone understood what she meant.

Therefore, the returning students would alternate teaching the First Year students under the direction of a Professor, each within the area at which they most excelled – “with the exception of our talented Ms. Hermione Granger, who will be helping Professor Vector with the Third Year Arithmancy students.” Ron gave an encouraging whoop at the mention of Hermione, which made her blush and McGonagall glare at him for having interrupted. He didn’t look at all sorry, though.

“All of you will be meeting with your Professors to design a teaching plan over the next two weeks for the weekly lessons on which you will be in charge. Otherwise, you will go to classes normally in preparation for the NEWT examinations next Spring. The pairings are: Under Professor Flitwick for Charms, Ms. Susan Bones and Mr. Ronald Weasley; Under Professor Meek for Defense Against the Dark Arts, Mr. Anthony Goldstein and Mr. Harry Potter;” at the mention of his name, a collective hush fell over the table, much to Harry’s annoyance, “Under Professor Chase for Transfiguration, Ms. Lisa Turpin and Mr. Blaise Zabini; Under Professor Slughorn for Potions, Draco Malfoy; Under Professor Sprout, Mr. Gregory Goyle…,” at this Harry and Ron looked at
“Now, seeing as you are not regular students I have some special guidelines that must be followed… by everyone.” Here McGonagall looked over her glasses at Harry, Ron and Hermione – which seemed a little unfair. “You can take and give House Points, but only during your lecture periods. You can coach and train with the Quidditch teams, but you cannot be official members.” At this Ron groaned loudly. “You will follow a curfew of 11:00 at night, and keep to your own dormitory. We have renovated the Guest Suites to accommodate all of you, two per room. And you will, and I must stress this, you will be an example to all other students in proper behavior, discipline in your studies, and above all, inter-house unity. I’ve taken the liberty to instruct our House Elves to alter your uniforms to black, white, and gray. From here on out, you do not belong to any of the Four Houses, although you may sit at any table you wish during meals. Now, off to bed. You will meet with your Professors tomorrow after breakfast.”

Harry always knew McGonagall to be a strict, organized, and commanding – but he never dreamed that she would make such a decisive leader. He was inclined to agree with all of the rules she set down, even the one about Quidditch. Hermione seemed to agree too, but Ron groaned all the way to their new rooms. They were on the Fourth Floor down a rarely used hallway behind a beautifully carved door depicting a phoenix, which seemed rather fitting. There was a small Common Room, more of a waiting room really, with a fireplace, two tables and some straight-backed upholstered chairs. Everything was in neutral tones of gray, ivory, and tan – which gave it a bit of a hotel lobby feel, in Harry’s opinion.

“Well, perhaps not as cozy as Gryffindor, but I can definitely see myself using all that table space.” Hermione commented.

“Why couldn’t she have picked something less… clean looking?” Ron grumbled.

Harry laughed, but then had to stifle a yawn. It had been a long day. “Come on, let’s see which room is ours.” He pointed down the hallway at the dark wooden doors, each sporting a pair of names, one on each of two silver plaques. “No stairs, that’s kind of nice.”

“How can you say that? I miss Gryffindor already.” Ron moaned.

“Oh, I’m with Lisa Turpin from Ravenclaw! Transfiguration student teacher. Brilliant.” Hermione’s door was one of the first they passed. She gave Ron and Harry brief hugs and opened her door and slipped inside. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Hermione.” Ron and Harry said simultaneously.

A mousy girl with wavy hair and glasses opened the same door a moment later, a grin on her face – probably equally pleased with her rooming arrangement.

“Well, that’s the last we will see of Hermione for a while, I reckon.” Harry muttered. “They will get along swimmingly.”

“Don’t say that. I already have to share Hermione time with you.” Ron grumbled back, teasing.

Harry laughed. Ron had really come a long way in dispelling the jealousy that had nearly consumed him with the unhelpful push of the locket horcrux – but not completely rid of it, it seemed.

“Oh, this one is uh… I mean, mine and Neville’s it looks like. Sorry, mate. Who are you paired
with then?” Ron looked down the hall trying to read the plaques from where he stood, squinting.

“Oh, good – someone I know.” Neville said from behind them. “Reckon we have our own shower and loo?”

Ron’s eyes bulged for a second before grabbing the door and wrenching it open, “I call dibs! I call dibs!”

Neville shrugged at Harry and followed Ron inside.

Harry thought for sure McGonagall would pair him with Ron – he was almost hurt. But he shook his head, trying to clear the tight feeling in his chest. Both his best friends would be just down the hall, it didn’t matter really.

Harry kept reading the names on the doors as the rest of the “Eighth Years” started filing into the hallway behind him. Of course his door would be the last one. He reached the end of the hall and sure enough there was his name: Harry Potter. And right beneath it was: …Draco Malfoy.

“Well, shit.” Harry swore.
After Voldemort fell, Harry hadn’t seriously thought about the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy definitely deserved to be chucked back in Azkaban, but the social fall-out of having been a member of the Dark Lord’s inner circle was probably almost as harsh. Their influence and respectability had been effectively obliterated. To seek further reprimand in the name of justice seemed like a waste of time to Harry – so many had suffered already, no need to add more to it.

But Draco… Harry felt genuine pity for Draco. He wasn’t ready to confront his old rival so soon, let alone have to share a room with him. Harry pulled open the door anyway, and looked inside. His trunk and all his belongings were set up for him next to one of the four poster beds with tan and brown striped bedding and dove gray curtains. There was an enormous rich, brown braided hearth rug in front of a small fire and a doorway to a private bathroom at the far end. Malfoy hadn’t arrived yet.

Perhaps it would be best to just get ready for bed. Harry could talk to McGonagall about the living arrangements in the morning – since he was sure he wouldn’t be the only one to object. But there was a soft click of the door behind him before he could make himself move and Draco stepped into the room with a very unimpressed look on his face.

“Potter.” Was all he said in greeting. He surveyed the room for a moment too, but then walked over to his trunk and started pulling things out - soaps, towels, silk pajamas, all white and new looking.

Harry pulled his eyes away, realizing he had been staring. “I was… uh, surprised to see you back, Malfoy. I don’t know what possessed McGonagall to bunk us together… I’m sure we can change, if… if…” Harry tried to get out what he was feeling, surely this was just as awkward and uncomfortable for Malfoy.

“If you insist.” Draco had finished arranging his toiletries and now had them all bundled into his arms. “Since you don’t seem to be in a rush for the bath, I’ll take my turn now. Goodnight.” Said Malfoy quickly, and he disappeared behind the second door.

Harry couldn’t help but just keep standing there, aghast. Draco Malfoy had treated him neither well nor badly – but almost politely. He was used to being sneered at or baited into an argument. Harry wasn’t sure how to respond to this strange, new Malfoy. Had the past couple months really changed Draco that much, or was he just exhausted from the trip to Hogwarts? Harry just listened to the water running in the bathroom for a while in silence with the realization that no matter how much he wanted things to go back to being normal – it might just be impossible.

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Harry’s Tempus spell woke him early – weak sunlight was just filtering through a gap in the curtains. He had forgone a bath last night and instead gone straight to bed so as to avoid further interaction with his roommate. He had placed basic protection spells and silencing spells around his bed and planned on taking a long, hot shower in the morning.

Draco’s curtains were snug around his bed still, so Harry rustled in his trunk for everything he needed and started for the bathroom. He hadn’t actually seen the inside the night before. It was simple enough – barely big enough for two people. He turned on the shower and the water was immediately warm, bordering on hot. Perfect.

While scrubbing his hair he started mentally planning out what he was going to tell Ron and
Hermione. Would he be early enough to catch McGonagall before breakfast? Really, what had she been thinking, putting him with Malfoy? But that wasn’t what he felt was most pressing. He’d be officially meeting Professor Meek today to start designing a lesson plan for Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry couldn’t really remember much of Professor Quirrell’s lectures. He had rather liked Lupin’s, but he probably couldn’t copy any of those with First Years. He didn’t have any idea what he was doing, really.

After finishing his ablutions he looked at himself in the mirror, looking for any sign that he looked Professor-ish. But Harry only saw himself reflected back – a young man with messy hair, slim frame, and really nothing seemingly extraordinary about him at all. Would the students respect him because of his name – or would they be as obnoxious as Lockhart’s simpering fangirls just because he was famous? Suddenly bunking with Malfoy seemed like the least of his worries. He strode back out to the bedroom with his ratty orange towel wrapped around his waist, in search of his newly re-colored uniform.

“Bloody Hell, Potter! Put on something decent!” Came a strangled yelp from Malfoy’s side of the room. Draco was wearing some kind of robe over his pajamas, looking away and covering his eyes.

“Oh… uh, sorry, Malfoy. Was hoping I’d be done before you woke. And I am decent – don’t be a prude.” Harry replied defensively.

“I hardly think a tatty old rag is enough. I’ll change in the bathroom – be dressed or gone by the time I’m out!” Malfoy slipped quickly into the room Harry had just vacated and shut the door with a snap.

So maybe Malfoy hadn’t changed that much after all. Harry scowled at the door and then looked down at himself. He had never needed to worry about modesty much in his old Gryffindor dorm – Seamus even walked around starkers on occasion and no one seemed to mind. Or was Malfoy suggesting he has too ugly to be seen without clothes? Harry wasn’t sure.

Harry dressed quickly anyway and left the room. No one else seemed to be up and about in the common room yet. He knocked on Ron and Neville’s door and walked in upon hearing a sleepy “C’m in…” from inside. Their room looked almost identical to his and Malfoy’s, only the braided rug was royal blue and the window was shuttered, leaving the room gloomy.


Neville was lacing his shoes, but otherwise seemed dressed and ready for the day. “Sleep good, Harry?”

“Fine. Oh for heaven’s sake, Hermione will storm in here soon if you don’t move.” Harry shook Ron, who was drifting back into slumber, stretched out in an odd position on his bed.

“I’m up.” Ron said blearily, rubbing at his eyes. He did slowly start to disentangle himself from his bed sheets and poke around in his trunk for clothes. Ron pulled his pajama shirt off right then and there and left it lying on his bed.

Harry felt rather vindicated at being told off by Malfoy for being similarly exposed earlier. “You won’t believe who I’m sharing with.”

“Who is it then – fuckin’ Malfoy?” Ron said jokingly.

“Yup.” Harry didn’t know how to elaborate – or if he needed to.

Ron looked stunned. “Blimey, I was joking! What was McGonagall thinking?”
Harry just shrugged. There came another knock on the door and Hermione’s voice called, “Meet you at breakfast, Ron. Don’t be late!”

Neville was all dressed by then – Ron encumbered with handfuls of robes. “Oh, go on, gents. I’ll catch-up. Maybe you can catch McGonagall and request a room change, eh?” Ron stifled a yawn and then he slipped into the bathroom to change.

“You do know waking him up is going to become your responsibility, don’t you?” Harry told Neville as they both exited the room.

“I’ll be putting a sticking charm on the shutters later so he can’t block out the light. That should help.” Neville offered conspiratorially. “My plants enjoy the morning sun.”

Harry laughed and followed Neville down to breakfast.

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Harry was too late to catch the Headmistress before breakfast, and right afterwards was instructed to meet Professor Meek in her new classroom along with Anthony Goldstein for introductions. There were two new guests dining on either side of McGonagall wearing all white that he didn’t recognize – so he didn’t dare interrupt. The Malfoy problem could wait.

“Hiya, Harry. Thought you’d be snatched up by the Ministry after our last battle – not back here. But it is good to see you.” Anthony Goldstein extended his hand out for Harry to shake as they made their way to Professor Meek’s class.

“Thanks, Goldstein. Glad to see I’ll be working with someone from DA. Do you know Professor Meek?” Harry shook the offered hand and smiled.

“Nah, but I heard she just passed her Auror’s training – might be a bit green, but she should know her stuff.” Goldstein smiled.

“Not a Lockhart or an Umbridge then, that’s a relief.” Harry smiled back. They had reached the classroom. Professor Meek was waiting for them at her desk – she was writing something with a glossy, black feather quill.

“Welcome gentleman, I am Janice Meek. Take a seat, please.” She said without looking up from her parchment. Harry was relieved she didn’t seem like she cared about his public reputation.

She seemed to finish a sentence with a decisive tap – then she put down her quill and brought her hands up to her lips in a steeple and there was a heavy pause before she began to speak. “I will be blunt, this is my first teaching position. As I understand, you were both part a club of some sort here at Hogwarts called Dumbledore’s Army, were you not?”

“Yes, mam.” Harry replied for both of them.

“An organization that was founded by you, Mr. Potter?”

“That’s correct.” He replied again.

“And then both of you fought here at Hogwarts in the final battle with Voldemort only a few months ago?” Harry was surprised she was bold enough to use his name.

“Yes, mam. Although, Harry… well, I didn’t do all that much, mam.” Goldstein offered.
“That’s not quite true. I couldn’t have done my part without relying on members of the DA – I’d trust my life to Goldstein here, any day.” Harry replied honestly – Goldstein seemed touched.

“Excellent. That is what I hope to achieve here, Mr. Potter. I don’t want to promote rash acts of heroism, but rather trust and teamwork. Can I rely on you to reinforce this as our goal?” She was looking quite seriously at Harry alone.

“Yes, mam.” He rather liked Professor Meek, she reminded him of someone.

“Very good.” Professor Meek pushed two worn textbooks on her desk towards them. “Here is the book I have chosen for us to use. It is actually the same one I used when I was a First Year some fifteen years ago. Take one.” Harry and Goldstein both grabbed a copy.

“Mark the chapters you feel you best understand and we will start dividing up the schedule soon. But before I dismiss you, I’d like to speak with each of you individually. Mr. Goldstein, would you wait out in the hall for a moment?” Harry was surprised at this odd request, but Goldstein just nodded and headed for the door. Professor Meek descended from her desk and made her way to the desk Goldstein had just vacated. She sat down, not looking at Harry – the pause before she spoke again was heavy.

“Mr. Potter, I’m going to share something with you which I would appreciate you did not repeat. Is that alright?” Professor Meek said, facing forward, still not looking at all in Harry’s direction.

“Yes, Professor, of course.” Harry was baffled.

“I have no idea how you might be feeling right now, Mr. Potter. But you’ve gone through something most people won’t be able to understand.” Here she paused again. “Headmistress McGonagall personally invited every student to return this year, not just to finish their education, but because she wanted to help them heal after everything that happened. She invited me to teach because years ago she helped me heal from a rather traumatic experience of my own.” Professor Meek’s voice didn’t waiver, but her brief pauses between phrases emphasized their weight.

Harry became uncomfortable. He didn’t want to talk about it. It was over – why couldn’t it just be forgotten? He was starting to have second thoughts about Professor Meek.

“You and I are no strangers to death, Mr. Potter. And while I don’t mean to presume my own misfortunes compare in any way to all that you have endured, I do think we will get along well so long as you are willing to follow my lead.” She finally turned to face Harry from her seat, looking him eye to eye. “Are you willing to do that?”

Harry was relieved this hadn’t devolved into a discussion about his feelings. Perhaps he did like Professor Meek after all. He looked right back, nodded, said “Yes, mam” and meant it.

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After switching places with Goldstein, Harry had hours and hours to kill before lunch. He didn’t much want to start right away on reading the book he had been given, but he didn’t’ know how much of it Professor Meek would expect him to have finished by their next meeting – so he decided to make his way back to his new common room.

It was deserted. His meeting with Professor Meek had hardly taken any time at all, really – so it wasn’t such a surprise that he had the place to himself. Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense wasn’t a very long book, so he flipped to the Table of Contents and settled into one of the straight-backed chairs. It immediately became clear that the book was a good choice for First Years – but
 brushing up on the basics never hurt. He got through two whole chapters before anyone else returned.

“There you are, Harry. How was Professor Meek?” Hermione asked.

“Seems alright. How was meeting with Vector?” Harry bent a corner over to mark his place, much to Hermione’s displeasure. She just looked revolted, but didn’t comment.

“Oh, come off it, Hermione – it’s my book.” Harry laughed.

She composed herself before responding to his previous question. “It went wonderfully. I’m not so sure I’ll love every aspect of teaching, but being passionate about the subject will do a lot to balance things out. Professor Vector liked my idea about including some supplemental readings to augment the primary textbook – but narrowing it down will be hard.”

“Sounds just like you. No word from Ron yet?” Harry couldn’t help but smile.

“He must still be with Flitwick. How do you like your room?” She hadn’t heard about Malfoy yet, then.

“Uh… they’re great. But uh… oh, speak of the devil.” Harry stammered, just as Malfoy walked in with a couple books of his own. He didn’t stick around though, but went straight for his and Harry’s bedroom.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione looked confused.

“Malfoy’s my bunk mate.” Harry said blandly.

“What!? I mean, really… Malfoy? Well, what did McGonagall say? Surely you’ve complained to her about it by now.” Hermione demanded.

“I forgot, actually. I’ll catch her at lunch. But honestly, he hasn’t done anything other than get all hot and bothered about seeing me come out of the shower – nothing I can’t handle.” Dismissed Harry.

“Uh… okay. At least neither of you have done anything rash.” Hermione blushed.

Hermione got out one of her own books and they sat in companionable silence for a while before she added, “I know it isn’t my business, but if you need to talk things out about Ginny… I’m here. Always am.”

Harry felt a bit annoyed at the reminder of his complicated relationship issues, but also touched at Hermione’s offer. “I’m not sure if there is anything more to sort out. She seemed like she was done. Kind of came out of the blue, really. I’ll know when she gets here, I guess.”

“You aren’t going to write her?” Hermione asked.

Harry thought for a moment. “Seems so… impersonal. And I’m not sure if she would welcome it.”

“You sound kind of… resigned. Do you, I mean… don’t you want to make things right between you two – even if it means not picking things right up again?” Hermione chose her words carefully.

Harry felt guilty. Hermione was too logical for her own good. “Alright, fine. You’re right.”

“Good. And if you need someone to proofread…” Hermione teased.
“I’ll ask Kreacher – brilliant suggestion.” Harry teased back, rolling his eyes. But he got up and headed for his room anyway. He had just enough time before heading to lunch to write something down and take it up to the owlry.

But Harry forgot about writing Ginny as soon as he entered his room. Malfoy’s curtains were drawn and there was a strange, soft sniffling sound coming from inside. Harry couldn’t quite figure out what Malfoy was doing – until he heard quiet sobs. Malfoy was crying.

What should he do? Ignore him? He couldn’t very well rummage through his trunk for parchment without alerting Malfoy that he had an audience. Should he let Malfoy know he could hear him?

The last time Harry had caught Malfoy crying had been in Sixth Year when they had dueled in the bathroom – which had ended horribly. Harry remembered how sick he felt after seeing the effects of the curse he had cast. Better to be open about it… and gentle.

Harry cleared his throat. The sounds from Malfoy’s bed immediately ceased. “Malfoy? Are you in here?” But Malfoy didn’t reply. Harry continued along with the charade. “Hmm… must be using Muffliato.” He mumbled casually, as if speaking to himself.

It took a moment for Harry to remember why he was there, and another moment to collect what he would need for a letter. But he was noisy about shutting his trunk and closing the door behind him for Malfoy’s benefit. He emerged hex-free back in the common room. Ron had returned by then, and he was talking animatedly with Hermione about his meeting with Flitwick.

Harry decided to write the letter in the owlry – the climb would give him time to collect his thoughts. Was Draco’s meeting with Slughorn really that bad, or had something else happened? Malfoy had almost seemed like his old self again that morning, but maybe he wasn’t. Harry had escaped unscathed this time, but what would happen if he walked in on Malfoy crying again? Draco had used crocodile tears before when dragging Hagrid through the mud over the Hippogriff fiasco back in Third Year – but his reasons for being overwhelmed to tears in Sixth Year, which now in hindsight, seemed perfectly reasonable. Should Harry be worried?

He reached the owlry without thinking of Ginny once. He had no idea what to write, really. He was upset with her for not explaining properly what she had meant by things not working between them, of course, but he hardly thought bringing that up would help them mend the rift that had somehow come between them. In the end he settled on something short and sweet.

Dear Ginny,

Hogwarts isn’t completely mended yet, but it looks good considering. It is good to be back. The Quidditch pitch has been re-built at least, although neither Ron nor I are allowed to be team members. But I’m looking forward to being here for you should you need my help, Captain.

Hermione pestered me into writing, so you can thank her for this letter. I’m not sure what comes next for us. I missed seeing you when we left.

Harry

He picked a very pretty barn owl to carry the letter and gave it an affectionate scratch before sending it on its way to the Burrow. He missed Hedwig terribly but couldn’t bring himself to buy another owl. Still too soon – someday, he reasoned, it would feel right.

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It was easy to catch McGonagall after lunch. All he had to do was approach her and she
understood. “Why don’t we meet in my office, Harry? It is good to see you.” She smiled.

“Thanks, Professor.” Harry dutifully followed her out of the Great Hall.

She didn’t say anything until they reached the statue guarding her office. “Vigilance” she said clearly – obviously the new password. “Take a seat, Harry. I’ll make us some tea.”

“Er, okay.” Harry was relieved to have some extra time to carefully phrase his concerns. McGonagall didn’t seem all that happy - even though she smiled, it didn’t reach her eyes.

“You are, no doubt, disgruntled about the rooming arrangements – am I right?” She said as she brought a tray laden with a silver tea set over to her desk and sat down.

“Partly. I guess, I just don’t see why? Malfoy and I fought like cats and dogs, somehow I doubt, despite everything, that that is likely to change.”

“Harry, dear. You are aware that Lucius Malfoy is still considered by the public to be at large?” McGonagall offered as a reply. Harry was baffled by this turn of the conversation.

“Er, yes, but…”

“You may even have noticed two unusual guests this morning for breakfast?”

Harry nodded. The two people dressed in white.

“I’m going to divulge something to you, as Malfoy’s roommate, which you are not allowed to repeat – to anyone. Is that clear?” McGonagall asked firmly.

Harry had heard the exact same thing only hours before from Professor Meek. He now realized why he had thought they would get along so well. “Of course, Professor.”

“Lucius Malfoy died early this morning at St. Mungo’s.” McGonagall passed him a cup of tea.

“He… what?” Harry searched McGonagall’s face, but it remained unchanged. Harry remembered Malfoy’s crying.

“The Order was contacted early into the Malfoy’s disappearance that they were surrendering. Lucius Malfoy was a broken man, both in body and spirit. We decided they would be kept hidden, at least for the time being, and Lucius given treatment at St. Mungo’s instead of condemning him to Azkaban. Unfortunately, he never recovered.” McGonagall passed him some biscuits.

Harry was floored. He hadn’t even touched his tea, but he took some biscuits out of habit.

His feelings were complicated on the matter. Just yesterday he had been thinking that Lucius deserved what came to him – but he hadn’t considered this. Lucius couldn’t hurt any more people, which was good, but the Malfoys had voluntarily surrendered. Harry had lost Sirius after knowing him for only two years – he couldn’t imagine what Draco must be feeling no matter how evil his father had been.

“Oh.” Was all Harry could manage at first. “Professor? Is… Malfoy… is he going to be okay?”

McGonagall smiled, and this time a real smile. “I had hoped you would be sympathetic. Understand, Harry, that I meant what I said at the welcoming feast. Now is the time to focus on healing. We won the fight, but at great cost. Some wounds may never heal fully.”

“So you put us together… to make up. Professor, I’m not sure if we can.” Harry stated honestly.
“I don’t expect you to – at least not right away. Malfoy will have a lot of enemies at this school – people who will want to take out their anger and hurt about how they or their loved one’s may have been mistreated during Voldemort’s reign on him simply on the fact that he was a Death Eater. Alternatively, you are going to be swamped now more than ever with adoring fans and well-wishers, which can be equally problematic.” Harry squirmed – he didn’t like the idea one bit.

“I’m attempting to kill two birds with one stone, sort of speak, by putting you together. Your room has the highest security in the castle. You will find that under your bed is a trap door, which can only be opened from your side, that leads to an emergency exit should you or Mr. Malfoy ever need to use it. All of your mail is re-routed through Mr. Filch’s office. Your window is enchanted to let in light and a soft breeze when open, but nothing else.” McGonagall said all of this blandly, as if reciting a grocery list.

“Professor, I hardly think…” Harry began.

“That all this is necessary? Well, I’m not taking that risk. While you are here under my care, Mr. Potter, I will do my upmost to see that you are safe.” McGonagall cut in fiercely.

“I… see.” Harry pondered. “Thank you, Professor. I’m… sorry to put you to so much trouble.”

“It was no trouble. I’m glad you agreed to return to us this year, Harry. You might not think so just yet, but perhaps you have some healing yet left to do as well. If you need anything, I’ll be here.”

And with that Professor McGonagall stood up.

Harry got up as well. He couldn’t seem to come up with the right words. His eyes were full, but he didn’t feel like crying just yet. Finally, he mumbled “Thank you. I’ll see you later, Professor.”

Bowing slightly, he placed his half-finished cup of tea back on the tray and made his way to the door.

“Remember, Harry, not a word to anyone. Lucius Malfoy’s passing will undoubtedly turn-up in the papers eventually, but until then…” McGonagall call out.

Harry nodded and left.

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He couldn’t focus on *Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense* no matter how hard he tried. It was after dinner and he had retreated to his bed for the evening, safe behind soft gray curtains and several spells. He had tagged along with Ron and Hermione at first, but hadn’t participated in their excitement - just playing along until he couldn’t stand it anymore. But they had assigned reading to do too.

Harry didn’t want to hear Malfoy cry again, especially now that he understood why. He couldn’t tell his friends what McGonagall had said either, so his bed seemed like the safest place to think. And then he remembered that it literally was the safest place at Hogwarts, thanks to McGonagall. Would this be how he would have to live from now on? He had only left the Burrow a handful of times over the Summer, which he knew had extra security from the Order. Is that why he hadn’t yet felt the full impact of defeating Voldemort?

Meek’s goals for teamwork and trust were good in theory, but Harry could feel the resentment boiling up inside him at how much people still seemed to be arranging behind the scenes for him. He had the sudden urge to sneak out into Hogsmeade just to see everyone’s reaction. Or at least a strong drink wouldn’t be refused. His mind kept going in circles and he wanted desperately to relax.
Harry ended up falling asleep in his clothes. He dreamt of hundreds of thousands of owls that all looked just like Hedwig swooping down with letters in the Great Hall, burying him in a mountain of unwanted fan-mail – some Howlers among them berating him for not being grateful.

He woke with a start, and a stiff neck, sometime in the middle of the night. He grimaced at how sweaty he was in his clothes. A quick Tempus told him it was just after one in the morning – much too early to get up. But Harry couldn’t help it, he needed a shower.

Harry quietly pulled his curtains back to scan the room. Malfoy must have been asleep. There was very little moonlight, so Harry lit his wand and carefully made his way to the bathroom. Just a quick rinse-down was all he had planned, but the warm water felt so good on his stiff neck he ended up under the spray for a long time. It was calming.

Maybe Ginny was right. Maybe there was something still broken inside him that needed to heal – something that she had sensed would need to be addressed before Harry could make things work with her – or anyone for that matter. Granted, living with a piece of Voldemort’s soul attached to you for 17 years probably had some affect. With it gone, was there a gaping hole inside him somewhere?

Harry didn’t want to think about it. The warm water felt so good he lathered himself up a second time, focusing on each part of his body as he went. He scrubbed under each finger nail. He tried to reach every inch of his back with the soap – first with his right hand, and then with his left. He started to wonder what Malfoy might have been offended by upon seeing him partially naked yesterday morning. He cataloged each blemish as he saw them – none being sufficiently off-putting to warrant Draco’s response. He was starting to grow quite a bit of chest hair, but it was still a little patchy. He had several moles on his arms and on his back. He wasn’t nearly as thin as he once was, but no one could accuse him of being fat either – rather filled out.

His hand travelled lower, lathering up his privates. He contemplated jerking off before rinsing down. It was unlikely he would be interrupted this late at night. And it might help him get back to sleep. Harry didn’t jerk off nearly as much as Seamus, or even Ron. He had always been too busy being worried about the next crisis to have had much time to think about it, he reasoned.

Harry took hold of his slowly growing member and started gently tugging on it, making it hard. Harry was reminded of Ginny grabbing him there but only felt guilty and embarrassed about it. He focused only on the sensations instead. A nameless, faceless, someone gently caressing his dick with feathery touches. He rolled his balls in his fully relaxed and sagging sack. He squirmed at how good it felt to press his dick against his stomach, enveloping it in warm heat. He wondered what it would feel like to press it against another naked body.

It didn’t take long for his mind to become cloudy and his hand moved faster. He could feel that he was getting close. A thought occurred to him that he had never seen his own face as he came. What would it be like to do this in front of a mirror? In this semi-private bathroom, he could find out. He could stop, turn off the water and release to his own naked and aroused image. But just the thought was enough to trigger his climax and he shuddered as sticky white ropes fell and mingled with the water at his feet – all traces soon vanishing down the drain.

Harry immediately felt exhausted. He rinsed down and turned the water off, cursing himself for not bringing his pajamas in with him to the bathroom. He wrapped his trusty towel around his middle and peeked out the door. Still no change from Malfoy’s curtains. Harry found the pajamas he had worn the night before, slipped into them, and then slipped into his bed. In moments he was asleep again.
Unexpected Complications

When Harry awoke the next morning Malfoy’s curtains were pulled back, the bed made, and he was alone. If Draco’s trunk and soaps in the bathroom weren’t still present Harry might have concluded that Malfoy had left for good. Other than Dumbledore’s, Harry had never been to a proper wizarding funeral – let alone had a hand in having to plan one. Harry felt sick at the thought of Draco and Narcissa burying Lucius all alone – now that they were alienated from the rest of their family and old friends. Especially if no one was to know.

Harry’s stomach clenched at the further knowledge that he had only read up to Chapter Four of Lafford’s *Guide to Practical Defense*, probably nowhere near as far along as he should have been. He reasoned he could skim the chapter headings at breakfast before meeting Professor Meek, at least. Harry dressed into his new uniform and brought his book with him out to the Great Hall.

Ron and Hermione were already at the breakfast table, Hermione with a couple books of her own carefully positioned away from any food or drink. Harry didn’t see Malfoy, though.

“I see Neville’s taking his new job seriously.” Harry teased Ron.

“Not now, Harry. It’s too bloody early.” Ron replied blearily.

“Morning, Hermione.” Harry tried, but Hermione just waved at him – her eyes never leaving her book.

So things were somewhat normal, Harry reasoned. Except he still felt slightly sick. The bacon, eggs, and potatoes he usually relished in the morning didn’t look very appetizing. Harry’s thoughts drifted again. Malfoy probably wouldn’t appreciate his sympathies in any case, but it felt wrong knowing what he was most likely up to this morning, all alone.

Furthermore Headmistress McGonagall wasn’t at breakfast either. Harry picked at some toast and sipped at his pumpkin juice in relative silence. Ron and Neville talked back and forth happily between mouthfuls. Hermione had abandoned her plate and now held her book in both hands, too enraptured in her own world to notice Harry’s distress.

“So, Harry? What do you think of Professor Meek?” Anthony Goldstein asked from Hermione’s left.

“Oh… well, I guess she reminds me a bit of McGonagall. A proper teacher.” Harry replied.

“My thoughts exactly. Say, how far along did you get with the reading?” Goldstein inquired further.

Harry groaned. “Not far. It’s a good book, though.”

“It’s okay, mate. I didn’t finish either. Left it in my room, though – see you there in a bit!” And Goldstein was off, indicating with a wave to the book in Harry’s hand.

Harry scowled down at the book he was supposed to be thumbing through. He followed Hermione’s example and forgot about his food. There were 25 chapters with five chapters per section giving a very basic overview of common and uncommon dangers of the wizarding world and useful hints to avoid or defend against them. Harry noticed there was no mention of really nasty things like dementors or inferi – which was probably for the best. Harry remembered as a First Year how terrifying a single lumbering troll had seemed on Halloween – so long ago now.
“Well, I’m off to Flitwick’s. Better get a move on, Harry.” Ron said from across the table, getting up. Harry started, having lost himself for a bit. He cast a quick Tempus, waved to Ron and Hermione, and hurried off to Professor Meek’s classroom.

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Harry shouldn’t have bothered with being nervous. Once Anthony and he had entered the room Professor Meek promptly gave them a different assignment. McGonagall wanted security sweeps done of the whole castle, top to bottom, before the rest of the students arrived. All of the student teachers were to take turns going room to room to check for any structural weaknesses or damaged spells, repair what they could, and document any anomalies that would require an expert.

“While we will be covering the dangers of improperly cast spells and the potential consequences of attempting advanced spells without first gaining an adequate understanding of them – it should be noted that broken enchantments can be equally unpredictable and deadly. And, given that the school was all but presided over by Death Eaters last year, it would be prudent to check for any unsavory remnants of their occupation.” Professor Meek even lectured like McGonagall.

“Granted, Headmistress McGonagall herself has checked the castle over and directed the most urgent repairs already. It is our job to pick up where she left off. Nothing is too small to report. We’ll start in the owlry and work our way down. We can pick-up with your progress through Lafford later.”

Somewhat relieved, Harry followed Professor Meek up the familiar winding staircase to the owlry. He wondered if he should reveal the existence of the Marauder’s Map, or if the repairs had at all changed its workings. McGonagall had said she had placed a trapdoor under his bed after all, and he was pretty sure there had never seen a secret passageway off the Fourth Floor like the one she had described. What else had changed since he had been here last?

It was tedious and boring work – but they had managed to find a few rickety handrails, several holes in the ceiling, and even a decade’s old stash of sweets behind a loose brick. It reminded Harry of cleaning out Grimmauld Place. The usual enchantments seemed to be in perfect working order, but Harry felt better knowing if the Carrow’s had left anything unpleasant they would surely uncover it. Professor Meek seemed accustomed to the work. She explained that it made up a lot of an Auror’s job – sifting through the mundane for clues.

But by lunchtime the novelty had worn off and Harry was thinking that if this was what Aurors did on a daily basis he wasn’t so sure it was the right job for him. However, that might have just been because he was hungry, not having had a proper breakfast that morning. Goldstein called it grunt-work, and Harry was inclined to agree.

“Well, that should do it. You boys did a thorough job. Let’s get back down for…” but Professor Meek’s words trailed off. “Don’t move.” She said after a moment, quite seriously.

They were back on the staircase, both Harry and Anthony too stunned by the Professor’s words to do anything else but obey.

Professor Meek walked forward towards a small alcove in the wall that would have been hidden from view on their way up. Inside there was what looked like a shelf for a candelabra or a decorative vase, but empty. As Harry looked more closely at it, he noticed he could faintly see through the stones. A glamoured window maybe? He had walked right past it just the day before, it was well hidden.

The opening was just big enough for one person to crawl inside, Harry realized. Professor Meek
did a couple spells to check that it was safe to approach, and then bravely stuck her hand into the space. It went right through the back of the alcove, proving the stone wall to be an illusion. A trap, perhaps?

An eerie sound came drifting out of the alcove as Professor Meek withdrew her hand – kind of like a leaky bellows, followed by a putrid stench. “Mr. Goldstein, you are to go and fetch our gamekeeper, Professor Hagrid, at once. Mr. Potter and I will wait for your return.” Anthony nodded and quickly descended the stairs.

“What is it?” Harry asked, confused.

“Carrion Curriers. It’s like a private mailbox for unsavory items that living birds would never agree to carry. And it sounds like there is still at least one bird still inside.” Professor Meek said mournfully.

Harry recalled the leaky bellow sound, which now that he thought about it could have been a warped bird call. “No living bird? You mean there is something dead in there still flapping about?” Harry asked, intrigued.

“I assume you’ve heard of Inferi? Necromancy works just as well on dead animals. And with a way to smuggle illicit items into the castle, it is likely the Carrow’s left a few of them behind.” Professor Meek said darkly.

“There are things that owl’s will refuse to carry?” Harry asked, even more interested.

“Of course. But honestly, I’d rather not elaborate on the subject – use your imagination.” Professor Meek added, making a disgusted face.

Harry was quiet for a moment. He had often come into contact with things he found unpleasant in the wizarding world, but which were tolerated out of necessity – rat tails and salamander eyes in potion making for example. He had witnessed dark magic, however, that had required much worse. His mind drifted to cursed objects and human body parts briefly before agreeing that he didn’t really want to think about it either.

“Professor?” Harry tried again, as the silence of waiting became awkward again.

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“Why am I learning about this only now? I mean… I guess, what I mean is there seems like so much about dark magic we are never warned about. I agree that leaving out the more gruesome details is prudent for a First Year textbook, but sometimes I feel so… unprepared.” Harry grimaced, thinking that he sounded like he was complaining.

Professor Meek seemed to understand his question though and took a moment before responding. “Harry…” the use of his first name surprised him, “with all the horrors you have witnessed, you’ve seen but a glimpse of dark magic. It has become… out of fashion over the years, but there still exist plenty of grimoires in private collections and on the black market filled with unimaginable evil. It can be an enticing path to traverse, and it has ensnared plenty of unwary witches and wizards with false promises. It would be so easy to mislead a student if too much was revealed too early – before they are strong enough to resist the temptation.”

Here she paused again, letting her words sink in. Harry recalled the Room of Requirement bursting into flames, a magical inferno that had killed its caster all too easily. He whispered, “Fiendfyre.” Even the memory made him hot, he pulled at his collar, loosening his tie.
“Yes, and countless more spells even more dangerous.” Professor Meek had heard him.

“Why aren’t these books destroyed, then? Round them all up and burn them?” Harry said bitterly.

Professor Meek smiled a sad smile. “Burn our magical heritage? Ban even the knowledge of that which is dangerous? Would it really be that simple?” Here Professor Meek arched her brows. “Voldemort manipulated powerful pure blood families who were pushing back against what they believed to be oppression – taking it out on muggle-born and mixed-blood witches and wizards. Getting someone to commit Unforgivables is easy if you can convince them it is in self-defense, that they are adequately justified. No, brute force is not the answer.”

Harry needed a moment to digest this information. He knew that Tom Riddle’s father was a muggle, something that probably only very few of his inner circle ever discovered. Regardless of how much Voldemort may have hated his father, it didn’t quite line-up with the pureblood mania many of the other Death Eater’s had subscribed to. Old pureblood families were likely to have heirlooms, libraries, collections of artifacts that could now-a-days be considered dark. Items they might loathe to part with - much like the things Kreacher had hoarded back in Grimmauld Place.

He knew there had been raids at Malfoy manor looking for dark artifacts. It had never occurred to him that such searches would be interpreted as unwelcome invasions and even attempted theft of priceless estate collections by the owners. Like Mr. Weasley, Harry had relished the thought of the Malfoys getting caught doing something illegal – something that seemed rather petty of him now. Would he, in a way, not be participating in a prejudiced vendetta not so different from their own if he endorsed such actions?

Harry scowled. “You’re right, Professor. I guess that would be too simple.” Professor Meek smiled back, and this time it was genuine.

“Almost there, Professor!” Came a breathy call up the staircase. Harry could now hear heavy, hurried footsteps below them.

Anthony Goldstein arrived first, out of breath, but beaming. Hagrid following close behind. “What’s the emergency, Professor?” Hagrid looked as confused as Harry felt. “Hello, Harry.”

“I believe the Carrow’s have left us some Carrion Birds.” Professor Meek conjured a brass birdcage with her wand as she spoke, handing it to Hagrid. Anthony gaped in obvious recognition of the words, much to Harry’s displeasure. “There could be more than one nesting inside this false alcove. As these things are considered magical creatures, I thought it best that you were in attendance for their capture.”

Hagrid’s face was contorted, perhaps caught between the pleasure of being included as gamekeeper and revulsion at the idea of the creatures he was soon to be in charge of. “Right… uh… right.”

“I’ll attempt to surprise and immobilize them. If we are lucky, they will have nested far away from any outside openings – otherwise we will have to leave traps.” Professor Meek nodded solemnly, then turned, climbed up, and disappeared through the small space.

The stench that wafted towards them this time was horrible – like rotting meat and damp mold. There was a soft scuffling sound and then Professor Meek re-emerged carrying what looked like two very wet black feather dusters. They were crow corpses, Harry realized – with missing feathers and leathery heads. Professor Meek shoved them both into the brass cage Hagrid offered just as they started to turn their heads and flap their wings slowly, regaining mobility as if they were treading water. They smelled awful.
“I think there were just two of them. Devolved back to their animal instincts without their masters – had a nest full of broken glass and bits of shiny metal.” Professor Meek looked relieved.

Hagrid held the cage at arm’s length. “Er… and what am I to do with… er, these creatures, Professor?”

“They can’t be killed by normal means, and they don’t need to eat or drink. Just keep them safe until I can report this to the Headmistress and let her decide how to proceed. I suspect they will want to be examined at the Ministry.” Professor Meek cast a few enchantments on the cage to keep it secure.

“Right… I’ll do just that, then.” Hagrid said lamely.

“Mr. Potter and Mr. Goldstein, thank you for your help with the owlry. You better hurry down to the Great Hall before lunch is over. You have the afternoon off to catch-up on your reading.” She turned back to her students and waved her hands at them as if this was business as usual.

Harry nodded, wished Hagrid luck, and then followed Goldstein down the stairs. He had a lot to think about.

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Malfoy didn’t re-appear at lunch, or at dinner. Ron and Hermione tried to engage him in conversation multiple times, but he couldn’t seem to focus. He gathered that they hadn’t had their turn sweeping the castle yet, however. He also tried to read more of *Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense*, but kept zoning out when he felt some greater evil was being omitted.

Harry had barricaded himself up on his bed again to be alone with his thoughts and the book. After re-reading the same line for the third time in twenty minutes, he decided to give up. The putrid, rotten smell of the Carrion Birds from that morning had made him feel dirty. A proper shower and clean pajamas would help his concentration. But he forgot his clothes again and emerged wet and dripping wrapped in his orange towel just in time for Malfoy to return.

“Potter!” Malfoy turned his head away. He had dark circles under his eyes. “I don’t suppose you even own a dressing gown, do you?” He said, without the usual venom.

“A what?” Harry stammered, not sure how to proceed with the re-emergence of his old rival now.

“For the love of…” Malfoy seemed too tired to finish.

“Er… I just didn’t know when you were coming back…” Harry tried, weakly.

“Listen, if you insist on parading around in the buff at least let us set a schedule so I don’t have to witness it.” Malfoy sighed in frustration, but then added “I mean, that is unless you’ve talked with McGonagall…”

Harry wasn’t sure what Malfoy meant at first. Had McGonagall told Malfoy that Harry knew about his father? And then he remembered their previous conversation. “Oh! No McGonagall wouldn’t budge. We’re just stuck sharing – sorry.”

“Figures.” Malfoy pulled his curtains between them so he wouldn’t have to keep shielding his eyes.

Harry wasn’t embarrassed about being so exposed to Malfoy until Malfoy made such a big deal about it. His cheeks burned with embarrassment as he found clean pajamas and wiggled into them quickly. “And is a dressing gown the robe thingy you wear over your pajamas in the mornings?”
Harry inquired.

“Yes, Potter – very good.” Malfoy mocked.

“I’m dressed now, you can come out.” Harry rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I’ve got anything you haven’t seen before, Malfoy.”

“Are you really this stupid?” Malfoy peeked from behind his curtain and gave Harry a withering look.

“Listen, can we not fight? Truce? The war is over. I’m willing to do a schedule, even if you are being a prude.” Harry was trying to not get riled up.

“Fine. Evening showers are mine, mornings are yours.” Malfoy looked pleased with himself.

Harry groaned, that meant waking-up early. “Fine.”

Draco started collecting his own things for a bath. Harry tried to ignore him, but couldn’t help feeling like he should say something about Malfoy’s absence. Would Draco tell him the truth if he asked where he had been?

“Malfoy…?” Harry started. Draco stopped just inside the bathroom looking at him with an annoyed expression. But he looked haggard rather than intimidating. “It’s… it’s good to see you back at Hogwarts. Wouldn’t feel the same without you.” Harry finished, feeling his cheeks burn.

Malfoy’s face softened. He relaxed, his expression turned to one of surprise. “Goodnight, Potter.” Was all that he said, without any feeling, and he closed the door.

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At breakfast the next day Harry received a response from Ginny. It had been opened, which annoyed him, but he didn’t think Ginny would write anything too embarrassing anyway – and he was right:

Dear Harry,

Thank you for your letter. I just need more time.

And they better have the Quidditch pitch re-built – or I might transfer! Pity you and Ron can’t be on the team. Of course your help would be appreciated.

Ginny

He let Hermione read the letter after he was done, and she gave him a sad smile. He could tell she had loads of questions, but was being polite and biting her tongue. He debated on telling her more about their argument to try and understand whatever it was he had missed. It hurt to think about too much, though, so he folded Ginny’s letter up and tried to forget about it.

Professor Meek was less understanding about Harry’s slow progress getting through the textbook. She gave him a disapproving look when he told her he wasn’t sure which parts he felt he understood best. He had just followed his gut when leading the DA, giving people encouragement and the space to practice mastering practical defensive spells. When he expressed this, she said that his method had worked well for people already familiar with how to cast spells and weren’t likely to point their brand new wands in each other’s faces given the first opportunity.
Harry reluctantly admitted that teaching First Years would necessarily need to be different and promised to do better on the reading assignments. He and Goldstein were dismissed early, and they parted ways to their respective rooms to read. But Harry felt too confined behind his curtains for the third day in a row and decided to take his book out onto the lawn.

The sunlight was still warm enough that Harry didn’t need any extra layers as he stretched himself out on the grass by the lake. He could hear Professor Sprout giving Neville and Goyle instructions outside the greenhouses about where and when to fertilize different plants. It was quiet – similar to how quiet the castle got on Christmas Holiday when most of the students were gone, only warmer. Harry found his eyes drooping as we tried to focus on the text – perhaps coming outside hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“Hiya, Harry!” Neville called, walking over to him – having been dismissed by Professor Sprout. Interestingly enough, Goyle followed him.

“Hey, Nev. How is working with Professor Sprout?” Harry asked, conversationally.

“Brilliant! We’re on break until after lunch. I guess we will be taking a turn sweeping the grounds with Hagrid and Professor Sprout then. Have you done that yet?” Neville asked, Goyle still right behind him.

“Yeah, we did the owlry yesterday morning. Found some strange creatures Professor Meek called Carrion Birds.” Harry mentioned casually.

Goyle started, face turning pale. He obviously knew what they were.

“What in Merlin’s name are those?” Neville asked.

“Something nasty left by the Carrows. All cleaned-up now, though.” Harry didn’t really want to keep Neville in the dark, but he also felt better knowing he wasn’t the only one who hadn’t heard of them before.

“They had… Carrion Curriers?” Goyle finally spluttered. He seemed genuinely shocked.

“Apparently so. You never saw them use them?” Harry now asked Goyle, hoping for more information, but also selfishly enjoying Goyle’s discomfort.

“No. No, I never saw that.” Goyle looked appalled.

“What’s wrong, Goyle?” Neville asked. Harry felt a little ashamed at seeing Neville so concerned about a classmate that until very recently he would have been at great odds with. Neville had witnessed the Carrows firsthand as well, even taken some of their curses.

“I just… didn’t know. That’s… I mean, that’s dark stuff.” Goyle managed to say.

Harry had assumed that Goyle would have been an adoring fan of the Carrows, eager to please them and supportive of all they had done at Hogwarts. Maybe he was wrong.

“I’ve already told you, Goyle, that all that rubbish is over now. Just cleaning things up, eh?” Neville said encouragingly, making Harry feel even more like a prick.

“I suppose. Still… I… I didn’t know.” Goyle looked both at Harry and at Neville desperately wanting them to believe him. He probably wasn’t clever enough to lie so convincingly, Harry reasoned.
“It’s in the past now, Goyle. We believe you.” Harry heard himself say.

Neville beamed. “Now, why don’t I show you my Mimulus mimbletonia before lunch. It loves its place by the window in our new rooms.” Neville steered Goyle back towards the castle and started talking Herbology again. Harry watched the two of them go, fascinated.

Was Neville too trusting? Probably.

Or maybe Harry was too jaded. Goyle was a bully. He had tormented Neville for years – and they were casually walking up the castle steps together as if none of it mattered. They had been kids after all – and kids do stupid things as they figure out who they are and how to deal with new, scary situations.

Neville was giving Goyle a second chance. McGonagall would be proud.

Maybe Harry could do the same.
Back to Normal?

After lunch, Harry found that if he brought his ink and quill with him to underline the important parts and make notes in the margins of the text he was able to get through *Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense* a lot quicker. He dog-eared pages that introduced concepts or dangers he felt he knew a lot about. Hermione would be appalled, but he felt rather proud of his efforts and thought Professor Meek would be too.

By dinner time, however, all the reading was starting to get jumbled in his head and he needed a break. Seeing Neville and Goyle out on the lawn earlier got him thinking about how not wanting to seek retribution for past misdeeds and genuine forgiveness were not the same thing. How had Neville done it? As much as Harry wanted the war to be over and forgotten, perhaps some part inside him was scared to give it up. His whole life seemed to have been building up to the final showdown between him and Voldemort – what was he now that it was over?

Harry entered the Great Hall at just the right moment to see Ron spoon feed some kind of dessert to Hermione. They were sitting close together on the far end of the table, obviously enjoying an intimate moment. Harry felt both happy and a little bit jealous at their blossoming relationship. It seemed wrong to interrupt – and embarrassing to witness their clumsy attempts at romance.

Instead, Harry sat with Neville. Goyle wasn’t there either, having already finished or had not yet arrived – so he thought this was a good time to ask questions.

“Hey, Nev. How was searching the grounds?” Harry started innocently.

“Hey, Harry. Not bad. Kind of boring really. Hagrid brought along some creature that can detect buried treasure – if your idea of treasure is a hundred years’ worth of rusty pen-nibs, candy wrappers, and lost bits of parchment. We did find a glass bottle full of some perfume and a cracked pennywhistle, though – not complete rubbish, eh?” Neville joked, but he looked tired.

“Did you finish sweeping the whole grounds, then?” Harry looked impressed.

“Nah, but we are nearly half-way. I’m tuckered out from all the walking and digging, although Goyle did most of that – he went off to bed straight after. I was thinking of saving him some of these meat pies.” Neville gestured to a stack he had been forming on a clean handkerchief.

“That’s… so thoughtful of you, Nev. I… I was hoping to ask you about that, actually.” Harry began.

“Really? How so?” Neville looked confused.

“About Goyle, I mean.” Harry began dishing up his own plate, leaving the meat pies untouched. “Goyle… he, well he was such a nightmare – to you especially. You seem to have forgiven him so easily. I’m not sure… I don’t think I could do that.” Harry struggled to express his meaning.


“I don’t know how much of it is really mine to tell, …but seeing as it’s you – well, maybe its best that you know.” Neville brought his hands down on the table and focused on Harry like they were about to engage in a serious discussion. “How much do you know about Goyle, outside of school?” Neville whispered.
“Er… not much, I guess.” Harry said truthfully.

“I didn’t know much either, except that he lived alone with his dad. Last year, without Malfoy, both he and Crabbe didn’t really know what to do. They were kind of leaderless, right? You already knew that both their dads were Death Eaters – they probably felt a bit betrayed at Malfoy being inducted so early, leaving them behind to fend for themselves.”

Harry wasn’t used to sympathizing with Slytherins, but he could kind of see where Neville was going.

“The Carrows took both of them under their wing and let them get away with all sorts of mischief – praising them for being cruel, casting hexes for no reason at all, really. They taught them all sorts of nasty things and it appeared to most of us, me included, that they were enjoying it.” Here Neville paused.

“Go on.” Harry encouraged. “I figured as much. What’s the catch?”

“And then Crabbe died.” Neville said softly. Harry looked away, reminded at the horror of Fiendfyre. “I don’t know exactly how that happened… but I gather you know about it.” Neville continued.

“I… we, saw it happen. It was awful.” Harry couldn’t meet Neville’s gaze for a moment – not wanting to elaborate.

“Our first day meeting with Professor Sprout, Goyle was… different. He kept insisting that we understand that he wanted to work – that he would do anything to help. It was a bit annoying at first, so I snapped at him.” Neville looked away this time, chewing on his lip. “I know you saw my parent’s at St. Mungo’s. I felt it was only right that I kept hating Goyle, that I was justified in doing so – but what I hated was an illusion.”

Harry didn’t understand. The silence before Neville spoke this time was careful, as if Neville hadn’t yet worked out his reasoning himself yet and wanted to express it meaningfully for the both of them.

“After I said something horrible to him, Goyle broke down into tears. He kept saying he was sorry and that he just wanted to belong. He was inconsolable and spouting so much gibberish, I thought he was going mad. Professor Sprout called for Madam Pomfrey, who administered a Calming Draft, and then we all sat in the greenhouse, just talking him through it. That’s when I realized how backwards I had him in my head.” Neville nudged Harry. “You aren’t to tell anyone this – okay?”

“Sure.” Harry was truly astonished. Was this all true?

“I can’t give you specifics, but I can give you enough. Goyle’s mum left when he was really little. His dad… well, he beat him. And here I thought I had it rough being raised by Gran. Goyle probably found that being a bully in school was a relief – to be the one with power, instead of the victim. And with a best friend in Crabbe, and a leader in Malfoy, he probably thought he was doing pretty well for himself – the daft bugger. Goyle… he isn’t… well, he’s not very bright, to put it kindly.” Neville struggled to find more words for a second. “He liked the attention from the Carrows at first, but they pressed him to do more than he wanted. They threatened to perform Unforgivables on him if he didn’t practice them on others. It scared him.”

“And then Crabbe died – betrayed and used by the Carrows. You did a fine job of sweeping the floor with old Voldemort. And the Malfoys disappeared.” Neville paused again, letting that sink in.
“Goyle’s dad knew he would be hunted down for his crimes, so he burned down his own house and fled – leaving Goyle to fend for himself. He said he had been living on the street when McGonagall’s owl found him – inviting him back to Hogwarts. I suspect nowhere else would have him, and he had no friends or family left.” Neville finished in a quiet whisper. By now it was just him and Harry at the dinner table, but the weight of Neville’s words needed to be spoken softly anyway – for the pain and despair they implied.

“Harry, the things I heard him say… to Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey… I could tell he wasn’t lying. He’s… well, he’s just not bright enough to make all that up. And I’ve never seen someone cry like that before. It was easy to forgive him after that. Like I said, the Goyle I had in my head was an illusion – he really isn’t that different from you or me, Harry.”

Harry was moved. “Thanks, Nev… thank you for telling me. I guess I hadn’t thought about that.” He didn’t know what to make of Neville’s story. He didn’t feel at all hungry anymore.

“Well, I’m going to go leave these for Goyle. See you in the Common Room later?” Neville got up, having wrapped the meat pies into a neat bundle.

“Sure.” Harry got up as well, and the table began clearing itself.

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Harry didn’t feel like going back to his book after talking with Neville, and he certainly didn’t want to have to be the third-wheel with Ron and Hermione. He had been collecting a lot of secrets the last couple days – he was starting to feel like he would burst. So he found sanctuary in his shared room again, behind soft gray curtains. After a while, Malfoy came in and started getting prepared for his turn in the bath. Harry suddenly had an idea.

“Hey… Malfoy.” Harry opened his curtains.

“What is it, Potter?” Malfoy said, sounding resigned.

“Well… it’s just, I noticed you and Goyle haven’t been… well, you used to do everything together. I just wondered what might have changed?” Harry wanted to keep his promise to Neville, but he also wanted a confirmation that what he had said about Goyle was true.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.” Malfoy said rudely.

“I know… I just, well, Neville said that Goyle seemed… well, that perhaps he missed you. Just wanted to pass that along.” Harry thought he was doing a pretty good job at being subtle.

“McGonagall was right to bunk him with Blaise. No one else will look after the poor bloke.” Malfoy said, softer this time, but still abstractly – like he was talking about the weather.

“Actually, Neville isn’t doing too bad a job.” Harry mentioned casually. “Have you really broken things off between you two, then?”

“He’s better off. Why do you care, Potter?” Malfoy wrinkled his nose up in disgust.

“You really think he’s better off?” Harry dug deeper.

“What is this?! You can’t just leave us the fuck alone?” Malfoy spat back.

“I… just meant…” Harry back-peddled.
“I did nothing to help Goyle – I ruined him. There, I’ve said it! So stop trying to make me feel even worse than I already do. When is it going to be enough, huh? Let Longbottom braid his stupid hair, for all I care! So long as he’s got someone…” here Malfoy faltered, his eyes starting to fill.

“No, Malfoy – I’m not blaming you…” Harry tried again.

“Then what is it? Your stupid sense of Gryffindor honor? Still trying to play hero?!?” Malfoy shouted. “Just bugger off!” And with that, Malfoy slammed the bathroom door in Harry face.

Harry looked blankly at the closed door in shock for a while. It had probably been a bad idea to prod Malfoy for information on Goyle, especially since Malfoy was probably not fully recovered after learning about the death of Lucius. He and Malfoy were back to fighting again – that was normal.

But for the first time after the war, Harry didn’t want for things to go back to normal.

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To make matters even worse, the breakfast table was abundant with quiet whispers the next morning. Harry caught Hermione’s eye and without having to ask, she slid him a copy of the Daily Prophet. Its headline read:

DEATH EATER MALFOY’S DEATH CONFIRMED!

A source at St. Mungo’s confirmed today that they had treated the dangerous escaped criminal and confirmed Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy, who died from an unknown cause in their care early in the morning of August the 21st of this year.

Furthermore, Narcissa Malfoy, the wife of the deceased, was seen returning to Malfoy Manor yesterday after being absent since the fall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. No charges have been filed against her or her son, whose whereabouts remain unknown.

A spokesman for the Ministry gave a brief statement confirming Lucius Malfoy’s death but gave no further explanation…

Here, Harry stopped reading as it draveled on into speculation. Harry felt sick.

“Bit of a surprise, huh Harry?” Hermione asked sarcastically, eyebrows raised – she had watched him closely as he had read and had obviously realized that it wasn’t a shock to him.

“I… McGonagall told me. Asked me not to say anything until it went public.” Harry stammered.

“What else did she say?” Hermione pursed her lips, obviously not enjoying being kept in the dark.

“They… the Malfoys… they surrendered. And then… that’s why Malfoy was gone the second day back…” Harry trailed off.

“I had wondered why you didn’t come complaining to me about why McGonagall had stuck you with Malfoy…” Hermione looked thoughtful. “Anything else?”

Harry stumbled through explaining all of McGonagall’s reasons and the details on the extra warding on his room. She waited patiently. Ron was only half-listening in beside them, eating.

“Harry, I’m glad you kept your word to McGonagall, but… you know we are here for you. Don’t
think I haven’t noticed that you’ve been sulking in your room the past few days. I thought it was still about Ginny… but…” Hermione broke off.

“I know, Hermione. I’m sorry.” Harry said, feeling thoroughly chastised.

“Good. I take it you and Malfoy are… still fighting?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.” Harry sighed heavily.


“It’s… complicated. I guess it was just too much to hope that with Voldemort gone things would be great. McGonagall is right… things are still kind of… broken.” Harry offered.

Hermione patted his arm and gave him a weak smile. Harry felt lucky to have such good friends.

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Professor Meek was pleased with his progress in the textbook. She gave him and Goldstein until the end of the week to finish the reading and then the next week would be devoted to planning lectures. She also announced that they would take their turn sweeping the school again the following day. Harry asked if the Ministry had collected the Carrion Birds yet, to which she just said that McGonagall was taking care of everything. He felt a little hurt that she wouldn’t give him a straight answer, but also a little relieved not knowing. Maybe Malfoy was right – was he that eager to play hero again?

Malfoy still didn’t appear for lunch or dinner. Harry wanted to apologize, but wasn’t sure how to do it without revealing that McGonagall had told him in advance about Lucius. How do you share your sympathy with someone who hates you?

Not that Harry knew that Malfoy hated him – just that he thought it was implied. They weren’t hurling curses at each other anymore, and Harry certainly didn’t hate Draco anymore. Harry tried to recall why he had so disliked Malfoy before Voldemort and Dark Marks had even entered the picture. All he could remember was Malfoy being an arrogant prat and calling Hermione a Mudblood. Schoolyard rivalry nonsense… up until Sixth Year.

Harry was only half-dressed into his pajamas when Malfoy returned.

“Do you just laze about in here half-naked all the time, Potter?” Malfoy was covering his eyes, but he sounded exhausted.

Harry finished pulling on his clothes. “Oh, get used to it, Malfoy.” Harry teased. Malfoy lowered his hands and started rummaging around for his own pajamas and dressing gown – heading to the bath.

Malfoy looked awful. Harry had no idea where he was going to every day, but he doubted it was meetings with Slughorn. Malfoy always looked pale, but he was starting to look a sickly gray around the edges as if he was forgetting to eat and sleep.

“Hey… Malfoy. About yesterday… I really didn’t mean anything by it. I’m sorry I upset you.” Harry said, but it sounded hollow somehow.

“Apology accepted. I didn’t need to get so defensive. But this doesn’t mean I’m welcoming your questions, Potter.” Malfoy said, not looking at Harry.
“Just one?” Harry pleaded.

Malfoy huffed. “I reserve the right not to answer, but go ahead.” Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“Is your mother… with everything that has happened… is she alright?” Harry tried instead.

Malfoy looked back at Harry in shock. “Why ever would you ask that?” He accused.

“Well, I suppose, I feel that I still owe her. I’m… sorry for your loss, even if… I don’t exactly feel… even if that’s all I can say.” Harry finally managed to get out.

“How do you owe my mother? What are you talking about?” Malfoy looked confused.

“She didn’t tell you?” Harry was surprised.

“Tell me what, Potter?” Malfoy was getting angry again. This wasn’t what Harry wanted.

“She… saved my life. She… lied to Voldemort after he cast Avada Kedavra on me in the forest. Right to his face. It’s the only way I was able to get out of there.” Harry said solemnly.

Draco didn’t speak at all for a moment, face in deep concentration. She obviously hadn’t told him. “Mother… she did that? Why?” Malfoy asked in a whisper.

“All she cared about was you, Malfoy. She asked me if you were alive. I think she was willing to do anything just for what little I could communicate to her about you while splayed out in the dirt.” Harry recalled.

“And if you hadn’t… if you had let me… burn?” Malfoy asked.

Harry knew what Malfoy was referring to – his conscience wouldn’t have allowed him to leave Malfoy and Goyle in the Room of Requirement to die. “I don’t know. I think that would have broken her. I don’t think she would have cared either way after that.”

“Then you don’t owe us a thing, Potter.” Malfoy said seriously. “And here I thought I owed you for my continued existence – as miserable as it may be.” He sneered.

Something inside Harry gave an uncomfortable turn at hearing that response. “Even so… is she alright?” Harry asked in earnest.

“Yes, Harry. All things considered, I think my mother is going to be alright.” Malfoy replied, disappearing into the bathroom again – this time closing the door with a soft click.

All Harry could think about was that Draco had used Harry’s first name.
Harry was plagued by bizarre dreams that night. He was trying to find something to cover himself up after a shower, but everything he found was either far too small or was covered in holes. He could hear Malfoy’s voice nagging at him from somewhere. He found Malfoy's dressing gown and struggled to put it on. A feeling of panic that someone might see him made him frantic. He woke early with a hard-on and feeling decidedly unrested. A hot shower helped a little, but he wasn’t looking forward to sweeping the castle later.

Malfoy’s curtains remained closed that morning. Harry thought about saying something, in case Malfoy overslept, but thought better of it. Draco probably needed all the sleep he could get.

At breakfast, Neville and Goyle were huddled together talking about who-knew-what, both grinning like loons. Hermione and Ron were not attempting romance, much to his relief, so he sat with them. Ron was shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth with his eyes only half open. Hermione looked pensive, but much more awake.

“Morning, Hermione.” Harry tried.

“Morning, Harry.” Hermione gave him a warm smile. “Don’t mind Ron. The Charms group swept all of the Astronomy tower yesterday. It’s my first day sweeping – have you had a turn yet?”

“Yeah. Owly.” Harry hadn’t actually told Hermione about the Carrion Birds yet. As he recalled the discovery earlier that week, she looked at him with wide eyes, covering her mouth. Harry wasn’t surprised that Hermione already knew what they were, of course.

“Gosh, Harry… those creatures… or rather what’s left of them… they are only used to carry… well, Professor Meek is probably right… whatever they brought in is probably still here somewhere. Oh, that’s awful.” Harry felt a little guilty for seemingly ruining her morning.

“It’s not likely that every group will find something nasty. The Herbology… group, as you put it, started on the grounds but they haven’t found anything yet. Which is… reassuring, I guess, for McGonagall and the returning students.” Harry amended, wanting to brush it off.

“We found loads of Wheezes products stuffed in an old cupboard. I don’t even think Flitwick minded that I left most of them there, to be honest. George will be happy when I tell him, at least.” Ron said between mouthfuls, only sounding a little bitter.

Harry was a bit jealous. As exciting as the Carrion Birds had been, he wouldn’t mind if the Universe decided to give the potentially deadly and disastrous discoveries to someone else for a change. He would have relished finding a cache of Fred & George’s infamous gag items. Although, he doubted that Professor Meek would have left any behind for some other young mischief-maker.

“Ron, remind me that this year it is your turn for a proper adventure. If nothing happens by Christmas I’ll enlist Flitwick to make sure it does.” Harry said, only partly in jest.

Ron smiled. “It wouldn’t be any fun if you couldn’t at least tag along.” He winked at Harry, in understanding. “And no spiders.” He added, seriously.

Harry and Hermione laughed. Thankfully, at least some things were just as they should be.

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Harry, Goldstein, and Professor Meek swept all the classrooms on the Fourth Floor but didn’t find anything even remotely interesting. Harry was appalled at how much gum was under the desks. Harry and Anthony made a game out of it, seeing whose row was the worst. The loser picked first in the next room. There were some rather creative pictures carved onto some of the desks as well, which Professor Meek buffed away with a clever spell.

After lunch, they were free to try and work on the last few chapters of *Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense*. Feeling much better, Harry tried reading in the Common Room by the fire. The weather was turning chilly – the trees outside starting to turn red and gold. It made him a bit homesick for the Gryffindor Common Room, actually. He was making good progress, so when Hermione came and sat by him he shut his book with a snap, to save her unnecessary pain.

“Harry… I just wanted you to know… well, I got a letter from Ginny.” Hermione said carefully.

“Ah. Somehow I bet it wasn’t just about the weather.” Harry replied. He hadn’t thought of Ginny all day.

“No. I did tell her I didn’t want any more than she felt comfortable sharing. I really just wanted to help.” Hermione paused. “It’s just that… I know with Ron and I being together now… we don’t mean to push you away. I thought everything would be fine if you had Ginny. But…”

“Oh, don’t worry so much, Hermione.” Harry waved her off. “And I’m delighted for you and Ron – don’t ever think anything different.”

Hermione blushed. “Ginny said… well, she mentioned that she felt like maybe she pushed too hard to make things work between you two. I just wanted to let you know that although I rather wanted you two to be happy together – neither Ron nor I are upset if things are over for good. You know that, right?” She looked down her nose at him in a way that reminded Harry of McGonagall.

“Thank you, Hermione.” Harry wasn’t sure how he was supposed to be feeling. “Ginny… she seemed pretty adamant that it was over after we fought. I suppose she meant it.”

Hermione gave him a reassuring hand on his arm. “I think she did.”

“Well then, I guess there’s no point in worrying over it. Ginny and I will be friends again in no time. You’ll see.” Harry tried to act cool about it, but his insides were like ice.

“Harry, I just want you to know you can talk to me. About anything.” Hermione whispered. Harry wasn’t sure if she was trying to get him to divulge more about his fight with Ginny or if she was implying that she knew he was holding something else back.

“Hermione… I’m no good at talking… you know that.” Harry tried to wave her off again.

Hermione patted his arm and then got up. “Even still. See you at dinner, Harry.”

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Harry had been pushing thoughts of Ginny away in hopes that things weren’t over for good. Or at least, that is what he told himself. Now that it was confirmed, he decided to have a good long sulk about it. Maybe he would feel better afterwards. He retreated to the safety of his bed and soft gray curtains, yet again in so many days. Malfoy must have still been out with Slughorn.

Something Neville had said just the other day started resonating with him. Maybe he had been in love with an illusion. He liked the idea of Ginny, but not actually having her as his girlfriend. They certainly didn’t attempt anything romantic the way Hermione and Ron were. Snogging had been
great, but that was really all they did together.

Ginny represented so much for Harry – safety, a normal family, shared beliefs and interests. Somehow in their year apart, the hope of rekindling their relationship had turned into a crutch for him. He loved Ginny – but maybe not in the right way. Not in the way that seemed to matter.

It was… surprising to allow himself to think about her so objectively. He wasn’t heartbroken, at least. He actually felt guilty. Was Ginny genuinely in love with him? Was she heartbroken? He hadn’t meant to string her along – he just hadn’t ever thought that life would go any other way.

Being reminded of this terrified him. He didn’t know what came next. Would he find someone else? Should he be looking, or was it too soon after breaking things off with Ginny? Did he even want someone like that? Yes, he reasoned, he did want someone in his life. But he didn’t have even an inkling on what to do about it. There would probably be plenty of girls willing to date him, but all for the wrong reasons.

Harry reasoned that his brooding session would have to remain unresolved for now. He had time. Headmistress McGonagall had given him the opportunity to finish things out here at Hogwarts and start planning for a new future – one that he hadn’t ever seriously considered.

“Harry, are you in there?” Malfoy’s voice sounded a bit uncertain.

“Yeah.” Harry pulled the curtains back. “What’s up, Malfoy?”

Harry was stunned at what was awaiting him. Malfoy was chalk white and sweaty, with an expression on his face that looked half-manic.

“Er… Slughorn and I… we found… something… awful.” Malfoy looked like he was going to be sick, his robes were rumpled and he had his wand out as if he needed to fend off an attack.

“What’s wrong? Are you both okay? What did you find?” Harry started firing questions at Malfoy, who started looking furtively at the bathroom door.

“The Carrows… they were sick… twisted. I’m going to…” Malfoy dashed to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Harry called through the door. “Malfoy? Do I need to get help? McGonagall or Pomfrey?”

After a few moments of splashing water, Harry heard Draco yell back. “No, Potter!”

Harry started pacing, waiting for Malfoy to re-emerge and explain what was going on. Malfoy slipped out of the bathroom after a lot more splashing. He had regained some composure by dowsing his head under the tap, it looked like.

“I just… needed a moment. It was kind of a shock…” Malfoy slumped onto his bed. “Slughorn and McGonagall are handling it. Distract me.”

The last statement had been more of a command. Harry had no idea what to say. “Er… you sure you don’t want to see Pomfrey?”

“I’m fine. Just please, help me think of something else!” Malfoy was starting to sound desperate.

Harry started looking around for anything that caught his eye. “Uh… well, I see you have a new wand. Pretty. What is it?” Harry asked dumbly. “I do still have your old wand, if you want it… I have it… somewhere...” Harry actually couldn’t remember where he had stashed it.
Malfy laughed, a nervous but genuine laugh that showed his perfectly straight white teeth. “You’ve lost it then? No matter, I don’t think it suits me anymore.” He looked down at the wand that was still in his hand. It had apparently not been spared from his dousing earlier. He started drying it off on his robes.

“It is pretty, isn’t it? It was my great-grandmothers. Ironwood and unicorn hair. Had it in a case on the mantle in the study for ages – I always did like it.” Malfy waved it about, letting pale blue sparks glitter around him. “It seems to like me well enough.”

“I’m glad.” Harry said, still reeling from Malfoys sudden appearance.

Malfy took a few deep breaths to calm himself down.

“It is pretty. But don’t people usually… I mean, isn’t it customary to bury the wand with the owner when they pass on?” Harry wasn’t sure if this counted as effectively distracting conversation, given that Malfy had likely just had a funeral for his father.

“Some do.” Malfy said, unhelpfully.

“I’m sorry, am I helping – or making things worse? At least let me get Goyle or Zabini.” Harry tried.

Malfy huffed. “Yes, Potter, you are helping. If in no other way than surprising me with your incompetence. Zabini is kind of a prat and I’ve already told you Goyle is better off without me.”

“Are you calmed down enough to tell me what happened? At least enough so I won’t feel like I need to run down the halls screaming ‘bloody murder’?” Harry tried to jest.

Malfoy composed himself again and nodded. “Professor Slughorn had us do a sweep of the castle today. He said all the student teacher teams were doing it, to help make sure the castle was safe for the returning students. It was supposed to just be routine, I guess. It’s just…” Here his voice faltered. “Harry, I know you probably think what with my father being so close to the Dark Lord that us Malfoys should relish in dark magic – but we aren’t like that, really.” Draco looked pleadingly at Harry.

“It’s okay, Dra… Malfoy. I might have thought so once, but I’m learning.” Harry offered.

“The Carrows… I guess they had more plans for Hogwarts than just turning it into a school for the Dark Arts. Slughorn mentioned all kinds of nasty potions ingredients in the storage cupboard, but I would never have dreamed of… this…” Malfoy swallowed.

“What did you find?” Harry asked in a soft whisper.

“The Carrows were trying to… create Homunculi.” Malfoy whispered the word back, his eyes wide and frightened.

Harry felt like he could laugh – except that the fear in Malfoy’s voice and on his face was undeniably real. “And what, exactly… is a… Hu-mun-kully?” Harry wasn’t sure he said the strange word right.

Malfoy’s face twisted from one of revulsion to a familiar scowl. “Harry… you are best friends with the Hermione Granger. Surely you remember a little about the history of Medieval Alchemy?”

“Bit before my time, Draco.” Harry shrugged his shoulders, secretly pleased that Malfoy had just inadvertently praised Hermione.
This time Draco did laugh. He kept on laughing too, until tears started running down his face. Harry thought that perhaps Malfoy had fallen into hysterics.

“I… won’t corrupt your innocent head with that rubbish… not tonight, anyway.” Malfoy finally wheezed out. “Honestly, I was never sure if you were just playing dumb or not. I guess, now I know.” Draco wiped his cheeks, regaining his composure. Malfoy’s stomach gave an audible grumble. They had missed dinner.

Harry felt a bit affronted at this. “I may not be as… knowledgeable, about the Wizarding world as some – but I’m not daft. Whatever it is you found, it’s not an immediate threat to anyone, right?”

“No, Harry. They were failed experiments. Lots of them. They must have had a steady supply of… fresh ingredients – with plans on extracting more from the students, no doubt.” Malfoy face went white again. “Oh, God. Those monsters…”

Harry wasn’t sure if Draco was referring to the Homunculi things or the Carrows. “I’m starved and we’ve missed dinner. Want to walk down to the kitchens?” Harry’s stomach was also complaining about lack of sustenance.

“I don’t know if I can eat… not after…” Malfoy looked uncertain. “And you’ve been in the kitchens here before, Potter?” He said, a bit accusingly.

“You haven’t? The house elves are great… come on, just a bit of toast?” Harry pleaded.

“Follow you to the kitchens?” Draco was starting to give in, Harry could tell. “You do realize we aren’t exactly friends, Potter?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean things have to stay that way. Tell me more about your new wand on the way.” Harry said boldly – he was a Gryffindor, after all.

“Okay… does this mean you’ll tell me why you’re still using your smudgy old wand? Seriously, do you never polish it?” Malfoy was going to demand an equivalent exchange of information, it seemed – very Slytherin-like. “I thought you were the master or the Elder Wand now?”

“Oh, please, like I would keep it. As hard as this might be for you to believe, I actually rather hate all that unwanted attention, Malfoy.” Harry said back with more than a little bitterness.

Malfoy didn’t reply for a moment, but squinted at Harry like he was trying to determine if he was lying or not. “You are very… odd. You know that, right?” Draco concluded.

“Coming from you, I’ll take it as a compliment. Now, are we going to go get food, or not?” Harry gestured at the door.

“If you insist.” Malfoy sighed and got up off his bed, ready to go.

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Hermione and Ron were in the Common Room when they finally left. Harry could tell Hermione was a little miffed at his standing them up at dinner, but he apologized, saying he would explain later. Both of his friends’ eyebrows crept up their foreheads when Harry told them he was taking Malfoy down to the kitchens and that they would be back soon. He left them gaping and followed Malfoy out into the hall.

“They’ll get used to you.” Harry said earnestly.
“Ugh, I hope not.” Malfoy said in mock disgust. “Where are the kitchens, anyway?”

“The dungeons, just below the Great Hall – behind the painting of a bowl of fruit.” Harry recited.

“What possessed you to figure that out?” Malfoy inquired.

“Hermione.” Harry said, unhelpfully. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to get into an argument about the welfare of house elves with Malfoy.

“I really only want a nice cup of tea. Do you have to make the food yourself?” Draco asked.

Harry laughed. “Of course not.”

Malfoy continued to look skeptical, but also intrigued. They made their way through the labyrinthine dungeons to the painting Harry had only visited a handful of times before.

“It’s a bit… chaotic inside. But the house elves are always happy to provide you with whatever you would like.” Harry had a sudden, second thought. “Just don’t… ask for too much. Be polite.”

“Polite? To house elves?” Malfoy parroted back, uncomprehendingly.

Harry just shrugged and tickled the pear, which then transformed into a familiar green doorknob. Inside was chaotic, in fact no one noticed them at all for a few seconds. An older house elf carrying a tall, freshly scrubbed pot walked over to them and bowed.

“Good evening. What can we do for the young masters?” His voice was comically high and squeaky for such a grizzled looking face and large, droopy bat-like ears.

“Er… Thank you. We missed dinner. I’d just like some leftover beef and rolls, please. Malfoy?” Harry glanced over to his companion.

“Black tea with a splash of milk and some toast?” Malfoy asked.

“Of course, sirs. Please, come this way… sit here.” He indicated a small table with four chairs which had previously been occupied by other house elves – which all seem to have vanished to complete other chores. “It will only take a moment.”

Of course the house elves brought way more than enough food. A full tea service with biscuits, toast, and petit fours were laid out in front of Malfoy. Harry got mashed potatoes, still steaming hot and dripping with melted butter, three slices of roast beef swimming in rich gravy, and a whole basket of rolls. He tried to protest at first, but that only seemed to encourage them.

Harry and Malfoy talked about nonsense stuff while they ate: the Common Room, their assigned readings from their respective Professors, and the queer habits of the house elves that kept re-loading their plates. Harry noticed that Malfoy didn’t eat much, but he did nibble at a decadent-looking chocolate petit four along with his toast and tea.

When Harry couldn’t stuff in another bite, he waved the house elves off – thanking them over and over again for the meal. He was getting rather tired, and Malfoy still looked like he needed a full night’s sleep. They left the kitchens, but not before one of the elves insisted that Malfoy take some of the chocolate petit fours he had favored, wrapped in a neat cloth bundle.

“Well, that was… enlightening.” Draco said, as they ascended the stairs.

“You should have had some of the mashed potatoes – they were lovely.” Harry added.
Malfoy looked downcast all of the sudden.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

After a moment of silence, Draco spoke. “Thank you, Harry. I still think you are a bit of a git, but I needed this.” Malfoy held up his bundle of chocolates.

Harry knew he meant more than just the food.
Learning the Truth

The sun was just peeking in through his curtains, and for once he could hear Malfoy’s gentle, even breaths from the other side of the room. Neither of them had cast silencing or protective charms after their feast down in the kitchens. Harry felt rather pleased at the thought.

As much as Harry tried to convince himself not to, he couldn’t stop trying to puzzle out what had frightened Draco the day before. Hermione would know, of course. It seemed that the Carrion Birds and the Homunculus experiments were somehow related. Could it possibly mean there were even greater dangers still hidden at Hogwarts – or was that the end of it?

Thinking that it would be best to explain it all to Hermione at breakfast, Harry got up and tip-toed to the shower. When he got out, Malfoy’s curtains were still drawn, but Harry couldn’t hear him anymore. Was he awake then? Just biding his time behind his curtains, waiting for Harry to leave?

Sharing a room with Draco was surprisingly easy, but then again, he hadn’t even been at Hogwarts most of the days they had been back. They were still kind of dancing around each other, not yet sure what kinds of contact would be welcome – each keeping to their own space. It didn’t feel like home yet, but things were starting to look up.

Harry slipped quietly out into the hall, hopefully without disturbing Malfoy, just in case.

Zabini was the only one in the Common Room, so Harry chose to go down to the Great Hall and wait for Hermione there. He could always read more of Lafford to appease Meek. He was nearing the last few chapters, pleased with her textbook choice. It also included some helpful hints in an Appendix about introducing new ideas and spells to absolute beginners.

Only a couple pages in Harry was interrupted by Hermione’s pained groan. “Oh, Harry. What have you done to that poor book?”

“Good morning to you too, ‘Mione.” Harry rolled his eyes.

Hermione took a seat next to him, but didn’t mention the book again. “Last night? Explain.” She demanded.

“I’m sorry. I needed some time to myself after hearing from you about Ginny. I hadn’t realized how late it had gotten, but I was just about to come down for dinner when Malfoy turned-up white as a sheet and babbling about some horror he and Slughorn had found during their sweep.” Harry said patiently.

“And so you invited him down to the kitchens to abuse the house elves?” Hermione would look at it that way.

“Of course not. He was… shocked. Needed someone to talk things out with. We missed dinner, so I suggested we go down to see if they had any leftovers. He really was in a state – and considering everything else that has been going on, he didn’t need to miss any more meals.” Harry said, a little protectively.

“That was… kind of you, I guess.” Hermione acknowledged. “Did he say what they found?”

“Yes, in fact, I was hoping to ask you about it. He said the Carrows were trying to create Homunculus. Said it had something to do with Alchemy. I wondered if it was connected to the Carrion Curriers?”
Hermione’s face blanched. She didn’t respond for a moment, but slid her plate away – obviously done with eating for the time being. “Homunculi? Really? And… you said trying… there were multiple? Unsuccessful, I… hope?”

Harry could tell she knew what these things must be, but could tell it upset her too. “Yes, he said they were all failed experiments.”

Hermione took a big breath and let it out slowly. “Harry, it’s not so much what they are that is bothersome… it is what it takes to make them. Yes, I’m willing to bet the Carrion Birds were involved.”

“And… what are they?” Harry whispered. Other people were starting to file into the Great Hall.

“Alchemy lead to many great discoveries, but also many failures – some dangerous and others too dark to even contemplate. The Philosopher’s Stone was one of the goals – an elixir of life and the ability to turn any metal into gold. But these wizards also wanted to test the very limits of magic. I first read about… Homunculi… when researching Horcruxes. The idea is simple enough – to create life. Not conjured life, mind you, as that is really just mimicry with a finite existence. Conjured life can’t eat, grow, or die. The ultimate goal with creating a Homunculus was to create living, thinking beings – like people.” Hermione paused to catch her breath, looking at Harry intently.

“Sounds simple enough. So what’s wrong with them?” Harry prompted.

“Innocent uses might be to create a companion or a pet. More deviously, it could be employed to create workers that were smart enough to fix minor problems but wouldn’t complain or need to be paid. Or… they could be made to be bodyguards or weapons. Golems fulfill that purpose most of the time, but are usually confined to a specific location due to their ties to the earth from which they are created. Imagine a living weapon you could assign tasks to, take with you on long journeys, with complete loyalty to its creator.” Hermione paused again.


Hermione looked sick. “The problem, Harry, as I said before is what it takes to make them. Only life can create life. And seeing as the height of Medieval Alchemy coincided with the height of the ideals of Blood Purity – it was thought that only through magical life could life spawned of magic come into being.” Hermione was expounding on the history, not only for Harry’s sake, but also because she wanted to avoid what came next. Harry could tell it bothered her. “Harry… one of the main ingredients is… a human fetus. Other organs, blood, and potions would be needed to sustain it while it grew. Historically, Pure Blood expectant mothers were sometimes kidnapped and… opened…” Hermione couldn’t continue.

Harry also felt sick. He pushed his own plate away in disgust. “Oh, Hermione. I’m sorry – I didn’t know. How… awful. Beyond awful… that’s… just sick.” Harry sympathized with Draco’s reaction, and he hadn’t actually seen whatever the Carrows had been working on.

“What is most distressing is that the school would be an ideal location for harvesting plenty of fresh material from the students. The Carrion Birds probably brought… the rest.” Hermione gulped.

“Uh… not that I’m not grateful for you telling me, Hermione, but… I kind of wish I didn’t know.” Harry said honestly. Thankfully, Ron was sitting with Neville that morning. It was probably best
that they not bring it up unless they had to later.

Still feeling a bit sick from his talk with Hermione, Harry trudged up the stairs with Goldstein to Professor Meek’s classroom again. When they arrived though, Professor Meek told them she was busy helping the Headmistress with something and would need to make their meeting short. Harry thought he knew what it was she was going to go help McGonagall with and grimaced.

Luckily Anthony hadn’t yet finished the book either, but they had both read enough to know that Harry liked to focus on Defensive Spells while Goldstein preferred the context of each danger – both historic and modern. Harry was sure he could drone on for hours about the gradual shift from wizards’ outright hunting Vampires to protecting them in non-discrimination legislation.

They would both finish the text over the weekend and then it would be time to assign days and create lessons. Harry was actually excited for it, which surprised him. He had rather liked being in charge of the DA in the end, after all, so maybe it shouldn’t have been.

Anthony turned out to be great friends with Terry Boot, who was waiting for them just outside the door when they left.

“Hey, Tony. I was hoping you’d get out early. I’m free till this evening – going to start practicing with the big telescope tonight, want to come?” Tony beamed. “Oh, hiya Potter.”

Harry nodded.

“You just want me there so you can show-off.” Tony rolled his eyes.

Terry Boot didn’t deny it, but just grinned back impishly and mouthed the word “please” over and over again.

“Oh, alright.” Anthony relented. “See you later, Harry.”

Harry watched the two friends go. He missed Ron terribly. The problem with Meek wanting them to be so self-directed meant that he had far too much free time on his hands. He could go to the library and study, but that felt like too much work.

After learning about Homunculi from Hermione, Harry really wanted something to keep his mind from imagining fresh horrors. Something fun… effortless.

It hit Harry then – he could go flying! He hadn’t been on a broom in ages. It seemed like forever since he was last able to just fly for fun. Not for a Quidditch match, or to escape dark wizards, but just to fly for the thrill of it – feeling the wind on his face and the freedom of being able to go anywhere, fast or slow. He descended the stairs rapidly, almost running, now that the idea had presented itself.

The Quidditch pitch was fresh and new – smelling of cut pine. But more importantly, it was deserted. It couldn’t have been more perfect. It wasn’t too cold yet, so he didn’t freeze, in fact, the chill was refreshing. He flew as high as he could and dove back down like a falcon. He skimmed the surface of the lake with his toes on a leisurely course around the entire castle. He picked up some pinecones and practiced throwing them up and catching them as if they were the Golden Snitch.

Harry lost track of time and probably would have flown until nightfall if he didn’t get so hungry. It was probably too late for lunch and not yet time for dinner. Harry grimaced at the thought of
asking the house elves for yet another meal – not that they wouldn’t be happy to serve him one. He could hold out for a couple hours more so long as he took a long, hot shower. He wouldn’t mind a wank too.

And with that prospect in mind, Harry dismounted his broom and started heading back to the castle.

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Back in his shared room, in which Malfoy was blessedly absent, Harry stripped out of his sweaty clothes and shut himself away in the bathroom. What was it about just thinking about touching himself that made his penis so... reactive? It was already semi-hard and sensitive to every little brush of fabric or casual touch. He scrubbed himself down, removing all the dirt and sweat from flying.

Draco’s soaps were still in the bath. Harry smelled a few. Some he rather liked. Harry hadn’t ever been very picky about the soaps he used, but he could tell Malfoy was. Some of them looked expensive too.

There was a bottle of some kind of clear shampoo that smelled heavenly – kind of cool like mint but also rich and musky. He poured just a bit out onto his hand. It was super slippery. Harry had an idea. He poured out just a little more, but not enough that Malfoy would notice, and dribbled it over his stiffening cock.

It hadn’t occurred to Harry that such behavior might seem odd until after he had started stroking. What Malfoy didn’t know though, couldn’t hurt him – Harry reasoned. It was blissful to take his time just polishing his dick, savoring the sensations, and letting his mind wander. Sex wasn’t something that anyone had ever really sat him down and talked about explicitly. What he knew came from his former dorm mates and crude gossip from other students over the years. Seamus had several dirty magazines that he left lying around now and then – Harry had nicked one once.

He wondered, not for the first time, how his life would have been different if he had grown up with real parents – or at least people that cared enough about him to explain things properly. He didn’t feel guilty about having a good wank now and then, but it was just such a taboo subject to bring up with his mates – he didn’t know if he was… abnormal, in any way.

Harry then recalled his idea from several nights past. He rinsed off and emerged into a steamy bathroom. He had to wipe the mirror clear of fog. Seeing himself naked was strangely erotic. He touched his prick gently, watching his reflection. His expression turned to one of contentment and pleasure. His whole shaft was red and sensitive from his ministrations in the shower. It felt so good.

Not having the running water of the shower as a disguise, Harry had to stifle his moans. He would need to finish quickly, just in case Malfoy came back. The idea that Draco might already be back and just beyond the door seemed to make Harry even harder. Each stroke brought him closer to completion. He noticed how clear beads of pre-cum welled up and dribbled down his fingers – looking only at his reflection… as if it he was watching someone else. His climax hit him hard and lingered deliciously as his hand grew still.

He wanted to revel in the afterglow, but now that he had more blood flowing to his brain, it seemed prudent to clean up and enjoy himself on his bed, just in case. A quick Scourgify and the mess he had made all over the sink and floor disappeared. But Harry had forgotten his clothes again – he would have to emerge from the bathroom in not but his towel.

Hoping that Malfoy was still absent, Harry opened the door – schooling his face to reveal nothing.
But Harry was not so fortunate. Draco was on his bed, reading. His curtains were only partially drawn.

“Hope you didn’t mind that I took my turn early. I want flying.” Harry said from the bathroom doorway, trying to give Malfoy a hint.

Draco just waved at him, still absorbed in his book. “I called evenings and it isn’t even dinnertime yet – no worries.”

Harry shuffled over awkwardly to collect some clean clothes.

“Bloody… Potter! I swear… are you doing this on purpose?” Malfoy screeched, pulling his curtains closed.

“Sorry, Malfoy. And no, I’m certainly not doing it on purpose.” Harry dropped the towel and started dressing hurriedly. Now that he was clean and carnally satiated, he was very excited at the prospect of food. “Why does it bother you so much, anyway?”

“Potter… sometimes you are dense as a brick – you know that, right?” Draco called back, a little muffled behind his curtains.


“First of all, no, I haven’t seen them naked loads of times. We Slytherins like being properly dressed – thank you very much. And second… use your imagination!” Malfoy snapped back, unhelpfully.

Harry had finished dressing. A quick Tempus let him know it was almost dinner time, but not quite. Harry didn’t want to play guessing games with Malfoy.

“Ok, I’m decent. And for the sake of argument… let’s say I don’t have an imagination.” Harry laid down on his own bed.

Malfoy didn’t answer right away. “I’m not so sure you’ll want to know. I just assumed you knew…”

“Knew what, Draco?” Harry tried using first names to keep things from escalating into an argument.

Again, a moment or two of silence. Draco still hadn’t pulled back his curtains. “Being a Gryffindor, you’re all for things to be fair – right?” The question seemed like an odd response.

“Of course. Is this one of those times where I have to provide you with something you don’t know before you’ll give me an answer?” Harry asked in return.

“Equivalent exchange is… preferable, but no… this is something different. Really I thought everyone knew… I haven’t had to do this in ages.” Malfoy still didn’t answer.

“Spit it out, already.” Harry was getting nervous.

“I’m gay.” Malfoy stated, defiantly, pulling back his curtains at the same time. “Now… please stop running around in nothing but that pitiful excuse for a towel.” Malfoy got up. “I’m heading down for dinner.” And with that he walked out – not waiting to hear or see Harry’s response.
Harry was hungry. But he was also rather shocked – and he didn’t want to leave the room right behind Malfoy. He knew what being gay meant, and he wasn’t bothered by it – Dumbledore was gay for goodness sakes. But, the fact that he was making Malfoy uncomfortable because he might possibly find Harry physically attractive was… embarrassing? He wasn’t sure how to describe how he felt, exactly.

He guessed that he felt a little stupid for not having figured it out earlier, and a little guilty for exposing himself to Malfoy. Liking blokes was one of those things that he knew happened in theory, but had nothing really to relate it too. Dumbledore had always been too… unapproachable about matters of romance. In fact, even though Harry knew Dumbledore identified as gay – he had always seemed to him more like an asexual, celibate adult. The kind of person you just couldn’t picture even wanting sex.

Harry rather liked the friendliness that had started to develop between him and Draco over the last couple of days so he concluded that the right response would be to just apologize. He headed down to the Great Hall and entered just as the food was starting to appear. Malfoy was one of the only people already seated. Harry walked over to him and sat down next to him, which seemed to surprise him.

“I’m sorry, Draco. I should have worked it out. But just so you know… it doesn’t bother me.” Harry said quickly.

Malfoy blushed. “It’s not like I can’t control myself or anything, Potter. And of course I’ve seen blokes naked before… but not without appropriate context… just not… you.” He replied lamely.

“Do you… find me attractive then? Or is that impolite to ask?” Harry inquired, rather sheepishly.

Malfoy started chewing something and looked like he was contemplating the best way to answer. “I suppose you aren’t hideous.” And that was all that he would say.

Harry laughed. “Fair enough. So are you seeing anyone, then?” Harry inquired further. By now more people were starting to gather around the table. Harry noticed Ron and Hermione come in, but they just waved at him and headed towards their normal spot.

“No, Harry. I’ve been too busy with… everything… to even consider it. Now equivalent exchange comes into play. Are you still hooked to the She-Weasley?” Malfoy said with a grin.

Harry hadn’t considered being asked that in return. Oops. “Well, shit. No, Malfoy… we broke up just before I came to Hogwarts.”

Malfoy looked stunned. “Really?” He arched his eyebrows, waiting for Harry to continue.

“And that’s all. She’s still my friend, though.” Harry felt the need to add.

Malfoy took another bite of whatever he was eating and moaned in pleasure. “This is really good.” He managed to say between mouthfuls.

Harry started dishing himself up large helpings of everything in reach. And just like that, they were back to talking as if nothing had ever happened.

Harry’s dreams that night, however, were wonderfully erotic. Harry was back in the Gryffindor
boy’s dorm communal showers. There was too much mist and fog from the hot spray hitting the cold tiles for Harry to see much, but there were several naked individuals dimly silhouetted in the gray light. Harry was palming his erection through his robes. He wasn’t sure why he was the only one dressed. He heard Malfoy’s voice in the gloom, but he couldn’t see him. Harry suddenly wanted to see Draco out of his dressing gown. He started searching each stall for blond hair. What was Malfoy doing in the Gryffindor showers? Why did he want to find Malfoy so badly? What would Malfoy say if Harry found him?

He woke up hearing Malfoy’s voice.

“Are you skipping your shower this morning then, Potter?” Malfoy was asking. Real sunshine was streaming in through the slit in his curtains. He was awake.

“Er…” Harry managed.

“I understand that it is Saturday… but really, I’ve been down to breakfast and back already. At least tell Granger I haven’t killed you.” Malfoy teased.

Harry remembered his dream… and could feel his prick still standing at attention. He didn’t know how to respond. “Just… overslept. Be up in a bit.”

“Fair enough.” Draco left, closing the door behind him.

What the bloody hell was up with that dream?

Harry wanted to jerk-off so badly. He untangled himself from his sheets and made his way to the bathroom. He whipped out his dick and gave in immediately. It only took him a minute or two before ropes of sticky cum splattered the sink and floor. He was not thinking of Malfoy.

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Harry avoided Draco the rest of Saturday and most of Sunday. He had finished reading *Lafford* and had even gone back to the earlier chapters to mark them up like the rest. He wanted to go flying again, but the weather had turned and it was raining buckets.

Thankfully he hadn’t had any more strange dreams, but he couldn’t help thinking about it. He even tried to find something on dream interpretation in the library – but that proved to be vague and unhelpful. Hermione scoffed at him when he mentioned it.

Harry had finally dug out the Marauder’s Map to keep an eye out for Malfoy. Surprisingly, the map had adjusted to the changes at Hogwarts as if it had always been that way. Harry was pleased that the spells used in its creation were holding up – considering none of its creators were still alive. Reminded of this, Harry fell even deeper into a black mood. This is how Hermione found him Sunday night.

“Harry… open this door!” She demanded.

Harry peaked out from behind his curtains. Malfoy was in the library at the moment, according to the map, but he felt like he needed to make sure, just in case. “Coming.”

When Harry opened the door he was greeted by a scowling Hermione, hands on her hips. She walked past him into his room and took up residence on his bed.

“I’ve made a new school year resolution.” Hermione stated matter-of-factly.
“Oh?” Harry shut the door again, resigned to having been found out.

“You bottle so much up, Harry. I’m not going to sit around waiting for you to explode. Sunday nights are going to be just you and me. And talking.” She said sternly.

Harry groaned. “It’s nothing, Hermione.”

“Right. You being chummy with Malfoy and then all of the sudden avoiding everyone for two days is nothing.” Hermione said sarcastically. “What happened?”

Harry had exhausted all his other options, he reasoned. His best friends wouldn’t laugh at him for being… confused? Worried? He wasn’t even sure what he was feeling anymore.

“Ugh… alright.” Harry perched himself on the other side of his bed. “I’m sure you already know… but I guess I was too dumb to realize that… Malfoy was gay.”

“And… what? Did he try snogging you?” Hermione asked.

“No, of course not. I just felt stupid for not knowing. How long have you known?” Harry grabbed one of his pillows and held it like a shield.

“Fourth Year. He was far too interested in the Durmstrang boys in their formals to be dating any girl. Probably about the same time he realized it himself.” Hermione answered. “Why would that matter?”

“It doesn’t really, I guess.” Harry conceded. “I guess I just don’t know how to react. I don’t want to say or do the wrong thing.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “Harry, you do know several gay people already… you know that, right?”

“Besides Dumbledore?” Harry shrugged.

“Seamus is bisexual. You’ve been bunking with him for six years. Charlie is gay – Ron told me just the other day that he and his partner are thinking of tying the knot. Does knowing really make a difference in how you act around them?” Hermione said wisely.

“Really, Seamus? And Charlie? Why am I the last to know these things?” Harry moaned.

“Does it… bother you?” Here Hermione paused, unsure.

“Of course not. I just didn’t know. I just don’t know so much, it seems. I hate feeling like I’m… lagging behind.” Harry said bitterly. “And don’t make this about you and Ron. I stand by what I said before.”

“Harry… you have probably the best reasons for having had your focus elsewhere the past few years. Is that really worth all of this moping?” Hermione gestured at Harry’s slovenly appearance. Being in bed most of the weekend probably made him look a bit pathetic.

“It’s not just that…” Harry began, hating himself for even thinking about bringing it up.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione asked, kindly.

“How do you think Malfoy… knew?” Harry said vaguely.

Hermione seemed to pick up on his meaning, but dutifully answered anyway. “I don’t know for
him specifically, but I can imagine that he figured it out the same way we all do. He asked himself what would make him happy.”

“What a… simple answer. Too bad knowing what would make one happy can sometimes be… complicated.” Harry answered – still trying to keep things hypothetical.

Hermione smiled. “You’re right. And sometimes it takes time… years even, before we work that out. It’s okay to need time, Harry. Everyone is different.”

Harry felt marginally better. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“Now… you and I are going out to the Common Room and playing Exploding Snap with Ron and Neville. They are teaching Goyle the rules… be prepared for bruised knuckles.” Hermione got up and offered her hand to Harry. He took it, wondering why he deserved such amazing friends.
Professor Meek gave Harry a rare smile when he showed her all his notes and explained what parts of the text he enjoyed the most. But applying them to actual lesson plans was difficult. Harry hadn’t ever thought about all the time and effort his teachers had to exhaust behind the scenes for something as simple as starting a new chapter and introducing young minds to a new concept. However, Harry found he enjoyed this new perspective, despite the challenge. Nothing cemented information better than having to explain it thoroughly to someone else.

Harry was cordial to Draco whenever they happened to pass each other coming to or from their shared room – but they were both very busy the next few days. Sometimes Malfoy slid easily into casual conversation with Harry, but other times he still seemed a little bitter and distant as if he wasn’t sure about how things were changing between them. Regardless of how he had dismissed Zabini before, he did start hanging around the other Slytherin at meals and in the Common Room.

This surprised Harry – not because Malfoy was obviously much happier to have at least allowed himself contact with one former friend – but because Harry found he was jealous of Zabini. Occasionally when Hermione would spend hours in academic discussions with her new roommate, Lisa Turpin, Ron would condescend to keep Harry company. But it was obvious that Ron and Hermione were happiest when they were alone together. Neville and Goyle were quickly becoming as thick as thieves, and Anthony had Terry Boot. Harry was glad that only a few days remained before more students would arrive.

Maybe Harry seemed untouchable by some of the other student teachers – due to his new status as the one who defeated Voldemort. He had never reveled in social attention, but he was beginning to feel downright lonely. On a whim, Harry went down one afternoon to visit Hagrid. Thankfully the rain had stopped, but the sunshine refused to come back out from behind thick gray clouds that seemed to linger just above the tree tops of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry knocked on Hagrid’s cabin door. It had been rebuilt along with the Quidditch Pitch – fresh pine wood still fragrant. From inside Harry could hear the low bark of Fang, Hagrid’s loyal dog.

“’ello, Harry!” Hagrid smiled, when he answered the door.

“Afternoon, Hagrid. Hope you don’t mind my coming un-announced. Might be the last free afternoon I’ve got before regular classes start next week.” Harry was sure Hagrid wouldn’t mind.

“That was thoughtful of you. And just in time too. Those Jothpar eggs are ready for me to pick-up in Hogsmeade. You don’t mind helping me get the lot safely back here to their nests, do ye?” Hagrid ushered Harry around back to what looked like a giant chicken coop.

Harry still had no idea what a Jothpar was – but he was relieved to see that they must be pretty small, at least when they first hatched. “Wow, Hagrid. How many are you expecting?”

“I ordered 50 eggs. The lady I bought them from said they can remain dormant for a long time until the conditions are right, but they almost always hatch in the end.” Hagrid turned a wheel-barrow that looked more like a trailer truck back over onto its wheel and started down the path towards the entrance. “Heard about them from Miss Lovegood, actually. She’s got a knack for knowing creatures, that girl has.”

Harry was suddenly concerned that Hagrid might have been duped into buying odd looking rocks. “Er… I was meaning to ask you… what is a Jothpar, anyway?”
“See I always called them Urks when I saw them in the field by my house as a lad. Didn’t know
they weren’t native to Britain. I mentioned them to Miss Lovegood once and she got all excited and
hooked me up with an old acquaintance of her Father’s that farmes ‘um.” Hagrid’s eyes twinkled
with excitement. “They are a bit… unusual. But ideal for teaching kids how to care for something
important. Need to be exposed to magic to hatch, see?”

“But… er… Hagrid. What do they… do… exactly?” Harry’s fears were dampened a bit knowing
that Hagrid had seen them before – but still uncertain how well suited they were for a class project.

“Do? Well… they aren’t pests – McGonagall had me go through all the proper channels for this
lot. Had to submit things in writing and everythin’. They are categorized by the Ministry as…
curiosties.” Hagrid rolled his eyes and seemed to think that this was an adequate enough answer.
They had reached the gate, which Hagrid unlocked.

Harry wanted to press Hagrid further, but knowing that McGonagall had gotten involved put his
fears to rest. At least whatever they were on their way to get wasn’t likely to be too dangerous.
Hagrid asked about Harry’s preparations for the new term as a student teacher, which lead into a
discussion about Professor Meek, which reminded Harry of the Carrion Birds.

By now they were entering Hogsmeade, so Harry had to whisper. “Any word on those…
interesting new birds she found for you?” Harry asked coyly.

Hagrid scowled. “McGonagall has taken care of all that. Don’t you worry about it, Harry.” This he
said rather loudly, and some of the people on the street stopped and stared at them.

Harry thought that seeing Hagrid out and about – even with his massive wheel-barrow – must have
been a common enough site at Hogsmeade. There didn’t seem to be any reason for those they
passed by to give them strange glances or whisper so excitedly to one another. The further they
went into town the worse it got. Harry started feeling uncomfortable. A smartly dressed wizard
wearing an emerald green suit walked up to them, tipped his hat, and bowed. At this Harry began to
understand. They were all looking at him.

“Er… not much further, I hope. Hagrid?” Harry looked up at his tall, bushy companion.

Hagrid made an effort to clear his throat loudly. It startled some of the people who had stopped to
look at Harry. “It’s just up there. The blue door, see?” Hagrid indicated a cottage just a little further
down the road with the sign out front of an owl in flight holding a small square package in its
claws.

At least one man who was staring at them had procured a camera from somewhere and was
unashamedly snapping pictures. Hagrid opened the little blue door and held it open for Harry. It
was a relief to be out of sight again. He wished he had his Invisibility Cloak.

Inside there was a positively ancient old witch behind a counter sorting letters. Other than that,
every available surface was occupied by an owl. There were every color and size of owl on
bookcases, chairs, and lamps. A huge fireplace at the other end of the room stood empty, looking
far too clean.

“Ah… Hagrid! You can finally sign for your order so I can release all these bloody birds.” The
witch said in exaggerated relief. “Couldn’t you have used the Floo? Far less messy.”

“Sorry, Adonica, precious cargo – don’t want to expose them to transport magic.” Hagrid began,
but quickly amended when she scowled fiercely at him. “Not that I don’t trust you to be careful…
it’s just that exposure to magic is what starts them hatching, see?”
Adonica’s eyebrows rose slowly, considering this. “Oh, alright. Just warn me next time so I’ll have room for 25 bloody owls in one morning.” She withdrew a slip of paper from her stack and offered it up to Hagrid along with a quill.

Hagrid took the paper, quickly scrawled on it, and handed it back.

“Even for you, getting all these packages up to Hogwarts in one go would be tricky. Unless the boy you brought is stronger than he looks.” Adonica appraised Harry with a sideways look.

“Don’t worry about that. I left my wagon just outside. Although I’m sure… Harry, could manage more than a few.” Hagrid emphasized Harry’s name, much to his dismay.

“Oh… this is the Potter kid, eh? You don’t look like much, boy. Still… thank you for what you’ve done for us.” Adonica’s gratitude seemed genuine, but her gruff exterior held.

“Er… you’re welcome, mam.” Harry said, a bit unsure how best to reply.

The witch marched to the front door and opened it. “All of the owls from Primley… SHOO!” She bellowed. There were several squawks and screeches but most of the birds just ruffled up their feathers and soared gracefully out the open door, leaving only a handful of birds on perches behind the counter.

Harry could now see a rough pile of brick-like boxes in front of the counter. Hagrid bent down to retrieve one. He opened it carefully, but did so bending down so that Harry could glimpse the contents. Two pale gray eggs were nestled securely in beds of dry grass – they were rough in texture and not uniform in shape. Harry would have mistaken them for common rocks and ignored them except for the unusual sheen that made them look wet.

Hagrid closed the box again and handed it to Harry. The eggs were also unusually heavy for their size. Hagrid handed three more boxes to Harry, which turned out to be his limit. “Ough… these are rather heavy, Hagrid. I’ll put these in your wheel-barrow, okay?” Harry started for the door.

“Actually…” Adonica called out suddenly. “I think it would be best if you Apparate back to the gate. I can help Hagrid load these up. He’ll meet you there in a bit.”

Harry was confused at first. He set the boxes down carefully and looked through the window. A crowd was growing outside. Word had got out somehow that Harry was in Hogsmeade. “Blast. Er… but will you be alright if we just… leave them there?” Harry asked Adonica.

“I can scare them off easier than that flock of owls. Just don’t leave the castle unprepared next time, eh?” Adonica smiled crookedly back at him.

Hagrid had finally noticed the crowd as well. “Oh… I… er, sorry Harry. She’s… probably right. I won’t be but a few minutes.”

Harry sighed heavily. “Alright then. It was a pleasure to meet you, Adonica. Goodbye.” And with that Harry Apparated back to the Hogwarts Gate.

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As much as Harry appreciated Hermione’s repeated attempts to keep him feeling included, he could sense his black mood returning with a vengeance. Not even a casual trip to Hogsmeade was safe. Was he destined to travel between safe house to safe house for the rest of his life? It was one thing to be lonely by chance… and another thing entirely to be lonely because you were some kind of prisoner.
Malfoy was gone again. He had been missing at lunch too, Harry remembered. He wondered if he could ask where Draco always disappeared to – or if Malfoy would think he was being nosy. Harry had helped Hagrid unload the wheel-barrow back at his cabin and then parted ways. Neither of them mentioned that crowd outside Adonica’s shop. Afterwards Harry declined staying for tea and found himself laying in his bed – safe behind soft gray curtains yet again.

Harry checked the Map – but Malfoy wasn’t in the castle. Hermione was still talking with Professor Vector and Ron was outside in the hall, obviously waiting for her to finish. Harry’s gut flopped unpleasingly. As much as he did feel happy for Hermione and Ron getting together, he did feel some resentment at being left out. Not that he would ever say anything out loud about it, of course.

The bedroom door clicked open and someone entered. Several things were unceremoniously dropped on Malfoy’s bed. Harry peeked through his curtains. Draco had abandoned several parcels that looked like books and things for school on his bed and was fiddling with the ties of his cloak. Molly had picked up everything for him and Ron from Diagon Alley a few days before they left the Burrow – Malfoy obviously hadn’t been able to go until today.

Harry felt a little guilty just watching Malfoy from the smallest slit between his curtains, instead of announcing his presence or welcoming Draco back – but something in Malfoy’s face stopped him. He looked… drained. As if a simple shopping trip had turned into a battle with a troll. Draco finally undid whatever knot had been made of his cloak fastenings and threw it onto the pile on his bed in contempt.

Harry rather liked how expressive Malfoy was. Draco wiggled out of his robe and kicked his shoes off as if they had offended him. He ripped his tie off as if it had been strangling him, letting it fall on the floor.

Suddenly Harry realized he was being rather rude, spying on Malfoy as he was undressing – possibly for a shower after a long day. His cheeks burned but he couldn’t seem to make himself look away either. Malfoy undid his cuffs and untucked his shirt with a flourish. Draco paused in his dramatic display long enough to undo all his shirt buttons, leaving his bare, white chest open to the air. Harry held his breath. But instead of removing the offending garment, Malfoy scooped up fresh clothes and retreated to the bathroom.

Draco had not caught Harry, but he still felt guilty. Certainly it wasn’t normal to secretly admire one’s roommate. Had he ever had such a knot of anxiety catch in his chest before? The butterflies he had experienced with Ginny seemed insignificant now. His cock was hard and catching rather uncomfortably in his trousers, he realized. His cheeks still burned as he recalled the exact color and shape of Draco’s exposed chest.

So what did it mean? Was he Bi? Gay? Or just outrageously horny? Now that Malfoy had become synonymous with being gay in Harry’s mind, he was having trouble separating the two. Seeing Malfoy partially undressed probably just reminded him of sex, Harry reasoned. But his logic seemed hollow. He wanted… something. What did he want?

Harry was right about one thing – nudity wasn’t such a big deal. It was the tease or lure of partial exposure that riled up the imagination and should be deemed sinfully erotic. Discovering that he really did have these kinds of feelings for Malfoy was a surprise. He hadn’t let himself really consider this fantasy before… it had never presented itself to him so fully.

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Finally, it was the last night before the rest of the students would arrive. Headmistress McGonagall had arranged another, smaller feast for all of them at their shared table before being separated
again. Harry hadn’t seen much of her after the first week – probably because she had been dealing
with what the Carrows had left behind. Thankfully, the rest of the sweeps of the castle had been
completed and nothing else had been discovered except for a few weakened rooftops and confused
staircases.

“As this is the last night there will be so few of us present, I thought it would be prudent to mention
the progress that has occurred here at Hogwarts with your help – and remind everyone how
important it is to help make the students feel safe upon their arrival tomorrow night. The sweeps of
the castle and grounds did uncover some surprising and unsavory reminders of the past – which I
can now say, with assurance, have been eliminated.” McGonagall said fervently. “We are grateful
for your help in restoring Hogwarts that much closer to its former glory.”

“I am also very pleased at the progress you have all made at coming together as a team – setting
aside old divisions and petty differences. I ask that you continue to set an example for the younger
students. And finally, I have one more request.” McGonagall paused. “As you know, I brought all
of you back here not only so that you can complete your education – but also so that the hired
faculty might have the time they need to reach out to those students who might need extra support
after all that has happened.” She paused again, making sure her words were clear. “This help is
available to anyone. Refer students to members of staff should any need arise. Thank you.” And
with that, she slowly took her seat.

“I’m glad she’s so keen on us getting back to things being good again…but could she have
sounded less…I don’t know, motherly about it?” Ron asked as he piled his plate up with food.

Harry sighed. “She’s definitely got a different style than Dumbledore.”

“She’s not wrong to be so…concerned about things though.” Hermione defended. “I’m sure she
protected everyone she could under the Carrows, but couldn’t openly rebel without removing
herself as their protector. And after everything…I doubt enrollment is exactly bouncing back so
quickly.”

“Well, out of our class, only twelve of us came back.” Neville offered. “Our group of First Years
might be rather…small.”

Harry felt rather sick with guilt thinking about it. Hogwarts had been one of the safest places in the
wizarding world up until last year when he had brought Voldemort’s army to their doorstep. Harry
wouldn’t blame parents for being unsure about their child’s wellbeing. His appetite for dinner had
evaporated. “I suppose so.”

Instead of eating what he had started putting on his plate, Harry looked for Malfoy. As terrible as
he felt, he could imagine that Draco was also conflicted with what to expect the next day. He
spotted him sitting with Zabini and Professor Slughorn. Malfoy looked smart – tie knotted
perfectly, hair expertly swept to the side – but was also not partaking much of the feast.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione whispered in his ear. Harry jumped.

“Er… nothing. I’m just…not that hungry.” Harry tried.

Hermione pursed her lips, obviously not buying it.

Harry made an effort to stick a spoonful of food in his mouth and chew – ignoring her. She didn’t
let up.

“I think I’d rather like to bring my dessert up to the Common Room. You should come with me,
Harry.” Hermione suggested.

““The feast just started, Hermione.” Harry protested.

““Does that mean you’re willing to talk here among all our friends?” Hermione countered, although thankfully, still in a whisper.

““Fine. We have tomorrow off. After Breakfast. Tomorrow.”” Harry gave in.

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Harry left the feast later that night stressing over what he was going to tell Hermione the following day. He hadn’t really come to any conclusion or chosen a course of action. She had said he had time… but did he really? Wasn’t moving forward towards… something, better than this uncomfortable middle ground?

Malfoy followed Harry into their room. Draco wordlessly started to gather up his pajamas and dressing gown for his evening shower routine.

““Draco…?”” Harry began, but he really wasn’t sure what he wanted to ask.

Malfoy stopped gathering his stuff and looked expectantly at Harry.

“I just… I wanted to ask. Are we friends now?” Harry managed after a second.

Draco squinted back at Harry, almost scowling, but not quite. “I suppose we are… getting there.”

This was a better response than Harry had hoped. “Good.” Harry sighed in relief. “Tell me if I ever… cross the line, okay?”

““…okay.”” Draco replied, obviously confused.

“I just mean… being friends is… I rather like this.” Harry wasn’t sure how to say what he meant without revealing more than he wanted.

““Harry, what are you getting at?”” Draco asked, sitting on his bed.

““Would you tell me where it is you go all the time?”” Harry tried something different.

““What?”” Draco was starting to look concerned.

““Draco… friends tell each other things. I just want to let you know… if you want to ask anything… equivalent exchange, right?”” Harry finished lamely.

““Did McGonagall put you up to this?”” Draco was starting to look angry.

““No! No, nothing like that. Draco… I just meant…”” Harry growled in frustration and sat on his own bed. “I feel awful. Things aren’t working out the way they are supposed to. I thought that after Voldemort… that after everything, things would just go back to normal. But they aren’t!”

Harry was starting to shout. “I just feel sort of stuck… and guilty… and alone… and bloody confused! I know things are hard for you too! And you don’t have to tell me things if you don’t want to… but I really need someone that understands!” Harry felt rather weak and pathetic for having admitted so much all at once, his eyes growing hot with unshed tears.

Draco looked stunned for a moment. Harry thought Malfoy would laugh at him, his stomach
clenching, preparing for a fight.

But Draco didn’t laugh. Instead he said in a soft, even voice. “My mother and I buried my father. We were subjected to interrogations at the Ministry. Sometimes I go and visit my mother in our old empty house. Last time I went to Diagon Alley to pick up stuff for school. Half of the shops wouldn’t let me in. People said… horrible things.” Here he stopped, his voice cracked.

Harry wasn’t sure what possessed him, but he got up off his bed and walked over to Draco and motioned that Draco stand up too. Draco reluctantly stood up, trying not to look at Harry’s face. Harry grabbed Malfoy’s arms and laid his forehead on the other boy’s shoulder. It was an awkward embrace. Not really a hug – but still comforting.

“Draco… I’m so… sorry… for what has happened to you and your mother.” Harry said earnestly. Malfoy had started to cry. It was easier when neither of them were looking at the other.

“Thank you.” Malfoy croaked.

“I’m sorry… that everything is still so screwed-up. I want to fix it… but…” Harry tried.

“Typical Potter. I knew you had a hero complex.” Malfoy said in jest, sniffling.

Harry looked up from Draco’s shoulder. “I do not.” He protested weakly. They disengaged and looked away from each other – both of them smiling.
Together at Last?

Hermione was at the breakfast table just finishing up her meal, without Ron for once, when Harry got to the Great Hall the next morning. She smiled impishly at Harry when he sat down and finished her pumpkin juice in silence.

“Okay, ‘Mione. Just let me eat in peace and then I’m all yours.” Harry relented.

“Deal.” Hermione said, as she set her empty glass down – perhaps a little harder than necessary. “You know… it’s unfortunate that our rooms aren’t more sound proof.”

Harry groaned. “What did you guys hear?”

“Not much. Just raised voices.” Hermione said truthfully. “Glad to see you aren’t any worse for wear.”

Harry stabbed a sausage with his fork and chewed on the end of it miserably. “Just clearing the air. Malfoy and I are… friends… sort of. Not unlike your fights with Ron.”

Hermione’s eyes squinted back at him, obviously considering the hidden meaning behind Harry’s words. He hadn’t meant anything by it… but perhaps it was okay to indirectly tell her about his… feelings.

“The sun is finally out this morning. Why don’t we take a walk around the grounds once you are done eating. I’ll be waiting for you in the Entrance Hall.” Hermione all but commanded, rising up from the table.

“Fine.” Harry managed to say between mouthfuls.

Harry was still not sure how much he wanted to reveal to Hermione, especially when he was only just coming to terms with it himself. Ginny would be returning to Hogwarts that evening. He realized he hadn’t been thinking about her at all the past few days. Was she over Harry? Would they be friends again, or would she avoid him?

And on top of that, the next day would be their first day back as students. He’d have classes to worry about again – homework to do. Part of him relished the idea of being busy, at having other things to consume his thoughts, so that he wouldn’t replay the same things in his mind over and over again. But he also knew that added distractions might prolong whatever realization he had been coming to.

Harry finished his meal and slowly made his way to the Entrance Hall. Hermione was waiting for him on the steps, looking thoughtful.

“Good – there you are, Harry.” Hermione got up and dusted herself off.

“Alright Hermione… you lead.” Harry meant more than just for their walk.

Hermione just nodded and headed out the door into the sunshine. Harry followed. They didn’t talk for a few minutes – not until they were far enough away that they would be able to talk normally without the chance of anyone overhearing. Hermione slowed her pace until she was even with Harry, bumping elbows.

“Harry… the last thing I want to do is ask more than you are ready to share. But I can tell
“I don’t know where to start, ‘Mione. Ask me a question.” Harry parried.

“Okay.” Hermione paused for a moment to think. “You seem… eager to befriend Malfoy. Have you forgiven him for… everything?”

Harry thought that was a strange question to start with – but he tried to formulate an honest answer. “I think… well… Draco is an idiot at times… but all of what happened before… it wasn’t all his fault.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that he still did some pretty horrible things, Harry. I know we were just kids… but you have to admit he was rather nasty.” At this Hermione linked her arm with Harry’s.

“Yes… he was. But have you really looked at him since the war? He’s lost so much of his arrogance… and he sometimes looks downright sickly. It… changed him, Hermione.” Harry remembered something. “I offered to give him his old wand, but he didn’t want it back. He said it wouldn’t suit him anymore.”

Hermione pondered this for a moment. “I admit that he might have changed… but does that mean you forgive him? To be honest, I’m not sure if I can – at least not right away.”

Harry recalled saying almost the exact same thing to Neville only a few days earlier. Had so much changed since then? “Forgive him for what, Hermione? For having a prick for a father who filled his head full of nonsense? For taking up the Dark Mark out of some sick feelings of obligation and fear? He didn’t kill anyone, Hermione. He couldn’t – when it came down to it. He didn’t want to.” Harry felt certain this was true.

“Okay, next question.” Hermione switched gears. “Have you made any progress on understanding what would make you happy?”

Harry groaned. “I honestly don’t know, Hermione. I’ve… thought a lot about it. At least enough to know that I’m not entirely… straight.” Harry blushed.

“Well that’s more progress than I had hoped for. I have a confession to make, Harry. Ginny… she could tell that you didn’t want her that way. She told me.” Hermione offered gently.

Harry groaned again. “Why does everyone else figure these things out before I do?”

“Harry… we are your friends. We care about you. Let us help you, okay?” Hermione pleaded. “And it isn’t like I hadn’t thought you might… not be straight before.”

“When?” Harry asked.

“Your obsession with Malfoy during Sixth Year. Seriously, Harry, if you weren’t fixated on Snape’s old book, you were tracking Malfoy’s every move on the Map. It was bordering on… unhealthy.” Hermione finished lamely.

“But you have to admit I was right.” Harry countered.

“Yes, Harry. Does this mean you are willing to admit you might want Malfoy as… more than a friend?” Hermione cleverly detoured the conversation into much more dangerous waters.

“Er… ‘Mione… I don’t… know.” Harry started. “Wanting something isn’t the same as… looking
“You’re right. So hypothetically, if you did want Malfoy in that way… you wouldn’t pursue things because…?” Hermione left the question open.

Harry thought about this for a moment. If he was willing to forgive Draco for what happened in the past, and he knew Draco was gay, what reason did he have for not… moving forward? “I don’t think he wants that. He probably hates me – at least in some way. Isn’t friendship enough?”

“I don’t know. Do you want that to be all there is between you?” Hermione asked.

Harry didn’t answer.

“Harry… I have another confession to make. You might not have noticed, but I have. Malfoy has been just as obsessed with you since First Year. I don’t know exactly what he feels for you… but I don’t think he hates you.” Hermione offered.

“Why not? He has every right to hate me.” Harry spat back.

“Is this what is eating at you, Harry? Are you honestly sorry for defeating Voldemort?” Hermione wheedled.

Harry threw his arms up in the air. “Of course not! Things are just still so messed-up. People died… things are broken… things are… different. We left for a year, Hermione, and Hogwarts went to shit! And then I brought Voldemort’s army right to the front door.” Harry sat down hard on the grass. “I just don’t know how to help put things right. For things to go back to normal.”

Hermione sat beside him. She didn’t speak for a while.

“Oh, Harry. As usual, you put too much on your own shoulders. All of the bad things that Voldemort did are **not** your fault. The lingering consequences of his actions does not make your victory against him any less significant. And don’t forget you had help then – and you have help now.” Her words were gentle. “And what is this “normal” you keep hoping for, anyway?”

Harry had to think about that. Perhaps it wasn’t so much what he had before but rather some ideal – like Neville had said, an **illusion** – of what he wanted things to be like. “I honestly don’t know. But some days… when we were hunting Horcruxes… it was all I could think about to keep going. Just one more puzzle to solve and then we could go back home. I could be with Ginny again… I’d bunk with Ron at the Burrow… we wouldn’t have anything to be scared of anymore. The three of us could Apparate somewhere, just for fun – have Summer Holidays just like everyone else.”

“And why can’t we?” Hermione asked. “What is holding us back?”

Harry pulled angrily at the grass, tearing out clumps. “I don’t know!” He was frustrated and slightly upset with Hermione for pressing the issue.

“It’s okay, Harry. Just think about it, alright?” Hermione didn’t get up though – so she wasn’t done asking questions. “You know… you and Malfoy do seem like a good match. When you aren’t trying to kill each other, that is.” Harry wasn’t sure if she was teasing.

“Does Ron… know?” Harry asked.

“Nope. You get to tell him all of this yourself, Harry.” Hermione’s impish smile had returned.

Harry buried his head in his hands. He had almost been lead out of the closet by Hermione – he
couldn’t imagine actually having to explain to his best friend that he fancied blokes. “Can we…
tell him together? Not right away… but later?”

Hermione nodded.

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Harry went flying after lunch. It was wonderful to be back in the sky to mull his conversation with
Hermione over in peace. It was so quiet high above the trees – far enough away so that he couldn’t
even hear the birds. For the first time in ages he wondered what his Animagus form might be,
should he pursue it. Something with wings, obviously.

Harry was willing to accept that he hadn’t been sexually attracted to Ginny. But had he ever been
attracted to women? His crush on Cho seemed rather juvenile, now. The Vela didn’t count… they
were magical. Besides, they were eerie in their seemingly flawless appearance. Harry felt attracted
to Draco despite his imperfections. Had he ever been attracted to any other men?

The attention he received from Cedric and Victor Krum in Fourth Year had been… flattering.
Oliver Wood stuck out to him as being rather striking. He was even taken aback by how much
Neville had matured – looking rather handsome now compared to the plump, frightened little boy
he remembered. But had he been attracted to them?

No, Harry reasoned, what he felt for Malfoy was stronger than anything he had felt before. The
glimpse of skin he had seen tormented him. He allowed himself to fantasize – dangling high up in
the sky all alone. In his mind Harry would demand Draco take off his clothes properly instead of
teasing him. Malfoy probably wouldn’t like that though – too exposed. Harry substituted Draco
wearing only his dressing gown, with no silk pajamas underneath. How the thin fabric might cling
differently to Malfoy’s slim frame. He could tell if Malfoy was excited simply by glancing down…
checking for the tale tell sign of a hard on. Would Malfoy want him back?

That was the question after all – was Harry going to try and find out? What if Draco really did still
hate him? What if he was rejected? Harry would be more than embarrassed… would the risk be
worth it? If Draco said yes… what then? Would Malfoy let him kiss him? He wondered what it
would feel like to kiss a boy. Would he like it? He had enjoyed kissing Ginny.

Riding a broom was becoming uncomfortable. Harry wasn’t sure he was ready to approach Draco
about things anyway. But another thought suddenly struck him. Draco said he was single… what if
he found someone else? What if Harry never got a chance? Harry growled in frustration at the
flood of emotions he had endured that day already – jealousy was not one he wanted to add to the
mix.

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Harry had a hot shower after his flight and before the Start of Term Feast. If he also enjoyed a nice
wank while under the water, no one need know. He had remembered his clothes as well, so he
didn’t disturb Malfoy as he exited the bathroom. Draco was reading a rather thick book on potion
making on his bed – seemingly oblivious to Harry’s properly dressed form.

“Say… Draco?” Harry asked carefully.

“Harry?” Draco asked in return, not looking up from his book.

“I feel rather stupid asking, but did you know Seamus is Bi? I only found out because Hermione
told me a few days ago.” Harry thought a few questions wouldn’t hurt.
“Everyone knows that. He would flirt with anything.” Draco still didn’t look up.

“Like I said… caught me by surprise.” Harry continued. “I guess I’m pretty… dense… when it comes to realizing people’s preferences.”

“Obviously.” Malfoy did give Harry a bit of a glare at this, but returned his gaze to his textbook.

“It… got me thinking. How can people tell?” Harry inquired earnestly.

Draco sighed and closed his book. “What do you mean, Potter? Are you asking how people can tell if someone is queer or how someone queer can tell that they are?”

“Er… both, I guess.” Harry offered lamely.

“Well, generally just having eyes does the trick – but I suppose that doesn’t work in your case.” Malfoy replied vaguely. Harry wasn’t sure which if the two questions Malfoy was answering.

“Er… I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific, Draco. What do you mean… in my case?” Harry felt genuine fear. Was he somehow projecting his interest in Malfoy to others?

“Relax. I just meant you pick up on things – especially if you are around them a lot. That and Seamus dared Zabini to snog him once. They put on quite a show… although now that I think on it, this was during one of those times you were in the Hospital Wing.” Malfoy said blandly.

Harry’s stomach did another summersault. This conversation was starting to become painful. “So Zabini… is he gay too, then?” Harry asked.

Malfoy laughed. “No way… but that doesn’t mean he didn’t enjoy winning the Galleon Seamus was offering.”

Harry’s stomach relaxed. “…I see.”

“Why the sudden interest? You said before that it didn’t bother you.” Malfoy looked suspicious.

“Oh… it doesn’t. Just… curious, I guess.” Harry quickly covered his mouth – fully aware of his word’s double meaning.

Malfoy’s eyebrows arched up – he had picked up on Harry’s meaning too. “Really, Potter?”

Harry hadn’t meant to let anything slip. He contemplated lying to Malfoy, but couldn’t seem to make his mouth protest. “Er… well… I did say I was bad at realizing people’s preferences.”

“And… how long has this been a problem?” Malfoy asked carefully.

“Not long.” Harry replied honestly.

“This doesn’t mean I have to endure you drooling over the other Weasley, now does it?” Draco said, half joking – but he sobered up to ask, “Please tell me you aren’t pining for him now that he’s snogging Granger?”

Harry laughed. “Ron? No way.”

Malfoy looked unconvinced.

“Oh, please! He’s as much my best friend as Hermione – and she’s like my sister. No… but there is someone…” Harry stopped mid-sentence, not wanting to reveal any more just yet.
“Who is it then? Seamus? I heard he was part-owner of some pub back in Ireland, now.” Draco pressed. “Equivalent exchange – I get to ask a question back, remember?”

This was not how Harry had imagined telling Draco about his feelings. Luckily, just at that moment Harry was spared from answering by a knock at the door.

“Are you coming down to the feast or not, Harry! Everyone is already left.” Ron said loudly from the hallway.

Harry sighed in relief and bolted.

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The Great Hall was decorated lavishly in the four house colors and all of the tables were set up again. Harry joined Ron, Hermione, and Neville at the Gryffindor table. The regular students hadn’t arrived yet, but it wouldn’t be a long wait. The teachers and members of staff were back at their own table above everyone, talking amongst themselves.

Malfoy trudged in a few minutes later, a tad sulkily, and joined Goyle and Zabini at the Slytherin table. But for all the familiarity of the house division, Harry didn’t care for it. Now that all of the Eight Year students were wearing black, white, and gray – it seemed silly to revert back to their old camps. Except that he was determined to avoid Malfoy until he forgot that Harry owed him an answer.

The front doors must have opened, because there was a sudden gush of chatter near the entrance and students fresh off the Hogwarts Express filed in to take their seats. Ginny and Luna were among them, although Harry didn’t make eye contact with either. Compared to past years, the crowd did seem smaller than usual.

“Welcome, students!” Headmistress McGonagall’s magically enhanced voice echoed throughout the Hall. “It is wonderful to see all of you back for another term. In a few moments, Professor Hagrid will be bringing in the First Year students to be sorted. Afterwards, I have a few announcements to make and then the feast can begin. Thank you.” The stragglers that had remained standing in groups had taken their seats, but the buzz of conversation continued. The Headmistress produced the sorting hat and placed it on a stool, like always.

Harry admitted it was rather exciting – especially since he so rarely was able to attend the beginning of the Start of Term Feast. Often coming in late or not at all over the years. This was also going to be Harry’s first look at some of his students. Ron and Hermione were quiet and attentive too – probably just as anxious.

Waiting for Hagrid to appear was torturous. But finally he emerged, engulfing the entrance, and behind him were a handful of tiny, frightened looking First Years. Harry only counted thirteen at first, but noticed one more, the smallest of the lot, clinging tightly to one of their friends. He hoped they weren’t sorted into different houses.

“Where we _ever_ that small?” Ron whispered.

“They look terrified – poor things.” Hermione responded.

Headmistress McGonagall then stood and announced how the sorting would play out. The hat sang a brief, cheerful song describing the four houses. It was Hagrid who read their names off a list this time. As each child was called they took a turn sitting on the stool – the hat far too big for all of their heads, sometimes covering their eyes.
Out of fourteen, only two were sorted into Slytherin – the pair of friends Harry had noticed earlier. That left five in Hufflepuff, three in Ravenclaw, and four in Gryffindor. All of the new Gryffindors were girls – Harry clapped loudly for each new member of his old house. He felt bad for the only Ravenclaw boy who would likely be forced to bunk alone. So few new students…

“Welcome to Hogwarts, First Years! We are delighted to have each and every one of you in our midst. The prefects of each house will escort you to your Dormitory Common Rooms and show you where you will be staying for the duration of your education once the feast is over.” McGonagall announced.

She continued by introducing the new members of staff, described the newly appointed student teaching position - but thankfully didn't introduce the Eighth Year students, much to Harry's relief - and stressed the importance of unity as they rebuilt from what she dubbed as “the trials of the past.” Having seen the First Years sorted, Harry was getting rather hungry and tuned out most of McGonagall’s speech. Besides they had heard a shorter version of it already upon their arrival two weeks prior. At last she concluded with a small bow and the food appeared from the kitchens below.

“Finally… I’m starved.” Ron declared – digging right in.

Harry was too busy watching the looks of astonishment and awe on the First Year Gryffindor’s faces to respond. It brought back so many memories. How many of these students came from Muggle homes? Would they be able to navigate the castle without stopping to stare at the moving portraits or falling into a trick step, waiting helplessly for rescue? It was amazing how much Harry had started taking for granted about the wizarding world.

“Harry, aren’t you going to eat?” Hermione asked. Harry realized he had been too busy reminiscing to start filling his plate.

“Er… yes, of course.” Harry’s appetite returned with a wave of hunger upon seeing the delicious spread laid out before him. There were even Treacle Tarts. He grabbed two slices.

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With all the excitement, Harry had had almost forgotten his escape from Malfoy earlier. After the feast, Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched the prefects take charge of the First Years – leading them off to their dormitories. It was strange to not follow along up the stairs to Gryffindor tower.

Malfoy was already in the shower when Harry finally made it back to his room. All the better, he thought, quickly changing into his night clothes and shutting himself in behind his curtains. He wondered how long he would have to avoid Draco before their conversation earlier would be forgotten.

Harry was just starting to doze off when his curtains were pulled aside, revealing a stern looking Draco with damp hair – expertly wrapped in his pajamas and dressing gown. “Spill, Potter. I’m not letting you get away that easy.”

Harry groaned. What was he going to say? He scooted over and motioned for Malfoy to sit on his bed. Draco looked unsure for a moment, but reluctantly sat on the edge with his feet still firmly on the floor.

“Draco… what would you do if you liked someone?” Harry began.

“That depends. And what I would do isn’t the question here.” Malfoy replied obstinately.
“Throw me a bone here, Draco. I’ve never had… feelings for a bloke before.” Harry whined.

“Fine. I would first have to know if they were even interested. Crushing on a straight guy is… unpleasant.” Draco said the last word with venom.

“Theoretically interested, or with some promise that your feelings might be returned?” Harry asked.

“You’re stalling.” Draco huffed, but he answered anyway. “I don’t think it works any different than asking a girl out. Someone has to make the first move. Rejection is always a possibility.”

Harry was stalling, but he was grateful for Draco’s candid response in any case. “You can imagine then that I’m… nervous. Having only just come to terms with what I want – any action forward still seems like… a huge leap.”

“What’s happened to all that Gryffindor bravery, Harry?” Malfoy teased.

Harry knew it was said in jest, but it also stung a little. Why was he so afraid? Either Draco would be amenable to the possibility of being with Harry – or he wouldn’t. “Would the… depth of feeling matter? This doesn’t feel like some silly crush. It has probably been building for ages – under the surface. I was just too… distracted to see it for what it was until now.”

Draco looked thoughtful. “I get it, Harry. You don’t have to tell me.” He got up from Harry’s bed and retreated across the room.

Harry got out of bed and followed him. “No… I want to tell you, Draco.” Malfoy stood frozen, with his back to Harry. Neither of them spoke for a few, heavy seconds – the silence ominous.

Harry gripped Malfoy’s arms the same way he had in their awkward embrace just the other day, only that time face-to-face. He leaned in, enjoying the scent of Malfoy’s shampoo. Harry’s heart was beating a thousand times a second. He placed his forehead on Draco’s shoulder and whispered… “It’s you.”

Draco didn’t move or respond. His arms were still tense under Harry’s hands. Harry didn’t know what to do next. Was he about to be rejected? Would Malfoy try to let him down easy?

“Are you… serious?” Draco asked, finally. His voice also a whisper. It was an honest question, holding no bitterness or scorn.

“Yes.” Harry replied, his chest filling with burning hope.

At this Draco did turn around slowly, so they could look into each other’s eyes. Draco looked frightened. Harry wondered why. “Harry… are you sure… you want… me?” Malfoy’s voice had become so small and timid, Harry felt the urge to embrace him properly.

So he did. Harry wrapped his arms around Draco’s neck and hung on tight. “Yes, Draco.” Harry said again. “Please tell me I’ve got a chance.”

Draco began to cry. Harry didn’t mind so much, because Draco was hugging him back. It was indescribably good to feel wanted in return – even just this much. Harry could almost feel the broken pieces inside of himself starting to knit back together.

“Yes… of course. Of course, Harry. I… I’ve wanted you too.” Draco managed to splutter, a little broken from crying. Harry’s heart leapt at the thought.

“Really? How long?” Harry asked, surprised.
Draco pulled away from their embrace enough so that they were looking eye-to-eye again. He just smiled and shook his head. A question for another time then.

“Would it… Can I kiss you, then?” Harry asked, voice shaking a bit, betraying his nerves.

This time there was no response other than Draco leaning in to kiss him. The kiss was gentle. It was both similar to other kisses he had experienced and nothing like them at the same time. The intimacy made Harry’s loins hot and alive. The connection points between them seemed charged, like a magnet binding them together. Harry closed his eyes and pressed closer to Draco… not wanting it to end.

Eventually Draco did pull away, much to Harry’s disappointment. But seeing Draco’s lips red and swollen made him feel rather accomplished. Draco wasn’t crying anymore, but the tear tracks remained visible on his cheeks. Harry brought both his hands up to brush them away. They just stood there smiling drunkenly at each other for a few more seconds.

“Does this mean I get to keep you?” Harry asked, teasing.

“Harry!” Malfoy pushed Harry’s hands away from his face, but he couldn’t keep the happiness from his voice. “Yes… I suppose. So long as I can keep you, too.”

“Of course.” Harry answered.
Happiness

Getting to sleep that night was nearly impossible. After the emotional display he had put on, Draco collected himself and insisted they get some sleep for their first day of classes. Neither of them were quite brave enough to continue that evening anyway. The world seemed to have shifted – and it would be some time before everything was set right again.

When Harry awoke groggily from a fitful sleep the next morning for his turn in the shower, Malfoy was already gone. It made their shared kiss seem more like a dream. Harry couldn’t help smiling at the memory, but could also feel a tight coiling in his gut that made him consider skipping breakfast. Harry hadn’t had any time to really think things through. Would they be open about being… together? Did Draco know that Harry hadn’t even officially come out to anyone yet?

Harry wanted to kiss Draco again and have proper talks about everything and nothing – get to know one another again with less barriers this time. He had some vague idea about his class schedule and remembered to pack his books, but it was an afterthought. Scenes of Draco’s watery gray eyes, damp blond hair, and red, abused lips swam through his head instead.

It seemed obvious now that he had never been so preoccupied with anyone before – and certainly not with Ginny. He still loved Ginny… but his feelings were so different towards her. Harry looked over at Draco’s bed again and again, imagining his roommate sleeping peacefully there behind closed curtains – only partially clothed – pale, gleaming flesh peeking out from between the sheets.

“Harry! Come on, you’ve missed breakfast. I’ve saved you some toast and fruit which I will give to Ron if you don’t come out!” Hermione bellowed from just outside the door.

The sudden yell startled Harry, jolting him back into reality. “C’ming, ‘Mione. Jeez.” He unlatched the door and glared at both his best friends. He really was grateful for the toast though.

“What are you holing up in there for, anyway?” Ron inquired, eyes narrowing. “Malfoy jinx you?”

Harry rolled his eyes. He really would have to have a talk with Ron about everything… and soon. In a way he did feel a bit bewitched, but he wasn’t quite ready to admit it. “Of course not. Just didn’t sleep well.” And this was the truth – although only a part of it.

The routine of classwork was strangely comforting. Thankfully, Harry wasn’t scheduled to teach until the end of the week, so he still had plenty of time to prepare for his first lesson. He drifted through Advanced Charms easily enough – probably because Draco wasn’t there – and then anxiously made his way to the Great Hall for lunch.

Harry caught his first glimpse of Draco, who had beat him to the tables, and was suddenly rendered immobile. Malfoy was talking to the tiny Slytherin First Year Harry had noticed the day before in soft whispers, head bowed, in what was probably an answer to some question or other. Draco’s face looked somber… pained even. Harry wanted to glide over to him and ask what the matter was, and he almost did before catching himself. The tiny Slytherin and her friend were obviously enraptured by whatever Malfoy was saying, looking back at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“Are you not hungry, Harry?” Came a familiar, airy voice.

“Luna – hey! Er… No… I mean, yes – starved actually.” Harry rambled in response, turning to meet his friend’s gaze briefly, then glancing back at Draco. “Good to see you, by the way. Have a
good summer?”

“No – it was rather boring… but I suppose that is to be expected after all the excitement last term.” Luna admitted freely, shrugging her shoulders.

Harry finally pried his eyes away from Malfoy long enough to register Luna’s response. Her genuine honesty and resilience always surprised him – but he rather liked her for it. He gave her a sincere smile in return. “Mind if I sit with you?”

“At the Ravenclaw table?” Luna asked, pointing to a seat in the far corner.

“Why not? Technically McGonagall released us Eighth Year students from our houses to sit wherever we would like.” Harry supplied.

“Is there some kind of rule about sitting with our houses? That’s a bother. I’ve probably broken it loads of times.” Luna said, without any regret in her voice.

Harry just laughed. “No… I don’t suppose it’s a real rule. We weren’t separated at all for the past couple weeks… it almost seems unnatural now.” He admitted, finally finding his feet again and moving towards the seats Luna had indicated.

“Is that why you were looking so intently at the Slytherins? They do like to keep to themselves.” Luna took a seat and poured herself a tall glass of water – sipping it daintily.

“Er…” Harry was at a loss on how to reply. Whatever he and Malfoy had was bound to come out if he kept acting so obvious. “Sort of?”

“Are you taking Magical Creatures this year?” Luna asked, unperturbed by Harry’s lack of an answer.

“Er… no.”

“What a shame. That’s my next class and I rather hoped we could walk down together. It is good to see you, Harry.” Luna interjected, piling her plate with several poached pears and two slabs of ham.

Harry suddenly remembered his trip into Hogsmeade with Hagrid. “I do know that Hagrid is really excited about things this year. He’s got a special project on – which I hear you helped him set up.”

“Really? How nice to hear. I wonder how I managed that.” Luna said, genuinely baffled.

“Er… I heard from Hagrid that you helped him get in touch with a supplier for… something.” Harry offered lamely. He wasn’t sure if he should reveal the Jothpars to Luna if she didn’t already know about them.

“Oh… you mean Da’s old friend at Primley’s? How exciting! Those two are a pair of aces – I do hope they met properly. Not many people love creatures the way Hagrid does.” Luna supplied, unhelpfully.

“Right… so I guess I better not spoil the surprise then.” Harry started attacking the food on his plate in earnest. Skipping breakfast really did work up an appetite.

Luna just nodded and carefully carved her pears into tiny cubes before eating them.

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Unfortunately, Harry had to endure History of Magic that afternoon. Hermione had insisted he take
It was as dry as ever – with Professor Binns’ monotone drawl – but he actually found several of the points of the lecture worth investigating later. He was determined to not feel so left out of knowing things, even if all he achieved was a broad overview.

Still no Draco, however. Harry went straight back to his rooms after classes to wait for him to return. They needed to talk things out. And maybe kiss again. His thoughts became cloudy again with the idea – just imagining snogging Malfoy was giving him a hard on. He didn’t feel the need to take care of it though. He just re-arranged himself in his pants and tried to be patient. Hopefully Draco wouldn’t be long.

Sure enough, the door opened moments later and Malfoy walked in slowly. Harry’s stomach was roiling with nerves at Draco’s cautious approach. Was he embarrassed? Was he having second thoughts?

“Draco.” Harry offered, trying to smile casually, but failing.

Malfoy’s cheeks were pink. He had a funny little pouch slung around his neck. He didn’t look Harry in the eyes, but went about putting away his school things slowly before carefully sitting on the edge of his bed. He left the funny pouch around his neck, however.

“What is that?” Harry pointed at the small blue bag hanging from Draco’s neck.

Instead of answering in words, Malfoy gently flipped open the top flap so that Harry could see what was inside. It was a Jothpar egg.

“You’re taking Magical Creatures?!” Harry was floored.

“You know what it is then? That saves a bit of the explaining, I guess. And don’t act so surprised… I need the NEWT credit to pursue Potions Master. Hagrid was… kind to let me back in his class.” Malfoy said sullenly.

“Well, Hagrid is kind – if not always smart about how dangerous some creatures can be.” Harry replied, not wanting to press the issue. “So why is he making you wear the Jothpar egg like a necklace?”

Draco blushed again. “They react to magic exposure – it helps them hatch. The kinds of magic and the duration of time needed before they emerge seems to vary and isn’t well studied since Jothpars don’t seem to exhibit any magical properties themselves and no trace parts of them are used for spells. So he’s having us carry them around… indefinitely.” Malfoy added the last word with a little bit of his old scorn, which Harry found rather endearing.

“I see.” Harry replied. They were still sitting on their own beds, and Harry was desperate to be closer.

Malfoy looked nervous. “About… last night. Did you really mean it?”

“That was torture.” Harry got up and walked over to Draco, prompting him to stand as well. “We didn’t really get to talk about things properly…”

And they didn’t start talking then either. Draco initiated a kiss and Harry was lost in the sweet pleasure of it. He carded his fingers through Malfoy’s hair – keeping some distance between them so as to not crush the Jothpar egg. It was gentle and chaste, but Harry still felt his chest fill to bursting with happiness. It felt so right.

Reluctantly, Harry pulled away. “Kissing you is… it feels… wonderful.” He tried to express.
Malfoy blushed. “So you really want us to be… together, then?”

“Yes. And stop suggesting otherwise. So long as you are on board, I am.” Harry said earnestly. “And I’d like to tell Hermione… if that is okay. I haven’t… come out yet to Ron. Might be best to go one step at a time.”

Malfoy considered this. “Granger… she won’t like it. Not after… everything. Are you sure?”

“You were a right prick to her growing up, Malfoy. But I think she’s willing to give you a chance. She… helped me come to terms with what I was feeling, actually.” Harry acknowledged. “Is there anyone you want to tell?”

“My mother?” Malfoy seemed to phrase it as a question.

“Certainly.” Harry waved Malfoy’s request away. “I think I’ll just need a little more time to adjust to the idea before we are… public about it.”

“That’s fair.” Draco admitted, looking a bit relieved. Obviously he wasn’t too keen on being in the papers again so soon either.

They both had soppy grins on their faces. Harry initiated the kiss this time, bemoaning the presence of the Jothpar egg because it meant they couldn’t get closer. Instead, Harry wanted to try something he rarely did with Ginny. He positioned Draco’s head at an angle and then proceeded to leave feathery kisses down his jaw and exposed neck.

Malfoy shivered and let out a soft moan. Harry’s erection was back and throbbing against his leg – becoming uncomfortable. He didn’t think he could reposition it however, without drawing attention to it. He did want to go further with Draco – but he wasn’t ready just yet.

Draco attacked Harry’s neck with similar enthusiasm – his hands tangling in Harry’s robes for better grip. Malfoy was taller and thinner than Harry, but only slightly. The Jothpar egg was becoming quite a nuisance, so Draco carefully shifted it to dangle off his shoulder instead.

Harry relished the sensation of their chests pressing together – both firm and warm. Emboldened, Harry stepped as close as he possibly could to Draco, pressing their whole bodies together. He was delighted to feel a similar bulge in Malfoy’s pants. With only layers of clothes between them, Harry slipped his leg between Draco’s and held on tight.

Draco let out a louder and much more erotic moan this time. It was exciting – thrilling even. Harry was sure his cheeks were aflame from embarrassment, but he wanted the closeness so badly. It would be easy to start bucking – creating delicious friction that would only add to their mutual pleasure.

“Can’t hide in there forever, mate! Hermione’s gone off to study in the library with Turpin.” Ron banged on the door – startling Harry and Draco to spring apart.

Harry cursed his best friend for horrible timing, but was grateful he hadn’t just waltzed in. Both Draco and Harry were sporting obvious hard-ons and looked thoroughly snogged – hair a mess and robes wrinkled. His cheeks flaming, Harry adjusted his prick and smoothed out his clothes.

“I guess I’ll need to have that talk with Ron now…” Harry said reluctantly.

Draco just nodded and headed for the bathroom – probably to have a wank in private, Harry thought jealously. It was incredibly satisfying to see him in such a state, flushed and messy. It just made Harry’s prick strain that much more in his pants rather than calm down.
“I’ll be out in a sec, Ron. Jeez.” Harry yelled back finally.

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After ensuring that he wouldn’t embarrass himself, Harry left his room. Ron wanted to play Exploding Snap again, but Harry insisted they go and find Hermione. Whatever Hermione was up to, it could wait – they hadn’t even been assigned any homework yet!

“Oi! She’s only just left. No need to rush.” Ron complained as Harry marched up their stairs, determined.

“Sorry… it’s just, well, she promised we would do this bit together.” Harry said cryptically.

“What are you going on about?” Ron looked almost cross.

“I’ll explain in a bit. Come on.” Harry entered the library and began searching for Hermione’s distinctive bushy, brown curls.

Hermione and Lisa Turpin were still unloading their books on a table in the reading area, whispering excitedly about something that sounded very technical. They stopped as Harry approached.

“Sorry to… interrupt. But can I steal you away for a bit, ‘Mione?” Harry tilted his head towards Ron. Hermione seemed to understand his meaning, but still looked surprised. She probably hadn’t figured he would want to have this conversation so soon.

“Alright. Sorry, Lisa, this shouldn’t take long.” Hermione apologized, as she abandoned her books and ushered Harry and Ron further into the stacks.

Ron looked confused and a bit hurt at Hermione’s obvious understanding. “Bloody hell… what is going on?” He hissed once they were alone.

“Calm down, Ron. I just promised Harry I’d be here for this. He has something he wants to tell us – and you are going to be quiet and listen.” She commanded.

Ron grumbled under his breath, but did was he was told. Both friends now looking expectantly at Harry.

“Er… I hadn’t really thought through how I was going to tell you.” Harry stalled, suddenly feeling anxious. “I guess you know Gin and I… split up. I feel… bad about it still, and also a little guilty… especially since… well, I don’t want you to think I was leading her on.” He stumbled for the right words.

Gathering his courage and taking a deep breath, he continued. “Ginny could tell that we just weren’t going to work – figured it out before I did. God, this is hard. Er… it turns out… well, turns out I fancy… blokes. Okay… I’m going to stop talking now.” Harry muttered awkwardly.

Ron gaped for a moment – the gears turning in his head were almost visible on his features. “Is that all? I thought you were going to reveal that we had to hunt down more Horcruxes or something. Fuck. Well, that’s too bad about Ginny, but she’ll understand. Charlie dated girls at Hogwarts too.”

Harry felt immense relief and gratitude all at once. He rubbed hard at his face with his palms, willing himself to not cry. Officially coming out had been much harder than he thought it would be – he was so glad to have it said out loud and for his friends to be so accepting.
"We are so proud of you, Harry. And I agree with Ron, Ginny will understand – just give her time.” Hermione whispered sweetly.

“Yeah, mate. Congrats and all that. If that’s everything, can we go back to Exploding Snap?” Ron whined.

Harry laughed. “Yes… well, for now at least… that’s all.” He looked knowingly at Hermione, who nodded. He would share his crush on Malfoy with Ron next time – although he doubted it would go as smoothly.

“Fine… I’ll see you back at the Common Room then! I’ll see if Nev and Greg are up to joining us.” Ron said over his shoulder as he escaped.

“Greg?” Harry asked Hermione.

“Goyle. Apparently he follows Neville around everywhere and visits their room often.” Hermione explained.

“That went… surprisingly well.” Harry admitted.

“I’m glad you told him, Harry. But you know I’m going to ask. What prompted this all of the sudden? Have you and Malfoy…” Hermione trailed off.

Harry blushed. “Yeah.”

Hermione giggled. “Oh Harry… you’re as dense as a brick for ages and then everything all happens at once. Congratulations.”

“We aren’t going to be… public about it for a while yet. But I wanted you to know.” Harry gave Hermione a weak smile, still embarrassed.

“I suppose I’ll be whisked away again in the near future when you’ve gathered the courage to tell Ron?” Hermione teased.

“If you don’t mind, yeah.” Harry teased back.

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Goyle and Neville did join in on their game, which was interrupted by dinner. Harry hadn’t returned to his room, where Draco probably still hid. Everything was happening rather quickly, but Harry felt like it was all moving towards something good – so he didn’t mind.

Malfoy did come down to eat, and he sat at the Slytherin table like always. Harry tried not to stare too much and give himself away. He was happy for a change – smiling rather than sneering. He sat down next to the tiny Slytherin First Year again and helped them reach the large bowl of mashed potatoes.

“I meant to ask, mate. Is it okay if I tell Charlie?” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear.

Harry refocused his attention away from Draco. “Oh… er… sure. I don’t mind.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to talk to you too, if you ever needed it.” Ron whispered again, rather maturely. “To be honest, I’d really rather not hear about whatever it is blokes do together. But I bet he would be willing to… you know, answer questions and stuff.”

Harry hadn’t thought that far ahead, really, but he was grateful – and a little embarrassed – for Ron
bringing it up. “Er… actually that might be nice.” He replied quietly.

“I did tell you Charlie is working on a big proposal for his partner, right? They’ve been together for ages. Mum will be so happy to plan another wedding.” Ron continued, this time louder, unfazed.

“You might have mentioned it. I guess I never did hear the guy’s name though… I had assumed… well, I didn’t even know Charlie was gay until Hermione told me.” Harry admitted.

“What? Really? His partner’s name is Nicolae Albu – a Romanian wizard. I think studying dragons was just a convenient excuse to shack up, really. Although he does love his work.” Ron laughed.

Harry laughed too. “How long have they been together?”

Ron had to think for a moment. “Let’s see… oh something like nine years. We always assumed they were happy just living together, but maybe finally tying the knot and making things official means they want to start a family. Charlie loves kids.”

Harry had never even considered that. He had a very vague idea of marrying Ginny and having kids once, but he had no experience with children. Suddenly planning things out long term seemed frightening. Harry really liked Draco and was hopeful about being with him for the foreseeable future. But what did Malfoy ultimately want?

“How come we’ve never met Nicolae?” Hermione asked.

“Oh it’s tragic. He came out to his family only a few years ago. They had a really tough time accepting it. I guess flying all the way here to meet his partner’s family was too… real for them. But from what I understand, they’ve softened a great deal recently.” Ron explained.

“How awful.” Hermione sympathized.

“Yeah…” Harry added.

Ron called down the table. “Hey Gin! Have Mum and Dad heard anything more from Charlie, yet?”

Harry had been consciously avoiding Ginny up to that point, but it seemed silly to continue to do so. She also looked a bit flustered at having been invited into their conversation, but she handled it well.

“Not that I know of – but I wouldn’t be surprised if they mention it in their next letter.” Ginny replied and then turned away, continuing on with her other friends.

Ginny hadn’t responded with any venom. Harry felt a bit relieved. She might not yet be over Harry completely, but at least she wasn’t bitter.

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Harry ascended the stairs back up to his room after dinner eagerly. He didn’t know how far Draco would want to go… but the prospect of just kissing again was still worth every bit of excitement that filled his chest and turned his stomach into jelly. Ron chattered to him about Quidditch the whole way up, which Harry hardly heard.

Neville and Goyle wanted to continue their game of Exploding Snap, but Harry excused himself under the pretext that he was awfully tired after their first full day of classes – which was true. Draco hadn’t made it back up to the Common Room yet, but Harry was determined to wait up for
him.

Harry shut himself in his shared bedroom, quickly peeled away his uniform, and put on his pajamas. He sat on his bed for a long while, waiting for Malfoy to appear. But when it became clear that it would be some time more, Harry started contemplating laying down for a brief nap. Draco would wake him if he left his curtains open, right? Or would he politely gather his things for his nightly shower and slip into bed himself?

Now that Harry had gotten a taste of Draco, he was keen on getting more. Maybe he could wait on Malfoy’s bed? Would that be too presumptuous?

After a solid half hour more of waiting – Draco had obviously been delayed – Harry couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. He boldly slipped between the covers of Malfoy’s bed and inhaled the wonderful scent of Draco’s shampoo that still clung to his pillow. He drifted off to sleep immediately.

It seemed like only moments later, but it must have been much later, Harry felt someone join him in the bed. “Potter… I don’t know why you invited yourself into my bed… but I suppose I’m not opposed to the idea.” Malfoy whispered, having just taken a shower and dressed in his silk night clothes.

Harry was too groggy to do more than smile impishly and move over so that Draco had plenty of room. He hadn’t heard Draco return or get ready for bed. When Malfoy was settled in, Harry tentatively wrapped an arm around the other young man’s waist protectively. It wasn’t long before he was asleep again. Kissing and conversation would have to resume in the morning.
Second Day of Classes

[LEMON WARNING: The following chapters will contain graphic sexual content. Up till now things have been pretty mild, with only hints at sexual behavior and fantasy. While this story is fanfiction, I do want to explore a budding gay relationship in a realistic way. Thank you.]

Harry awoke to weak sunlight filtering in through the curtains. Draco was still sleeping peacefully on the other side of the bed – which wasn’t designed for two fully grown men, so they were still pretty close together. The reality of the situation only then occurred to him. He was in bed with Malfoy.

What was expected of him in this situation? There wasn’t a manual or anything on relationships, so far as he knew. Had he been too forward last night? Waking up wrapped in Draco’s scent, warm from shared body heat, and thoroughly rested despite the cramped conditions was delightful. Harry had the urge to roll Draco over to kiss him awake – but he resisted.

Draco’s fair hair was tousled rather attractively. He still wore his very modest white, silk pajamas. Harry had left his glasses back on his own nightstand, so the details in the room were fuzzy. He also realized his wand was back by his own bed as well. Did he risk getting out of bed and waking Draco to check the time? If he was careful and Malfoy stayed asleep, would Harry just hop in the shower – acting as if nothing had happened? There was so much talking that the two of them kept putting off – Harry wasn’t sure how to proceed.

Except that now that he was awake and so close to Draco, his prick was becoming a problem. Having never done anything overtly sexual before, he was nervous – but also exceptionally horny. Had Malfoy ever been physical with another man before? Harry wasn’t sure if he found the idea erotic or disgusting. What if Draco expected more of him than what he was ready to give?

“Think a little more quietly, Potter. It’s too bloody early.” Malfoy mumbled.

Harry was alarmed – he went stiff. Draco was awake. “You could… hear my thoughts?”

“Of course not. But your breathing changed and I am a skilled enough Occlumens that I could tell you were worrying yourself into knots. Whatever it is, give us five more minutes – you are an insufferable cover hog.” Malfoy replied testily.

While not exactly comforting, the fright had wilted his erection considerably – enough that he wouldn’t embarrass himself if he got out of bed. So Harry slide out carefully, pulled the covers back over Draco and decided he would take care of things himself in the shower.

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Harry hadn’t brought his clothes in with him to the shower again. Would Malfoy be upset about seeing him in just his ratty orange towel now that they were together? Probably not. But Harry had just had a lovely wank under the soapy, warm water – he didn’t want to seem like he was advertising himself either. Harry groaned inwardly. Relationships were hard.

Draco was actually dead to the world as Harry emerged from the bathroom. He felt guilty – perhaps Malfoy hadn’t had as pleasant of a night’s sleep as he had himself. He started rummaging around for clothes and getting ready for the day, trying not to wake his roommate. Once he was ready, he wasn’t sure if he should just leave or not. Perhaps just a chaste kiss goodbye?
He tiptoed over to Malfoy’s unconscious form. It really was a beautiful sight, Harry thought – much better than his fantasies. He leaned over to plant a gentle kiss on Draco’s forehead. Afterwards, Draco stirred awake – bleary eyes blinking up at Harry.

“Kiss me properly.” Draco demanded in a rusty voice, still thick with sleep.

Harry obeyed.

The kiss grew deeper and more desperate. Malfoy grabbed Harry around the neck and pulled him down, forcing Harry onto the bed again. Both of them let out moans of pleasure. Harry’s prick decided that it wasn’t satisfied after all and quickly sprang to life.

“Draco… breakfast… and… class…” Harry tried to reason between kisses.

Malfoy groaned, but he did relent a little. “Bring us up some toast?” He asked hopefully.

“So you can sleep? I suppose I do owe you that much.” Harry gently extricated himself from Draco’s embrace and walked slowly to the door. “Be back soon.”

Harry practically skipped down to the Great Hall, loaded a plate up with kippers and buttery toast, and ascended back up, just as Ron and Hermione were making their way out of the Common Room. They both looked… surprised.

“Er… morning.” Harry offered sheepishly. There was an awkward moment of silence.

“Please tell me that is not what I think it is.” Ron’s face was starting to grow red and splotchy.

“Uh… what do you mean?” Harry tried to act dumb.

“You look all glowy, more rumpled than usual…and that is definitely food for more than one person.” Hermione accused, although without much bite.

“Is that from… for Malfoy?” Ron amended, suddenly looking angry.

Harry debated lying to Ron in front of Hermione. He just wasn’t ready to have this conversation. And what did she mean he looked… glowy?

“Er… yes?” Harry hadn’t meant to make it sound like a question.

“Are you shagging that murderous son-of-a-bitch?” Ron was starting to look livid.

This was exactly what he had hoped would not happen. Harry didn’t reply, but looked down in despair. Would having Malfoy mean losing Ron? He wanted to protest, but couldn’t think of anything that would help.

Hermione came to the rescue. “Ronald! Apologize this instant! Couldn’t you see how happy he was just a moment ago? And who Harry is with is really none of our business.”

Ron made an effort to calm down, but he didn’t apologize.

“I haven’t been shagging anyone – but yes, half of this is for Draco.” Harry spoke carefully, not wanting to lie, but also not wanting to admit he desperately wanted to shag Malfoy.

“For… Draco?” Ron repeated. Harry realized his mistake.

So instead of staying to confirm or deny anything else, Harry bolted for the safety of his room –
giving Hermione a pleading look over his shoulder.

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Malfy was asleep again when Harry entered their room. He looked so peaceful – it wasn’t fair. Harry’s appetite had disappeared. The plate of food was set carefully on the nightstand. All he wanted to do now was go back to bed – so that’s exactly what he did. Harry carefully crawled back onto Draco’s bed, on top of the covers, and held Malfy tight.

“Mmm…” Draco hummed – obviously awake now.

“Can we skiv our first class on only the second day back, you think?” Harry asked in a low whisper, feeling miserable.

“Definitely not – especially as it is Potions. Thanks for the food.” Malfy rolled over so that he was facing Harry. “What’s got your wand in a knot?”

“Ron knows.” Was all Harry could manage in reply at first. Draco squinted and worried his bottom lip, waiting for more. “He’s… upset… about us. I guess.”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before the… fallout would start – if you really do want to be with me.” Draco looked pained. “I understand if you feel… differently now.”

Harry buried his face in Draco’s shoulder. “No! I want this. I want you.” Malfy hesitantly embraced him back after a few seconds.

“I want you too, Harry.” He whispered.

“Then we will make this work. We can figure this out.” Harry pleaded. “We are going to go to class and afterwards I’m going to snog you senseless.”

Draco gave a quiet chuckle. “I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Good. Eat your food – we don’t want to be late.” Harry ordered, pulling away enough that they could both sit up. Malfy made kipper sandwiches and ate.

“There’s plenty here. Just don’t get crumbs in my bed.” Malfy warned.

Harry still hadn’t regained his appetite, but he took some toast anyway.

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Draco still insisted on dressing in the bathroom, much to Harry annoyance, but they did leave with just enough time to make it to their first class. Malfy emerged wearing his silly Jothpar egg pouch, which he must have hidden safely away somewhere for the night. Finally a class they had together – even if it was Potions. Harry usually partnered with Ron… but he didn’t see that happening today.

Sure enough, Ron and Hermione were already seated when Harry and Draco arrived in Slughorn’s classroom. Neither of them looked happy, but they were still obviously going to work together. Harry avoided them and sat with Draco, even though there were still other open seats. It wasn’t as if he and Draco were announcing their relationship simply by partnering for Potions – he reasoned.

“Welcome, Eighth Years!” Professor Slughorn said jovially from the head of the class. “By now you should be old hands at this – all you need is practice! Which is why I’ve made a list of five
commonly used potions which we will work on memorizing for your first examination, just before Halloween. We will be brewing Pepper-up Potions today. The list of ingredients and steps are written on the board. Make sure it is in your notes!"

“As you already know, the NEWT examination at the end of the year will require a precise brewing of a potion from memory for the practical – and a thorough knowledge of ingredients, tools, and techniques for the rest. In order to prepare you, we will start out simple and gradually work our way up to the more complex – taking particular interest in patterns and similarities so that you can surmise the makings of a potion simply by the desired effect.”

“Now! Let’s see how quickly you can brew a Third Year potion to sweep the cobwebs from between your ears after your extended break.” Slughorn concluded. Harry was glad for a gentle re-introduction into potion making as it had been over a year since he’d attempting making one himself.


“Oh, shove off.” Harry said playfully, setting off to gather the tools and ingredients he needed. It really was a simple potion – and certainly wouldn’t take them all class period to brew. Harry had hopes they would get out early. It meant more time alone with Draco.

Harry and Draco worked in silence, referring to the blackboard only rarely to check that they were adding everything in the right order. The potion would be stronger if allowed to simmer longer, but no one seemed keen on waiting.

Ron and Hermione worked in silence as well, Harry noted. They seemed to not be talking to one another except for when absolutely necessary. He wondered why they even bothered to partner up. Harry had hoped that Hermione would help soften Ron up to the idea of him dating Malfoy – but he certainly didn’t want it to cause a row between them. He felt guilt gnawing away at him.

“It looks like almost everyone is nearly done – and with only half the period left! Not to worry, we have more to do. Notes away!” Slughorn charmed the blackboard clean. “Decant what you’ve got – it is time to do it again. This time from memory!” The entire class groaned.

Harry’s hopes of getting out early were thoroughly squandered. He shamelessly copied Draco – who didn’t seem to mind. Harry noticed Draco had carefully tucked his Jothpar egg pouch under his robes.

“If Jothpars need exposure to magic to hatch, why hide yours away like that?” Harry asked casually.

Draco rolled his eyes. “‘Exposure to’ doesn’t mean getting splattered with potion. While it is just an egg, it might have an adverse reaction to some of the ingredients, or from the heat from the cauldron – I’d hate to be the only one in class with a dud because I wasn’t careful with it.”

Despite Malfoy’s excuse, Harry found his protectiveness rather endearing. “So what does ‘exposure to’ entail? How close do spells and enchantments have to be? Couldn’t you just cast an Impervious on the thing, or float it around instead of carrying it around in the little bag?”

“No. Hagrid said they almost always hatch eventually – when conditions are right. We are carrying them around to document the conditions in which each egg hatches and how magical exposure effects their development. But it is possible to damage one or to prolong it’s hibernation by exposure to a harsh environment. From what I understand these things… when grown… are pretty stupid, normally. That leaves very little margin of error if I’m going to hatch a healthy, above
“average Jothpar.” Draco drawled.

“Awww – that’s almost sweet, Draco.” Harry teased.

“Shove it, Potter. Or I’ll tell Slughorn you’re just mimicking my potion expertise.” Draco threatened.

Chastised, Harry went back to stirring.

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Lunchtime came and went. Harry and Draco both had Transfiguration next. Professor Chase had a funny accent, but otherwise seemed perfectly competent – and less strict then McGonagall had been. Ron was absent so that he could teach the First Year Charm’s class. But Hermione was there. Harry waited for Chase’s lecture to end so that he could talk with her.

“Hey… Hermione.” Harry greeted her timidly as everyone practiced three-way transfiguration – a silver spoon to a feather quill to an olive branch. Hermione’s spoon had already transformed into a glossy, white quill with a gilded nib – while Harry’s remained stubbornly spoon-shaped upon the desk.

“Harry.” Hermione’s voice was stern. Was she mad at him too?

“Is he… well, what’s the damage then?” Harry tried to ask casually.

“You know I hate it when I get stuck in between you two.” Hermione signed. “He will… come around. He’s getting along fine with Goyle. Just give him time.”

“Sorry, ’Mione. I really didn’t want him to find out that way. Are you… mad?” Harry ventured.

Hermione huffed. “No more than usual… with Ron. And while I do support you Harry, I admit it is a little weird seeing you with Malfoy.”

Harry glanced over at Draco, who was sitting across the room. “I suppose it might.”

“Does he… make you happy?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.” Harry replied.

“Then that is what matters. You deserve to be happy, Harry. I’ll get over it. I’ll give Malfoy a second chance. But so help me, Harry… if he hurts you, he better watch his back.” Hermione glared daggers across the room at Malfoy, who was watching them intently. Draco quickly refocused back to his partially transfigured quill, understanding the meaning of Hermione’s look even if he hadn’t heard her words.

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Finally, Harry ascended the stairs with Malfoy back to their room. Harry felt spent, but also eager to have some alone time with Draco. They didn’t talk as they followed the other through the empty Common Room and down the hall – both obviously remembering what Harry had said he wanted to do upon finding themselves alone again. The door clicked shut.

“Draco?” Harry asked.

“Harry?”
“I’m going to kiss you, like I promised. But later… we really ought to talk about how we are going to do this. I’ve never… been with anyone before. I don’t really know what I’m doing.” Harry admitted.

Draco looked thoughtful. “Could have fooled me. And it’s not like I have that much more experience.”

Something inside Harry was rather pleased with this revelation. “Good.” And with that he pushed Draco against the door and kissed him.

They kissed gently and sweetly for a long time – partly because the Jothpar egg was still nestled between them. Harry loved kissing. He had enjoyed kissing Ginny, but the added heat and excitement of kissing Draco was beyond compare. They wanted to taste and explore in equal measure. They fit together.

“Can you put that away?” Harry pulled away to ask, gesturing to the egg.

“Gladly.” Malfoy broke free, took the little pouch off and gently laid it on a nest of clothes in his trunk. But instead of returning directly, he slowly removed his robe as well – either to tease Harry or out of nerves, he wasn’t sure.

Harry quickly followed suit. They didn’t remove anything else, but it was thrilling to be rid of one more barrier between them. This time Draco kissed Harry – pushing him back towards his bed. They sat down and resumed snogging. Draco clung to the front of Harry’s shirt while Harry wrapped his arms around Malfoy’s waist. It was heavenly.

“God… Harry.” Draco broke away to gasp. “You asked before… how long.”

Harry’s mind took a moment to register what Draco meant. “Yes?”

“Fourth Year. When you came out of that Maze – bloody, bruised, and holding the TriWizard Cup. You looked so… broken. I wanted to put you back together. I didn’t know… I didn’t know about where you had gone… what had happened… until… after.” Malfoy whispered.

Harry’s insides turned to ice at the memory. “Fourth Year?” He repeated, dumbly.

“I knew I could never have you. I think it made me… hate you. Although even before then… I think I always wanted you in some way.” By now, Draco had buried his face in Harry’s shoulder. They weren’t kissing anymore.

Harry didn’t know what to say in return.

“Kissing you is already… more than I thought I would ever get.” Draco finished.

“Because you thought I was straight?” Harry asked.

“More than that. Although that was one complication. You were the Boy Who Lived. I was the son of a Death Eater. Can you imagine crushing on someone you knew your father wanted dead?”

The question hung in the air for a second.

“Sorry… I’m not thinking. Of course you couldn’t imagine that.” Malfoy’s voice was gentle, his hands clasped on Harry’s cheeks. Draco kissed him chastely. “I’m sorry.”

Harry couldn’t imagine what his own father would make of Draco. It stung, but only in the way old
wounds do. “It’s okay, Draco. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

They kissed again, deeper. Thankfully, Draco seemed to enjoy it as much as Harry did. But it didn’t take long for Harry’s prick to come to attention and make a nuisance of itself. A quick glance down, however, told Harry that he wasn’t the only one with a boner – which made him feel better.

“It’s so hard to not want… more.” Harry offered.

Draco laughed. It was genuine and rang like music. Harry loved it.

“In a way, I think I’ve always desired you too. Probably why I found you so… insufferable.” Harry grinned back. “But I’m afraid I only realized exactly what I wanted the day you came back from Diagon Alley last week. You seemed like you were in a huff. I watched you from a slit in my curtains. You unbuttoned your shirt… probably the most of your skin I’ve ever seen. You were… beautiful.” Harry confessed.

Draco blushed dark red, but didn’t comment.

“Am I taking this too fast?” Harry asked, ghosting his hands over Draco’s chest, remembering his stolen glance at pale skin.

“No.” Malfoy managed to say.

Harry unbuttoned Draco’s shirt and pressed his hands to warm, bare skin. He hummed his appreciation. Draco’s skin was as clean and smooth as living marble. Malfoy’s breath hitched.

“Equivalent exchange, Potter.” Draco said defensively, as he started on Harry’s buttons.

Strangely, Harry felt embarrassed – even though he knew Draco had seen him only partially clothed multiple times. It felt… different being undressed by someone else. Harry countered by pushing Malfoy down onto the bed, straddling him. He looked down at Draco’s stormy gray eyes, suddenly dark with arousal. Harry could both see and feel their erections through their clothes.

Something on Harry’s face must have betrayed his nerves. “It’s okay Harry. We can go as fast or as slow as you need.” Draco offered, kindly.

“I don’t want to go slow.” Harry replied.

Draco gave him a smirk – challenging him. Harry pressed their cocks and their bare chests together – leaning on his elbows so he could kiss the smirk away. The slight friction between them every time they adjusted their embrace sent delicious waves of pleasure through Harry’s groin. He was burning with the need to buck – the smell of his own sweat mingling with the scent of Draco’s wonderful shampoo.

Draco bucked first – pushing up against Harry in little jolts. Harry gasped in relief and followed Malfoy’s rhythm. Rutting against each other was much more intense than he had imagined. He didn’t have complete control to reach orgasm quickly by instinctively contracting his muscles in a familiar pattern. It took cooperation – and the wait for release made it all the more worthwhile.

Harry kissed Draco’s neck and clavicle. His skin suddenly more sensitive than he ever remembered it being before. Malfoy gripped hard on his back, keeping them locked together.

“Oh…. Draco…. I won’t… uh… last.” Harry breathed out between thrusts, grabbing handfuls of Malfoy’s hair.
“Then don’t.” Draco allowed.

It didn’t take much longer before Harry’s senses abandoned him completely and he was rutting hard and fast against Malfoy’s clothed prick. He was so close… he would be over the edge with just a few more thrusts.

“Fuck… Oh… fuck…” Harry couldn’t help but moan. He was so close… he only hoped Draco wasn’t too far behind.

“Mal… Draco… Oh… Fuck…” His release engulfed him completely — whiting out his vision. There was a pleasant warm gush in his pants, which he couldn’t be bothered to worry about right then. He could vaguely sense that Draco was still pressing up in quick bursts of his own, but all Harry could do was fall sideways off of Malfoy in a heap.

Draco just turned and bucked against Harry’s side – needed just a little longer, by the sound of it.

“Oh… Harry… Uh…uh…uh…” And Harry could feel when Draco’s release came. He tightened up and stilled with his prick pressed hard against Harry’s side. It was exhilarating.

It took a few seconds for their heavy breathing to subside enough that they could hear more than their heart’s beating frantically. Draco’s face was red – Harry imagined his own face was too. It was embarrassing… but also utter bliss. They laughed.

“Clean up isn’t going to be fun.” Draco complained, but he was still smiling.

Harry was far too comfortable basking in the afterglow to care. “That was… brilliant. Stay here with me… just lay here. We can have a rest before dinner.” Harry patted the space between them.

They both stank of sex and sweat, but Harry didn’t mind. Draco obediently snuggled in close and they kissed.
Ron was still avoiding Harry at dinner – Hermione by his side. So Harry ate with Luna again. Her Jothpar pouch was a brilliant orange. She had tied dried grass and flowers to it for some strange reason. Harry didn’t ask – and was grateful it wasn’t garlic or radishes.

“So glad you and I are still friends, Harry.” Luna said in that wistful way of hers.

“Of course.” Harry replied, through a mouthful of fried cabbage.

“And I hope you don’t mind me saying… but I think you and Malfoy make a great pair.” Luna added offhandedly.

Harry spluttered. “How… you… did someone tell you that?”

Luna looked thoughtful for a moment. “No. But you’ve been glancing over at each other all night. It wasn’t hard to guess.”

Harry blushed. He didn’t think he was being so obvious. “Perhaps we had a row? We are bunkmates after all.”

“That must be… convenient.” Was all Luna said in reply – returning to her pudding.

Harry blushed and pushed his plate away. Being with Draco was proving to be harder to hide than he thought it would be. He thought he would have more time to come to terms with it before letting the rest of the world know. Not that he was ashamed – but because everything was happening so fast. If even Luna knew – who was endearingly socially awkward – it was likely others did too.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Luna added.

“Oh, it’s not that. I just… well. Yes, I’m with Malfoy. It doesn’t… bother you?” Harry asked.

“I was locked in his basement for months – but only saw him twice. He was utterly miserable. More so than I was. We were prisoners together, in a way.” The weight of her admission still wasn’t punctuated with the appropriate emotion – but it was obvious she spoke truthfully.

“That’s… kind of you, Luna. I keep forgetting all the things I should be angry at him for, or I blame most of it on either his father of Voldemort. He was… nasty when we were kids.” Harry whispered, not wanting the other Ravenclaws to overhear. “And the stuff he did Sixth Year…”

“Is that why Ron is upset?” Luna asked, making Harry feel guilty. He hoped she didn’t think sitting with her had only been because of Ron.

“I suppose it is.” Harry admitted, trying to see things from his best mate’s point of view. “It’s just… we aren’t quite ready for everyone to know – Malfoy and me. I haven’t really had time to think through how we are going to make this work.” Harry felt like he was complaining.

Luna politely finished her plate before responding. “You and Malfoy have always been… connected in some way. I don’t find it surprising that you have finally decided to be together. Now that all that business with the Dark Lord is over, it is nice to see something good come after it.”

“You know, you are very… observant.” Harry tried to make it sound more like a compliment and less like an accusation.
“Am I really? How nice.” Luna gave Harry a smile.

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Draco had long since disappeared up to their room when Harry finally decided to abandon his partially eaten dinner in the Great Hall. He made his way slowly up the dormitory. Would Malfoy be upset that Luna – and possibly others – knew about them?

Ron and Hermione were in the Common Room to one side while Neville, Goyle, and some other people sat huddled around one of the tables playing a game. Harry was just going to slide past them, but Hermione called out to him.

“Harry? Come here for a minute?” She asked sweetly – trying to act friendly.

Harry sighed inwardly, but walked over to his friends.

“I thought it best that we hear each other out instead of giving way to… wild speculation.” Hermione said the last two words with a pointed look at Ron. “Mediating fights between you two is awful – so let’s try and get this over with.” Her sweetness had disappeared.

No one spoke for an awkward few seconds.

“Harry…” Ron began. “I’m glad you told me about liking blokes. And honestly, I don’t care about that. But Malfoy? Really?”

Harry’s stomach was tied in knots. He wasn’t sure how to reply.

“Hermione promises me you aren’t hexed… but I want to be sure. He’s not forcing you into this, is he?” Ron asked again.

Harry shook his head, surprised. “No, of course not.”

“Bloody hell, Harry. He’s a… monster. Have you forgotten all the horrible things he said about Hermione… what he did to me?” Ron pleaded.

Harry hadn’t forgotten… they just seemed far away. Like they happened ages ago. “I know he was awful, Ron. And you have every reason to be… skeptical. But I really do like him – who he is now. You seem to be getting along with Goyle.” Harry offered.

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment. “Greg is… different.” But his protestation was weak.

“I get that you aren’t ready to… forgive Malfoy yet. To be honest, I’m not sure if I’ve forgiven him completely. Just give him a chance?” Harry pleaded. “I wanted to tell you properly… once I’d figured things out more. But since you know now…” He trailed off.

“Hermione keeps insisting she doesn’t know details – and I’m certainly not asking for any. But just because Malfoy’s gay too… I just want you to think about this, mate. I know it might seem like there aren’t many available guys here at Hogwarts, but I’m sure there are loads out there in the real world that would date you. Charlie… well, he had some really bad matches before he found Nicolae. And trust me – Malfoy is bad news.” Ron continued.

Harry started to doubt himself. “Thanks, Ron. I know you mean well.”

“Harry… Malfoy is shit. Whatever his end game is, can’t be good. Please… just see sense!” Ron begged.
Hermione tried to cut in, but Harry beat her to it. “That’s enough! I’ll be careful – but Draco is not shit! He and I are together - deal with it!” His voice came out as more of a growl.

Ron looked resigned, but not sorry.

“Ron, you promised you would be civil!” Hermione whined.

“Harry… I’m not on board with this. How can you be?” This he said to both Harry and Hermione together. "After what his father did to Ginny Second Year? He bloody near killed me and Katie Bell in Sixth Year! He brought Death Eaters into the school! They killed Dumbledore! They killed Fred!” Ron’s voice was loud. The Common Room was quiet, all heads turned.

Harry was starting to see red – not caring who heard them. “Yes, all of that is true. But not all of that was his fault. You can’t blame him for everything!”

“Calm down, both of you!” Hermione tried.

Harry didn’t stop. “We were just kids, damn it! Don’t let Voldemort ruin anything more! It’s over! Can’t we just move on?!! Draco lost people he cared about too! Can’t we just… grieve together – for all of it? All of what’s happened. I’ve had enough!” Harry stormed down the hall to his room and didn’t look back.

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Draco’s curtains were drawn when Harry entered. He knew Malfoy had probably overheard some of his shouting match with Ron.

“Draco?” Harry asked quietly, a little worried that Malfoy might be upset at him too.

It took a moment, but Draco slid the curtains back a little without a word. Harry peeked through. Draco was still in his uniform, looking downcast.

“Draco?” Harry tried again. “Can I come in?”

“I don’t need you to defend me, Potter!” Malfoy said with some venom, but it came out rather broken. He was fighting back tears.

Harry slid onto the bed anyway, wrapping Draco in his arms. “I know. Ron is just being… difficult.”

Malfoy was quiet for a while. His tears hadn’t fallen and he was slowly relaxing in Harry’s embrace. Harry stroked his brilliant blond hair.

“Losing the war was… a relief, really. I don’t even care about losing my crazy aunt. But I… loved my father. Even if he was utterly stupid.” Malfoy admitted.

Harry just held Draco closer.

“I don’t really know how to… apologize. I feel worse about what I pulled my friends into – Goyle… and Crabbe. I’ve never liked the Weasleys, but that is probably just because of the Pure Blood traitor nonsense my father subscribed to. Even so – I never wanted any of them dead. I’ve been carrying around these ideas for so long because I trusted that my father was right. I had serious doubts after Fifth Year, but it wasn’t until… Crabbe died that I knew everything I had been taught had been rubbish.”
Draco seemed to need to get all of this out – so Harry just kept stroking.

“Somedays I find myself carrying it all around again out of habit. It is… hard to start over from scratch. I can’t quite put into words how guilty I feel. You’re right… it isn’t all my fault – but a lot more of it is than I want to admit. And it hurts. And it doesn’t go away.” Malfoy was crying now.

Harry kissed him. He wishes he felt brave enough to make love to Draco properly – but that would come later. Draco kissed back.

“Those cleaning charms we used earlier weren’t quite enough. Mind if I join you in the shower tonight?” Harry asked, boldly.

“Is sex all you think about?” Draco sounded a bit affronted.

Harry back peddled. “Thank you for opening up, Draco. I mean it. I just am rather tired and it would feel good to be clean and in our nightclothes. That is if you don’t mind sharing your bed again? I rather enjoyed it.” He hadn’t really meant anything sexual by it.

Draco looked thoughtful. “You seem so comfortable being… unclothed around others. It doesn’t come as easily for me.”

“It’s just another way of being open and honest – not unlike what you’ve just done, telling me all that. What you said… it means a lot to me – truly. You don’t have to share more until you are ready.” Harry replied, meaning both in words and physically. “But do be quick in the shower so I can get a turn before bed.”

Malfoy gave him a peck on the cheek and got up from the bed. He made a nest for his Jothpar egg and gathered up clean pajamas before heading into the bath. Harry wasn’t sure if he would last, laying down on Draco’s bed – he was so tired. So he got up and checked his notes for his first Defense lesson on Thursday just so he wouldn’t have to think about anything else.

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The next day Ron was still avoiding him. Harry had decided either he would come around, or he wouldn’t. But he and Malfoy still weren’t ready to be public – even if some of their friends were starting to guess. So Harry continued to eat his meals with Luna. She didn’t bring Draco up again, for which Harry was grateful.

But he did shamelessly partner up with Draco during both Herbology that morning and Defense Against the Dark Arts that afternoon. Professor Meek treated Harry just like any other student during class time – which was both a relief and a bit unnerving. She proved to be just as strict as McGonagall.

Hermione gave Harry an apologetic look at dinner, but remained by Ron’s side.

Once the meal was over, Harry was looking forward to spending the evening with Draco in their room, but he was held up by the Headmistress.

“Potter, can I have a quick word?” She beckoned him over to the High Table.

“What is it, Professor?” Harry asked warily.

“Meet me in my office – I’ll be there shortly. I just need to speak with Professor Slughorn.” Was all the reply he received before she got up and swept out of the Great Hall and into the Trophy Room the Tri-Wizard Champions had all waited in so many years ago.
Harry had no idea what she would need to say. He started to panic. Had she learned about his relationship with Draco? Maybe she was having second thoughts about letting him teach First Years? Surely she wouldn’t have been so cryptic if it was something good.

He hurried to her office in any case. “Vigilance” still made the statue leap out of the way – revealing the door to a room Harry was all too familiar with. But for a few changes, it looked just as it had under Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s portrait was empty, as were many of the others.

“Thank you for being so prompt.” McGonagall said from the entrance behind him. Harry realized he had been staring – lost in thought.

“Er… what is this about, Professor?” Harry started.

“Take a seat – won’t you. And don’t worry, it might be nothing – just a precaution.” Two chairs sprang to life and walked over for them to use. Once seated, Harry looked intently at McGonagall’s face – hoping for some clue. “As I told you at the start of term, while you are under my care I will be do my upmost to ensure you are protected. Something… unexpected has come about – which I feel you should be made aware of.”

Harry gulped, but just waited for her to continue.

“We’ve had several reporters and… admirers… try to wheedle their way past Hogwarts’ defenses since your return. I’m proud to say that none have been successful – that is until now.” Here McGonagall paused. “Harry, the handful that were caught attempting to break in before were usually trying to reach you, and so we must assume that you might also be the target of this most recent breach.”

“What happened? Are they somewhere in the castle?” Harry was upset.

“No. While the wards were shredded into ribbons in a most peculiar fashion, enough of an alarm was raised that Hagrid, Professor Sprout, and Professor Slughorn were on the scene within minutes. I don’t believe they got far.” McGonagall tried to sound re-assuring.

Harry groaned. “You don’t think it was an ordinary witch or wizard, do you? Otherwise you wouldn’t bother telling me.” Only a little bit of bitterness escaped him.

McGonagall pursed her lips, obviously sensing that this was a sensitive topic. “It is a fact that you are going to be hounded by harmless well-wishers and low-life leeches for all that you’ve done in defeating Voldemort. But no… in fact, I’m not even sure if it was… human.”

The implication struck Harry immediately. “The things Malfoy and Professor Slughorn found – a homunculus! But the Carrows are in Azkaban, aren’t they?”

McGonagall shook her head and looked concerned. “I see Mr. Malfoy entrusted you with some very sensitive information, Harry. Yes, the Carrows are in Azkaban, but they have been strangely… unresponsive in their cells. I had the… pleasure of seeing them for myself after that particularly nasty discovery. Not even Occlumency or Veritaserum loosens their lips – their minds are blank. It is possible they had set-up some kind of failsafe should they ever be caught again. It is too much of a stretch at this point to assume that one of their experiments remained… viable, after so long apart. And if it were a homunculus, I would expect it to originate from inside the castle, not attacking the outside. But whatever it is – it seems determined and… potentially harmful.”

Harry wasn’t fully convinced, but he lobbied an alternative anyway. “A magical creature of some
kind, from the Forbidden Forest, perhaps?”

She shook her head again. “It isn’t like anything that I’ve ever seen before. But Voldemort did bring all kinds of creatures in with his army – it is possible that some still linger. Or it could be the work of a gifted burglar, hired for access into Hogwarts. Dark Magic can be unnecessarily… destructive.”

They sat in silence for a few seconds – worrying this new development over.

“You’ve been through enough, Harry. I tell you this not because I want to place more of a burden on you, but so that you will be… vigilant… in maintaining your guard. Let us handle this, please. But if somehow we fail… and this threat is more dangerous than we think – I don’t want you to be unprepared.” McGonagall looked Harry in the eyes, making sure he understood.

Harry nodded. “Thank you… for telling me.”

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“What is it, Harry?” Draco asked, upon his return to their room. Draco had already had his shower, was wrapped up in his dressing gown and leafing through another giant potion’s textbook. “You look… worried.”

Harry remembered how frightened Draco had been of the homunculus experiments and decided to fib. “Apparently there have been some… over-eager reporters and the like attacking the castle wards trying to get to me. Someone tried to curse their way through. But it’s nothing to worry about.”

“So do one of those interviews to the Quibbler like you did in Fifth Year. If they get a taste, maybe they will leave you alone for a while. Something new will come up to grab their attention before too long.” Malfoy waived his hand like it was an easy fix.

“Not a bad suggestion, but I’d rather not be in the papers at all.” Harry moaned, flopping down on Draco’s bed – hoping he would put the book away soon.

“It’s your call.” Draco said, stubbornly returning his attention back to the text.

“Damn it, Draco. Let me kiss you.” Harry nudged the book off of Malfoy’s lap.

Draco huffed, but didn’t otherwise protest.

Harry climbed on top of Draco, kissing up his neck to his lips. They were becoming well acquainted with each other’s mouths. Draco liked nibbling on Harry’s lips. Harry loved kissing just below Malfoy’s jaw, inhaling deeply his boyfriend’s scent mixed with his expensive shampoo.

“Can we… go… further, tonight?” Harry managed to ask.

“Define… further?” Draco said, playfully.

“Hmmm…” Harry considered. “Ditching the dressing gown is a must. You can keep on the rest if you like – but I’m going to sleep in just my shorts tonight.” Harry parried.

“I think I can handle that.” Draco said, breathlessly. He dumped his book rather unceremoniously on the floor and started fumbling with the ties for his dressing gown. Harry stopped him.

“Let me.” Harry moved Draco’s hands away and slowly untied the dressing gown. It was rather
like unwrapping a present, he thought.

Not to be outdone, Malfoy pulled on Harry’s robe. Harry distracted him with a deep kiss instead – they had all night, no need to rush.

Harry pulled away from the kiss and very slowly removed one article of clothing at a time. Draco was transfixed and blushing. Harry removed his robe first, then snaked his tie off from around his neck. It felt a little silly at first, trying to be seductive – but they both wanted to see where it would take them.

By the time Harry had unbuttoned his shirt and removed his trousers, it was obvious that they were both sporting massive hard-ons. Draco started massaging his own prick through his pajamas. It was incredibly erotic.

“Let me… touch you?” Draco asked awkwardly. Harry nodded.

Draco peeled off Harry’s shirt so that he could caress his bare shoulders. Then his hands traveled over his chest, through his chest hair, and over his abdomen. His hands were warm, but the contact gave Harry goosebumps. Being touched so carefully was both exciting and strangely satisfying – as if he hadn’t realized how much he had needed to be touched.

Harry kissed Draco again. He didn’t think he would ever get tired of it. They moved closer, and closer, until they were flush together again. Their pricks were straining in their cloth prisons, leaving wet patches at their tips. All it took was an extra hard press together and the delicious friction began.

They tumbled back onto the bed so that they could feel more of each other. This time Draco was on top, still clothed, but with most of the buttons of his pajama top somehow having come undone. They bucked slowly together, kissing sporadically, and breathing heavily.

“I liked it better with you on top.” Draco admitted in a whisper. Harry wasn’t one to complain.

They switched places. Harry straddling Malfoy again, free to control the action. He lapped greedily at Malfoy’s exposed chest. He even ventured a little lower, kissing his pert nipples one by one. Malfoy groaned loudly at that – reminding Harry that they were likely to be overheard if they weren’t careful.

Harry’s wand was on the floor, however, along with almost all his clothes. “Draco… we will either have to do this quietly or you’re going to have to cast Muffliato.” Harry urged.

Draco’s eyes widened. He hadn’t thought about that either. He quickly used his wand to close the curtains and cast several Muffliato charms, just to be sure.

Harry heard his throat give a strange sort of growl, now that he knew they were safely alone. He resumed kissing Draco’s chest, palming his boyfriend’s prick through his clothes. Harry was craving to taste every bit of Malfoy. It was darker with the curtains shut – which made him bolder.

“Draco… let me taste you?” Harry whispered – suddenly very glad that the gloom hid how deeply he blushed at the request.

Malfoy spluttered, his prick practically dancing at the mere suggestion. “You really want to…?”

In answer, Harry undid Draco’s fly and started re-arranging the fabric so that his cock would be exposed. It only took a few seconds, but Harry could tell the extra friction was straining Draco’s fragile control. Neither of them were going to last very long.
Harry’s own cock was practically drowning in a soggy puddle in his shorts. The scent of their sweat and pre-cum was heady and only added to the intense need for release. When Draco’s prick emerged, it was an angry pink spear with a delightfully full mushroom top – and very hard. Harry’s mouth watered. He couldn’t believe what we was about to do.

Draco’s cock was slightly salty, but otherwise clean and smooth. It felt good on Harry’s tongue. He licked it and practiced sucking on the head. “I’ve never… done this before. Let me know if I screw-up.” Harry admitted finally.

“Just do something.” Draco moaned, his cheeks flushed.

Harry decided on putting as much of Draco’s cock in his mouth as he could and using his hand to hold the rest tight – finding a rhythm that would give Malfoy pleasure. It was easy. He stroked and sucked for a few minutes while Draco squirmed and moaned in delight. Somehow giving pleasure to his partner was satisfying for Harry too. He palmed his own prick with his other hand.

“Oh… please… I can’t…” Draco was breathless and nearly incoherent.

Harry just moaned in support, picking up the pace, wanting to taste Draco’s cum. It happened unexpectedly in hot, sticky ropes that flew down Harry’s throat, threatening to choke him. Draco stiffened, too late, his climax already upon him. “Cumming… Harry… I’m…” but the rest of his sentence were lost as he relaxed into bliss.

Draco’s cum was a little bitter and very salty. Harry didn’t care for the taste much, but it was thrilling to clean Draco’s prick with his mouth, catching every stray drop as Malfy’s cock pulsed out ever decreasing spurts of slippery spunk. Harry was so close himself, that when Draco was finally still all he had to do was reach down with both hands and stroke himself a few times before he spilled his own load all over his shorts - his seed seeping through the thin fabric and dribbling all over the bed.

Harry collapsed. Waves of pleasure engulfed him and it took him what felt like ages to come back down. “So good… Draco. So good.” Was all Harry could manage to say.

Draco cleaned them up and the bed with a smart spell. They repositioned themselves into a more comfortable embrace under the covers.

“That was… brilliant.” Malfoy said, still trying to catch his breath.

“Yup.” Harry snuggled deeper into the covers. “Expect more of that in the near future.”

Draco giggled. “You liked it then?” It was obvious what he meant by ‘it’.

“Oh, it wasn’t bad. But feeling you come undone… that was worth every bit.” Harry said earnestly.

Harry couldn’t tell if Draco was blushing in the gloom, but he suspected he probably was.
First Lesson

Finally, it was the day Harry would teach his first official Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to the First Years. He awoke in Draco’s bed, still in nothing but his shorts, and he was understandably nervous at the thought. This time Malfoy was already awake – but he still looked sleepily at Harry when their eyes met.

“Morning.” Draco mumbled.

Harry couldn’t help but smile at the memory of what they had shared only hours before. He traced Draco’s face with his finger, lingering on his thin, upturned lips.

“Please tell me there’s enough time for a shower. And food.” Harry’s stomach growled.

Draco laughed. “If you’re quick.”

“Did you sleep okay?” After their first night sharing a bed, Harry was still worried that Draco wasn’t adjusting to it as comfortably as Harry had been.

“Tolerably well. You?” Malfoy parried.

“Very good.” Harry stole a chaste kiss and smiled blearily at Draco – not wanting to start the day just yet.

Draco nuzzled into Harry’s shoulder, obviously not in any hurry either. The curtains were still drawn, keeping out most of the light.

“I really like this.” Harry gestured to their positions. “Having you all to myself.”

Draco pulled away to roll his eyes – but didn’t protest.

Harry’s thoughts became troubled. “You know besides Ron and Hermione, some of our other friends have probably guessed we are together. Does that… scare you at all?”

It took a moment before Malfoy responded. “I don’t think it’s really any of their business.”

“I agree. But if someone asks… I’d like to tell them the truth.” Harry hadn’t told Draco about Luna yet.

“If you must.” Malfoy said rather reluctantly.

“I’m not keen on going public. You know that. But being with you makes me so… happy.” Harry announced – he tightened his embrace on Draco’s slim form for emphasis. Their little cocoon of privacy still seemed to help dampen his nerves about such an embarrassing admission.

Malfoy spluttered. “…Really?” His voice just desperate enough that it made Harry’s chest ache.

Harry kissed fervently at Draco’s neck in response.

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There was barely enough time to rush through his morning routine and snag a bit of toast before class. Harry had to endure Astronomy all morning by himself, since Draco was taking Arithmancy with Hermione and Ron still wouldn’t talk to him. Luckily it was just a lecture, which Harry only
half listened to anyway. He was mentally reviewing his notes for that afternoon.

It would have been nice to ask Ron how his first day teaching had gone. While he was still angry at his best friend, he also desperately missed him. Luna was absent in the Great Hall for lunch, so Harry just sat by himself at the Gryffindor table as far away from Ron and Hermione as possible. To his astonishment, Ginny sat beside him.

“You look right gloomy. What is it?” She asked nicely.

Harry was surprised she had initiated a conversation with him – he wasn’t quite sure what to say. He gaped for a moment and then settled on being polite. “Oh… just nerves. It’s good to see you, Gin. How was your first week back?”

She didn’t look convinced at his answer. “Pretty basic. Madam Hooch asked me to help with the First Years’ flying lessons from time to time this term. Said she’s getting ready to retire.”

Harry was taken aback. “She’s not that old!”

“She suffered some lingering… battle damage. Doesn’t want anyone getting hurt because she’s a bit slower on her broom. Anyway… I’m staying busy and focused on what I love. Still not over the fact that you won’t be our Seeker again.” Ginny was very tactful.

“Oh, you’ll manage.” Harry felt guilt gnawing at him again, even though he tried not to let it.

“So what’s up? Do I need to hex Ron for you?” She asked, brandishing her wand and looking at the other side of the table pointedly.

Harry sighed. “No. He is being stupid… but I’d really rather not talk about it. Any idea where Luna has run off to?”

“I’ve noticed you sitting with her, but sorry, I’m not sure. Probably out feeding the Thestrals with Hagrid or something. She’ll be back.” Ginny offered.

There was a pause. Harry didn’t want to pretend anymore. “Hey… Gin. I’m glad you seem… good. And that you still want to be friends.” Harry replied awkkwrdly.

“Of course.” Ginny brushed his comment aside.

Harry persisted. “I know you’ve been conversing with Hermione… which I don’t mind really… but has she told you…?” Harry wasn’t sure how to phrase his question.

Ginny blushed. “She told me to ask you.”

Harry took a moment to cut up his ham and collect his thoughts. “Ron mentioned that I might benefit from reaching out to Charlie. He and I are alike in many ways – something I only realized recently.” It was difficult to say it bluntly.

“I suspected as much. It hurt at first… but not so much anymore.” Ginny admitted, obviously gathering Harry’s intended meaning.

“Would you write to him? Ron’s being difficult. And I do really think having someone who… understands, would be helpful right now.” Harry asked.

“Why not just write him yourself? While you only met briefly, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” Ginny didn’t outright refuse, but Harry was still disappointed.
“You see… well… I’m really hoping to ask… sensitive questions. It just seems right to at least ask permission first. And… all of my own mail is going through Filch’s office right now. McGonagall says it is for my safety, but it makes things… awkward.” Harry finished lamely.

“You know… there is an Owl Office in Hogsmeade. I bet you could set up a personal account there if you are worried about it. And I suppose we could draft a letter together to… formally ask for his help, if that is what you are worried about.” Ginny offered, taking pity on him.

Harry remembered Adonica from his trip to pick up the Jothpar eggs with Hagrid. The suggestion was a relief – he did have a lot of questions. “Gin… that would really mean a lot to me. Thanks.”

“I’ve got Herbology next, but I’m free after. Want to meet in the library?” Ginny supplied casually.

Harry’s stomach jumped at the reminder of what class awaited him next. “Yes – that sounds great! So long as the First Year students don’t eat me alive. It’s my first lesson.”

Ginny grinned a little mischievously. “You’ve faced worse… but good luck all the same.”

Harry laughed. “Thanks. And thanks for… just thanks.”

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Harry arrived at Professor Meek’s classroom a little early, just in case. Goldstein had given his first lesson already, so he knew the kids were aware they would have Student Teachers filling in now and then – just not if they knew who exactly would be teaching them. Fourteen students would soon be coming through the door and Harry had no idea how they would react to seeing him at the front of the room.

Professor Meek was at her desk, organizing rolls of parchment. “There you are, Harry. I’ll be out of your way in a moment. Are you ready?” She asked kindly.

“I suppose I’m as ready as I can be, Professor. Just not sure what to expect.” Harry’s nerves were starting to get the best of him.

Professor Meek seemed to finish gathering what she needed and straightened up before responding. “I did warn them in advance to behave themselves on Monday. Anthony told me his class went smoothly, so I’m not too worried. They are a shy bunch… except for those Gryffindor girls. You’ll do fine.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry felt a little bolder.

“I’m off to teach the Sixth Years – leave me a short report on how things go on my desk for Monday, won’t you? Good luck!” And with that she shuffled out of the room, leaving Harry alone.

Harry took his seat at Professor Meek’s desk. It felt much too big for him. He got out his book and his notes and waited for the students to trickle in. Unsurprisingly, it was the gaggle of Gryffindor girls that arrived first – too absorbed in talking to each other to notice him. It was a relief, actually.

The two Slytherins and the lone Ravenclaw boy came in next, all much more subdued – and looking at Harry like he might be dangerous. He tried to relax his features into a smile, hoping it looked genuine.

The rest of the students all came in together, just as the clock rang. Some were out of breath… still learning to navigate Hogwarts most likely. Harry waited for all of them to be seated before he began. Some of the students looked at him with awe, obviously knowing who he was.
“Good afternoon, everyone.” Harry called loudly, causing the gaggle of Gryffindor girls to stop their chatter. “I am Student Teacher Harry Potter. And I’d like to get a few things out of the way before we get started on today’s lecture.”

The eyes of the students who didn’t seem to know who he was before had turned big and round. It was almost comical. “First, while I am not an official Hogwarts Professor I still have the authority to give and take House Points – so I encourage everyone to do the work assigned and behave themselves. Second, you are welcome to come to me with any questions which are related to this class or for a referral to someone in authority for those questions I cannot answer. I will not answer questions relating to the battle with Voldemort…” here there were audible gasps from some of the students, “or my personal life. But I assure you I am perfectly qualified to help instruct you on the basics of Defense Against the Dark Arts.” Saying it out loud like that did make it seem a little more true than how he really felt.

“Now… turn to page 18 of Lafford’s Guide to Practical Defense. Anthony… I mean, Student Teacher Goldstein, has already given you an excellent overview of Chapter One. We will be focusing on safety protocol so that we can start practicing some of the spells mentioned in the text. Professor Meek has assured me that there will be a practical application portion on the midterm. Who would like to read Lafford’s Guiding Principles aloud to the class?” Harry asked. There was a belated shuffle as the students broke out of their rigid poses to flip through their textbooks, but no one rose their hand.

“Come on, now. There are only three lines.” Harry felt uncertainty crawling back up his throat, threatening to choke off his voice. Not commanding enough – or too forceful? The Ravenclaw boy’s hand rose unsteadily into the air, much to Harry’s relief. “Excellent. What’s your name?”

“J…j…Jerome Whitby, Sir.” The student squeaked and stammered.

“Thank you, Whitby. Go ahead.” Harry already knew all the names of his students from the roll sheet, but it was nice to have a face to match it to.


“Excellent. Five points to Ravenclaw.” Whitby blushed and smiled. “I want all of you to memorize these. We will be reciting them every time I teach a lesson.” Harry felt his confidence return. They went over the safety protocols, this time with more participation from the other students. It wasn’t so bad actually, Harry found that he was even enjoying himself.

“Now… we are going to put our books away and discuss. I realize this has only been your first week here at Hogwarts and I’m just as eager for the weekend to start, believe me, but I need everyone’s focus a little longer.” Harry had noticed the gaggle of Gryffindor girls had started whispering to each other. He cleared his throat loudly, commanding their attention again.

“If you grew up in a home with magic, please raise your hand.” Harry counted nine hands. “Good. Now, if you are from a Muggle home, please raise your hand.” The remaining five hands rose, but much less quickly. Whitby was among them.

“There are witches and wizards who find this distinction to be incredibly important. Why do you think that is?” Harry asked as the five students lowered their hands. No one offered a response.

“How about this… do we have anyone from a Pureblood wizarding family in this class?” Harry asked instead.
The two Slytherins raised their hands, as well as two of the Gryffindor girls. Harry pointed to the
tiny Slytherin that Malfoy seemed to know. “What’s your name?”

“Madeline Gaunt.” The tiny Slytherin replied in an equally tiny voice.

“Can you explain to the class what it means to be a Pureblood?” Harry prompted.

“Er… we can trace our ancestry back to the time of Merlin. We always marry into other Pureblood
families to keep our connection to magic… untainted.” Her explanation annoyed Harry a bit, but
she did seem like she was just repeating something word for word that she had been told without
having any real feelings about it herself.

“Thank you, Miss Gaunt. I’m going to tell you all something important that I want you to consider.
The magical strength of a witch or wizard is determined by their knowledge and mastery of it –
what we inherit is like a hand of cards, completely outside of our control. There exist traditions in
Pureblood families that I do not wish to dispute. It is perfectly fine to be proud of who you are. But
it does not guarantee success, nor should it imply that those who do not come from Pureblood
families are inferior in any way. To those of you who have only recently joined us in the Magical
World, I welcome you! And I ask those of you who have always been here to help your new
classmates.”

The classroom was silent. Harry hadn’t really planned this speech… it just seemed like it would be
an important thing to get out of the way up front. Most everyone was aware of Voldemort’s brief
reign, and the terror his followers tried to instill in Muggleborns – the attacks and raids.

“Now… who wants to have a turn explaining the importance of our safety protocols? Let’s start
with Rule Number One.” Harry wrote it down on the board from memory. They continued through
each rule until the bell rang. Harry was surprised at how fast the class had flown by. He was also
somewhat surprised that things had gone so smoothly.

“Don’t forget to read Chapter Two for next week. Class dismissed – enjoy your weekend!” Harry
called out as the students started to excitedly gather up their belongings and head for the door. All
but two.

The tiny Slytherin, Madeline Gaunt, hadn’t moved since he had talked about Purebloods. Her
friend had packed everything up and was heading for the door, but stopped to wait.

“It’s alright, Cathy… I’ll catch up.” Harry overheard her say. He was suddenly worried that she
would want to confront him about what he had said. The other girl, Catherine Burke, nodded and
left.

Madeline didn’t rise from her seat. Harry was unsure how to proceed. “Can I help you, Miss
Gaunt?”

“You said it was okay… to be proud of who we are.” She stated in her tiny voice. “After
everything… with the Dark Lord… I don’t think you realize how… hard that can be.”

Harry wasn’t quite following. “I’m sorry, I don’t quite get your meaning – but I admit I’m not an
expert on Purebloods. What don’t I realize?”

Another long moment passed before Madeline clarified, “It isn’t about the Pureblood stuff, not
really. My uncle… he was Augustus Rookwood. He died shortly after being shut back up in
Azkaban.”

Harry remembered Mr. Weasley mentioning it months ago after reading the Daily Prophet. The
knowledge wouldn’t bring Fred back, though – justice seemed a bit hollow. Even so, Harry wasn’t sorry to hear it then, but it felt very different hearing it from a young member of his family. “I didn’t know him well. Were you close?”

“He took me to Kiddell’s for my first wand on my birthday in January.” She said coolly.

Harry found his professional façade start to crumble. “I see.”

“Mum won’t talk about him anymore. I miss him.” Madeline continued. “He’s the one who told me about Purebloods, and why his sister - my mum, had to marry my father – even though they are separated now.” She said the last bit in anger, giving more away perhaps then she had intended.

“In that case, I’m very sorry for you and your mother’s loss.” Harry said politely, although still baffled by the whole conversation.

“I know whatever my uncle did was bad. But I loved him very much. People keep saying that it is a pity we were related. That because we were so close, we should be… ashamed somehow.” Madeline still hadn’t left her seat, her tiny voice barely loud enough for Harry to hear.

Harry had to think for a moment, but he was starting to understand. “You mean to say that other people seem to think that it is wrong to be proud of who you are because your uncle was a Death Eater?”

“Yes. Uncle Aug always said to be proud… but I don’t know what to believe anymore.” Madeline looked like she was starting to lose her composure.

Harry was not prepared to deal with a crying First Year. He considered calling for Madam Pomfrey, but then he remembered something. “I’ve seen you at the Slytherin table with Malfoy. You two are probably feeling very similar things. He might even be able to help.”

“He has been… kind. But he was a Death Eater too. Cathy says we shouldn’t trust him.” She sounded conflicted now, instead of on the verge of tears. “That’s why… I came to you.”

Harry felt anger burn inside him at the slight against Malfoy. He mulled things over for a second before responding – not wanting to say the wrong thing. “I trust Malfoy. However, if you feel like you need to talk to someone, Madam Pomfrey will be able to direct you further. As hard as it can be… sometimes being able to talk is… helpful.” Harry was reminded of his own confessions to Hermione.

“I’m sorry… I can’t give you a definite answer. But for what it is worth… I don’t hold your relationship to Rookwood against you. And I am sorry for your loss.” He found that he really meant it this time.

Finally Madeline got up. She was smiling weakly. “Thank you.” She gathered up her things and left.

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After leaving a brief note for Professor Meek, Harry made his way to the library. Eager to write Charlie, but less eager to talk to Ginny again. Their interaction at lunch had been… relatively cordial. But Harry still felt a little guilty about how things had ended.

Ginny was at a table near the back of the library with a book open, studying. Harry hadn’t expected Madeline’s question after class, so he wasn’t sure how long she had been waiting.
“Sorry if I’m late. Got held up by a student.” Harry took a seat next to Ginny.

“I figured as much. No worries.” Ginny put her book away and brought out a blank parchment and quill. “You just dictate your request after I get through the polite bit. ‘To my second favorite brother… Mum misses you terribly… get your ass back to the Burrow soon…’ all that jazz.”

Harry laughed. “Thanks for doing this, Gin.”

She just nodded and began writing. It didn’t take long for her to get a few lines down. Harry was starting to get nervous again. He really had no idea how to ask Charlie for advice.

“Okay. I’ve mentioned that you would like to begin corresponding with him through the Hogsmeade Owl Office – so that your letters aren’t ignored and he knows they are genuine. What’s next?” Ginny licked the end of her quill before dipping it back into the ink.

“Er… I’m not sure really. Did you tell him I’m…?” Harry trailed off.

“Told him what, Harry?” Ginny smiled evilly back at him, obviously just wanting Harry to say it out loud.

Harry took a deep breath. Telling Ron that he fancied blokes was much easier than labeling himself as gay. Is that what he was now? How ironic that he was officially coming out to Ginny, of all people.

“Ugh… Gin. You must think I’m a git – leading you on for so long. I really am sorry. I just… didn’t realize.” Harry lowered his head onto the table. One thing was for sure… he did not want to reveal his budding relationship with Draco with her just yet.

“Harry… I told you already. It hurt. But looking back now… it was kind of obvious. I think I went along with the idea because it was… well, you were my crush for ages. The kind of crush where you fall in love with the dream in your head – not the real person.” Ginny admitted quietly. It was strange how often this same analogy was being employed by Harry and his friends in the wake of their victory over Voldemort.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not still sorry.” Harry whispered, lifting his head enough to give her a pleading look.

“Ugh… I forgive you, okay. Just tell me what to write.” Ginny kicked Harry under the table.

Harry felt marginally better. “Er… well, you could tell him that your ex-boyfriend, Savior of the Wizarding World, has recently discovered he’s a brilliant wanker?” Harry tried to lighten the mood.

“That wasn’t so hard, now was it?” Ginny replied. “Thank you for telling me.”
Harry just groaned. It *had* been hard.

“Charlie will be happy to help, I’m sure of it. He didn’t have anyone either. Made some stupid mistakes early on – but Mum and Dad threw their support around him and he turned out alright. And I’m here for you too, as your friend.” Ginny put her hand on Harry’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“It’s a bit… scary.” Harry admitted.

“That’s okay. It really shouldn’t be, though. I think that is what bothers me the most. I grew up knowing Charlie liked other guys. Didn’t learn that some people thought it strange until I came to Hogwarts. Funny that we are so eager to sort everyone into camps, isn’t it? Just so we can alienate those we decide are different from us.” Ginny replied, pensively.

“You’re a good friend, Gin.” Harry replied warmly.

Ginny just smiled and went back to writing. After another paragraph or so, she finished, folded it up and handed it to Harry. “You’re welcome to read through it before sending it off, just to be sure I’ve got everything right.”

“Thanks. Hey, Gin. I meant to ask… have you got your eye on anyone? I do still want you to be… happy.” Harry asked timidly, not sure if it was the type of question that would be allowed.

“No. I think I’ll be taking a break from dating for a bit. But don’t worry – I’ll find the right guy eventually. And I *am* happy, Harry.” Ginny kicked him under the table again. She was rather… violent.

“Ouch.” Harry winced. “Well… if I were to find someone – what then?” He braced for another kick.

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Harry! You are free to snog any bloke you like. Knowing that I don’t have the right… *equipment* for you, really dampens any pangs of jealousy. And I want you to be happy too.”

Harry got up from the table and gave Ginny a hug. “Thank you, Gin.”
Doubts

[Sorry for the wait, everyone! I should be back to a normal schedule again soon. No worries – I’m very excited to finish this piece. It won’t be too much longer.]

Charlie,

I hope you and Nicolae are well – it seems like ages since we’ve heard from you. Seriously, do call Mum and Dad soon. And you did promise me more homemade Turkish delight.

I’m writing as a favor to Harry Potter, who you probably remember I was dating until quite recently. Oh, and he defeated Voldemort and stuff. He is in need of someone to confide in – and it would be a favor to me as well, as we are still friends despite Harry coming to terms with his sexuality.

He isn’t ready to make things public yet and would like to correspond with you through a private account at the local Owl Office in Hogsmeade. He will be writing his own letter to you shortly, to give you the box number.

While I was too young to really understand, I know you will recall how difficult it can be to come out of the closet and seek meaningful relationships in the Wizarding World – and it would mean a lot to both of us if you are willing to help act as a support and guide.

Lots of love,

Ginny

Harry posted the letter right away – rather touched by Ginny’s request on his behalf. It was also good to see that the strange hole in the wall where the Carrion Birds had lived had been patched neatly.

Draco wasn’t in the Common Room or their bedroom upon Harry’s arrival back down from the owlry. He was worried that meant he was off being interrogated by the Ministry again or something. Anxious about the letter to Charlie, Harry decided he would walk down to ask Adonica about setting up an account at the Owl Office while it was still light. He brought his Invisibility Cloak this time to deter curious onlookers.

Ron and Hermione were strolling the castle grounds. They looked stiff, as if neither of them were very comfortable, but Harry didn’t pry. He was tired of feeling guilty about things outside of his control. So he slipped past them unseen, down the well-worn path to the gate, and on towards Hogsmeade.

He removed the Invisibility Cloak in the bushes just outside the Owl Office. It looked deserted. Harry wondered if it was closed, but didn’t notice any sign. He tapped on the door and tried the handle. It was unlocked.

“Hello?” Harry called out quietly.

“Mr. Potter. How good of you to call. Did Hagrid send you?” Adonica was cleaning her already gleaming fireplace. “How are those eggs of his?”

“Er… good evening, Adonica. The Jothpar eggs are doing well, I believe. And no, he didn’t send me. I’m here for myself today.”
“I see. And what can I do for you?” Adonica quit scrubbing at non-existent dirt, wiped her hands on a rag, and turned around to face Harry fully.

“Er… as I’m sure you can imagine… privacy has become a bit… difficult for me lately. All my letters at Hogwarts are being routed through Mr. Filch’s Office. I was told you can set up an account for me here? It’s just, I’d really like to manage my own post.” Harry asked tentatively.

“Of course. I see you got here more discreetly this time.” Adonica glanced out the window and smiled. “Just letters or parcels as well? It is two sickles a month for a letter box and five for a larger one.”

“Oh… just letters for now.” Harry pulled out two sickles and passed them over.

“Follow me and we will find you a free box.” Adonica beckoned Harry around the counter to a little nook filled with buttons with numbers on them, much like an elevator. Some of the numbers were white, some were red, and some were green.

“White numbered boxes are free. Green means there are letters waiting to be collected, and red means reserved with no mail. Each box comes with a key, also numbered, that will display matching red or green. Letters can only be collected by key – so don’t lose it.” She ran through her spiel as if she had done it thousands of times before. “Go on… pick a number.”

Harry pushed the number 27 – unsure what to expect. A smooth wooden counter slid out from the wall with a little box in the middle. There was a keyhole on the top of the box, but otherwise no seams or marks of any kind. Adonica tapped it with her wand and the top of the box just vanished. Inside was a small key with a tag numbered on one side and the Hogsemade Owl Office crest on the other.

“I do lock the doors at 9:00PM, but we open up again by 7:00. Otherwise feel free to come and go as you please. No need to knock.” Adonica smiled at Harry, who blushed.

Harry took the key. Adonica pushed the button again and the small counter and box retreated back into the wall. “Thank you very much.”

“Of course.” Adonica walked back into the main room, brandishing her rag yet again.

“Er… if by chance I do receive a package… what then?” Harry asked belatedly.

“I’ll hold it behind the counter for you – no extra charge, unless it becomes a habit. Then I’ll insist you upgrade to the larger box and manage them yourself.” She said matter-of-factly.

“Brilliant. This really is… I mean, thanks again.” Harry stammered. Adonica just waved him off.

“How was the first week of classes? Get a good crop of First Years?” She was back to scrubbing, her back turned to Harry.

“Er… not a lot, but they seem alright. Some of them are awfully… small.” Harry commented.

Adonica laughed. “I reckon so.”

Harry was eager to draft a letter to Charlie and check on Malfoy. “I’d best be getting back before dark. Have a good evening, mam.”

“So long, Harry.” Adonica didn’t even turn around.
Draco still wasn’t back at dinner, but Luna was. Harry claimed his now familiar spot at the Ravenclaw table. Luna was already seated and carefully sculpting her pile of mashed potatoes into something with her bare hands. He smiled endearingly at her and began filling his own plate without comment.

“Hello, Harry.” Luna said kindly.

“Hey, Luna. Missed you at lunch.” Harry spooned a generous helping of wilted spinach and mushrooms onto his already full plate.

“You seem hungry.” Luna giggled.

Harry blushed, but just shrugged.

“My Jothpar egg began its hatching process, so I was down at Hagrid’s to share with him the good news.” Luna pulled her bright orange pouch up over the lip of the table to show Harry. He noticed she had festooned it with even more flowers… some of which looked suspiciously like weeds.

“Congratulations! How do you know it started hatching? Are there cracks? How long until it is out?” Harry asked all at once, thinking of Draco.

“Jothpar eggs don’t hatch the way birds do. The egg starts to swell and grows lumpy. Soon individual features will be recognizable. It fully hatches when it uncurls and opens its eyes.” Luna answered.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “Hagrid did mention there wasn’t anything about Jothpars that was generally considered useful to farm – so I guess that makes sense. Not even a shell.”

“Not generally useful is a rather odd definition, don’t you think?” Luna responded dreamily.

“Er… I just meant, seeing as not a lot is known about the hatching process – they aren’t well researched, which makes them good candidates for further study.” Harry amended.

Luna worked quietly on her mashed potato sculpture for a few moments in companionable silence. She didn’t seem like she was going to eat, but Harry was grateful for a large meal after everything that had happened that day.

As he was finishing up, Harry asked, “So what do you think has helped your Jothpar develop the most? Any ideas when it will finish hatching?”

“Oh, I’m just showering it with affection – just like any mother would, I suppose. It seems to like the flowers I picked for it.” Luna lifted the flap of her pouch and rubbed the Jothpar egg gently with a finger not covered in white goo.

“But as far as how much longer it will take… I haven’t any idea. Hagrid did say mine was the first to show any signs of change, but I don’t suppose that means anything. There is probably considerable variation after dormancy ends as well. It might even retreat backwards if conditions don’t remain favorable.”

Harry made a mental note to pass this on to Malfoy later. “Thanks Luna. I hope it isn’t too long of a wait for you – kind of excited to see what these Jothpar creatures are like, to be honest.”

“I think they will like you very much.” Luna replied – her curious choice of words not lost to
Still no Draco... not even on the Marauder’s Map, which Harry took as confirmation that his roommate had been abducted for more questioning. He felt terribly frustrated that there wasn’t anything he could do to help.

Ron and Hermione were not in the Common Room, but instead sitting alone in each of their bedrooms. Had they had another row? The guilt about his relationship with Malfoy interfering with theirs was starting to mount. He was trying his best to not wallow in blame, but it was hard not to.

Without Draco present, Harry was able to think about things without his hormones raging. He could admit at least in his own head that he was definitely gay. There was a kind of strength and familiarity about being with another man that was a relief after his rather shallow and awkward attempts at relationships with women.

Harry suspected that his latent realization about liking men probably wasn’t all that unusual, but he did want to ask Charlie about it. So he got out a bit of parchment and began writing a letter while he waited for Draco to return.

The letter started out well enough, but he wasn’t sure how much he should ask in the first letter. Charlie hadn’t yet agreed to correspond with him, after all. It was possible he would decline – so Harry tried to keep his questions general and brief.

Charlie Weasley,

As you may have already heard from Ginny, I’m in need of a confidant with whom I can write and ask questions regarding coming to terms with my sexuality. I am gay as well. I want you to know that I never meant to lead Ginny on, and I do care for her deeply. While you and I have only met briefly, I love your family as if it were my own.

My self-realization and acceptance has only occurred very recently – a fact that bothers me. Having no one to ask what is “normal” in this situation, I’m reaching out to you. Without revealing too much, suffice it to say I have been otherwise pre-occupied by – almost possessed with – the fight against Voldemort for most of my life. Now that it is over, I feel free to explore what options are available to me and how I can find happiness.

I’m curious to know how you discovered your own feelings and how you were able to find a partner and develop a lasting relationship – if that is not too much to ask. I would really appreciate your help. I look forward to your response to the Hogsmeade Owl Office, Box 27. You are welcome to share this with your partner Nicolae, if you are so inclined, but otherwise discretion on this matter is appreciated.

Warm regards,

Harry Potter

It took him three attempts to write something that sounded formal and friendly, rather than too casual or demanding. He had never written a letter like this before. He wondered if he should share it with Draco before posting it. Part of him wanted to share how new all of this was to him, but another part of him felt embarrassed about admitting his own doubts and shortcomings.

The letter didn’t even hint at his budding relationship with Malfoy, anyway – so Harry stuffed it in with his school things to be sent later without sharing it. By now it was really late. Could they hold
Draco overnight at the Ministry? If that was even where he was. Perhaps he was back at the Manor.

Harry looked over at Draco’s empty bed, desperately wishing it wasn’t.

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The sun shone in far too early in the morning for Harry’s liking. He hadn’t bothered to pull the curtains around his bed, hoping to hear Malfoy return sometime in the night. But alas, his bed remained untouched. Harry groaned and rolled over. Being without his best friends and not knowing the whereabouts of his boyfriend was starting to wear on him.

He could try and talk with Ron and Hermione at breakfast. Ron would probably give him the cold shoulder, but Hermione might be civil. He wondered if he needed to apologize. Was he in the wrong somehow?

Harry admitted that some distance from Malfoy wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. He did need to think things through. How were they going to make this work? Just wanting each other probably wasn’t enough - despite how much Harry’s body demanded otherwise.

As much as Harry had tried to avoid thinking about it – part of the problem was Draco’s past. His motivation at the time of his transgressions held significant weight, regardless of how sorry he might be for his actions now. Malfoy had never done anything truly evil – but he hadn’t stepped up against those who were when doing so may have saved lives or prevented harm. This... allowance of evil, did bother Harry – now that he thought about it.

What if something similar were to occur in the future? Harry would jump to act, as he always did. Malfoy might not.

And Harry had his secrets too. He had yet to tell anything to Draco that wasn’t common knowledge, for the most part. As much as he wanted to share the details about the past year with someone – he still wasn’t sure he was ready to unpack everything. It felt kind of... raw.

Did he trust Malfoy with his secrets? Harry found he didn’t know. In the past, Draco would have loved to be in the spotlight and might have shared sensitive information in ways that would only benefit himself. Harry doubted that he would do so now – but that was different than trust.

Doubts started circling to the point where he got up and showered just to clear his head. Was Ron right? As much as Harry wanted this – was what existed between him and Draco destined to fail?

“Harry – we’ve talked about this. At least get a larger towel.” Draco’s voice greeted Harry as he exited the bathroom, fresh from his shower.

Any lingering thoughts against Malfoy melted away as Harry took in the sight of his boyfriend – clean, well dressed, and sitting on Harry’s bed. “Draco! Where have you been?” Harry stole a quick kiss. “I was beginning to worry.”

“Final talk with the Ministry for a while… and then I stayed the night at the Manor. Sorry, that last bit wasn’t exactly planned, or I would have told you.”

Harry scowled, but was also relieved. They kissed again.

“You aren’t going to hide behind your curtain this time? I’m about to abandon the towel to get dressed for breakfast.” Harry teased.
Malfoy’s cheeks were red. Harry’s probably were too.

“I’ve told Mum I’d go back after picking up my school things. I shouldn’t keep her waiting. But I’ll be back before dinner this time. Promise.”

“Oh, alright.” Harry pouted. “Special occasion?” Draco was dressed rather smart.

Draco fidgeted. “I haven’t exactly told her… about us, yet.”

Harry’s stomach dropped. “I see.” He sat down beside Malfoy on his bed, leaving the towel on.

“Are you… worried?”

“A bit.” Draco admitted. That alone told Harry that he was terrified.

Harry decided to be candid. “Honestly, I’m a bit worried too. About us. I really want this to work. Probably why I’m so scared to… open up about it.”

Draco didn’t respond right away. They sat in awkward silence, just their knees touching.

“Harry… I want this to work too. Maybe too much. That’s what I’m afraid my mother will say.”

Harry was confused. “How do you mean?”

“Well, I did tell her after Fifth Year about my… attraction for you. You know… after father was shut up in Azkaban. She said she already knew. But we never brought it up afterwards with… father.” Draco’s voice caught on the last word.

Harry was shocked. So she knew, even as she was saving his life in the forest, how Malfoy felt about him. She had given her wand to Draco to drive Harry out of the castle to be killed, knowing how conflicted he must have been about it. Had it mattered to her, how Draco had felt about him?

“You can want something enough to be made blind by it. That was my father’s downfall, I think.” Malfoy added. “He wanted our rich magical heritage to be respected, our presumed authority acknowledged. He did some horrible things chasing that dream.”

Harry nodded, but was still lost as to how the two ideas connected. It must have shown on his face.

Draco sighed. “My feeling towards you have been… complicated. But I never thought I would actually get to be with you. I want this so much… it might blind me. We haven’t even stopped to think…”

Malfoy trailed off, looking away from Harry.

“I think I know what you mean. It’s okay. Hey… look at me?” Harry coaxed.

Draco turned his face slowly around – he was worrying his lip and looking scared.

“I really want this to work too. I mean that.” Harry looked Draco in the eyes. “But I’m not without doubts. For right now… just this moment… can it just be us? You and me. No worrying?” Harry placed his hands on either side of Draco’s face.

“Yes.” Malfoy relaxed into Harry’s embrace.

“Kiss me?” Harry asked.

Draco kissed him. It was more passionate and needy than any kiss they had shared before. Malfoy
pushed Harry down onto the bed and straddled him. Just as suddenly as the kiss began, Draco pulled away. “I really can’t stay long.”

“That’s okay. I’m glad you are alright, Draco. I hope you have a good day with your mother.” Harry said earnestly. “I’ll… miss you.” Harry hesitantly added, blushing.

Draco just nodded and blushed in return. Harry’s towel had become untucked and hung precariously low. Both of their gazes were drawn downwards. By strength of will Harry had never guessed Malfoy to possess, he got up from the bed, straightened his own clothes, and headed for the door.

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Harry felt like Hermione would be very proud of him. He was in the library, just finishing up all his homework and preparations for his next Student Teaching lesson. He had missed Ron and Hermione at breakfast and sat with Luna again at lunch. And without anyone else to distract him – and nothing else to do until Draco returned – he had burned through it all surprisingly quickly.

He sent off the letter to Charlie as well. He was pondering sending one off to Seamus too – but wondered if Draco might take offense to that should he ever find out. Now that he had a secure way to write and receive letters he was rather desperate to use it. Being without Ron and Hermione for too long was reminding him too much of his lonely summers with the Dursleys.

As dinnertime got nearer, Harry grew more anxious. How had things gone for Draco? Not having parents to seek approval from seemed rather convenient right about now. Remembering how smart Malfoy had looked, Harry made an effort to clean himself up. But when he looked in the mirror he was reminded why he generally just didn’t bother. His hair remained messy – spoiling the look no matter how dapper he dressed.

The door to their room closed with a click. “Draco?” No response. Harry walked back into the bedroom to find Draco digging through his trunk.

“Welcome back. So how… did…” He drifted off. “Oh my God, Draco! What happened?”

Draco’s nice shirt was rumpled and covered in blood and his usually perfect hair tousled and dirty.

“I’m fine… just… tripped down the stairs. I’ll clean up.” Draco didn’t meet Harry’s gaze.

“What… the… HELL… happened!?” Harry demanded, catching Malfoy’s lie. “I should take you to the Hospital Wing.”

“Just some jerks… tripped me up… please… really, I’m fine. Just got a bloody nose. Looks worse than it is.” Malfoy kept digging in his trunk until he emerged with a clean shirt and a little flask.

“Please… Draco… can I help?” Harry offered, but Malfoy shrugged him off and stalked off towards the bathroom. His face looked more like someone had smashed it into the ground. The bathroom door slammed shut, leaving Harry alone again.

It wasn’t really that long, but it seemed like ages before Malfoy re-emerged. His face was still a little swollen, but his hair was perhaps even more impeccably styled than usual and there wasn’t even the smallest trace of blood anywhere.

“Draco… tell me what happened.” Harry insisted.

Draco shook his head, but winced visibly. “Nothing I can’t handle. And you will just blow it out of
proportion. Some self-righteous Seventh Years just didn’t take kindly to my coming back to Hogwarts. Please, Harry, just leave it be.” He said tersely.

Harry scowled, but looked his boyfriend over good for any sign of additional injuries. He didn’t dare speak for fear of angering Draco further, but wanted to protest. They glared at each other for a few moments. Definitely not the happy reunion Harry had hoped for all day.

“At least tell me... how things went at home?” Harry asked after a few more awkward seconds.

Draco visibly relaxed. “Better than I expected. She… is surprisingly okay with the idea.”

“Well... that’s good news, at least. Are you sure you…” Harry began.

“I’m fine!” Draco stiffened back up.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to lay down for a bit before going down to dinner. Rest?” Harry finished.

Draco looked chastened. “I would like that actually.”

Draco sank gratefully into his bed, but left plenty of room for Harry to slide in behind. Harry was going straight to McGonagall as soon as he could manage it without Draco knowing.

Harry was angry. He was angry that anyone would hurt Malfoy, but also angry with Malfoy for not telling him what had happened and refusing to go to the Hospital Wing. Granted, any injuries he had sustained probably weren’t life threatening – but still… to be bruised and bloodied on school grounds was outrageous.

Harry tightened his protective embrace on his wounded boyfriend – suddenly struck by a thought. “Draco… where is your Jothpar egg?”

“Don’t worry, I left it safe in my trunk yesterday afternoon. Didn’t want to wear it out to my meeting at the Ministry and with my mother. It’s fine.” Draco sighed.

“Luna told me about the hatching process while you were away. Remind me later and I’ll tell you all about it – okay?” Harry kissed Draco’s neck gently.

“K.” Draco said sleepily.

Harry let him doze for a while until they would have to make their way down to the Great Hall or risk not getting any food. They were still angry with each other.

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At dinner, Luna explained in detail what all of the flowers she had tied around her Jothpar pouch were and why she had picked them. It was incredibly dull, but Harry tried to be polite anyway. He kept glancing over at the Slytherin table to make sure Malfoy was still doing alright.

The tiny First Year, Madeline Gaunt, was chatting away to him, much to Harry’s delight. And you could hardly tell that his face was still a bit tender. Maybe Harry really was getting worked up over nothing.

“Thanks, Luna. I’ll try and pass all that on to Draco. He’s keen on hatching a healthy Jothpar.” Harry managed once they were both finished eating.

“I’d be happy to show him where to pick the best mallow on the grounds if he’s interested.” Luna
Harry just nodded and retreated back up the stairs to talk to Malfoy. But when he arrived to their shared room he was surprised to see Malfoy’s bed curtains drawn up tight.

“Draco… are you turning in?” Harry asked quietly.

“Just leave me alone.” Draco sounded angry.

Harry was unsure why he was being shut-out. “Draco… please… tell me what’s going on.”

There wasn’t any reply for a few seconds. Harry thought that perhaps he was being ignored – and was starting to get angry again himself. But then Malfoy pulled back the curtains, letting Harry see his face. Draco wasn’t angry… he was crying.

All the fight went out of Harry at the sight. He gathered Draco gently into his arms and just held him for a few moments. At first Draco seemed embarrassed to let Harry see him so vulnerable, but when Harry didn’t pull away he began to relax and let the tears just flow for a while.

After he had calmed down fully, Malfoy spoke. “Today has been equal parts terrible and wonderful – and I’m exhausted. Sleep in my bed with me again tonight?”

“Of course.” Harry released Draco so that he could wash up and change. Harry did the same.

They reconvened on Draco’s bed, cleaner and more comfortable. Harry snuggled in to his usual place and they just looked at one another for a while. Draco’s eye had started to darken to an angry purple.

“Can you tell me more tomorrow? At least part of it. I just want to know you are okay.” Harry asked.

Malfoy nodded reluctantly. “Alright. Tomorrow.” Sleep claimed Malfoy first that night as Harry stroked his brilliant silver hair.
Finally Out in the Open

It was Saturday. Harry awoke nestled against Draco’s warm back. His boyfriend’s calm, quiet breathing told Harry that he was still asleep. The curtains had only been pulled partly closed, so the morning light was peeking in – transforming everything it touched to gold. It felt good to just lay there for a while longer, soaking in the warmth and reveling in the now familiar and welcome scent of Malfoy.

Harry smiled. His younger self would never have believed he would someday enjoy sharing a bed with his old rival. Slowly, the events of yesterday filtered their way into his mind and Harry remembered what Draco had promised. Today they would be… talking. Would this bring them closer, or tear them apart?

This time, it was easy to slip out of bed without disturbing Malfoy. Harry found a scrap of parchment and wrote a quick note to tell his roommate he would be collecting breakfast and left it on the nightstand. Draco didn’t stir as Harry changed and quietly left the room. There was chatter and soft laughter coming from the Common Room – Harry would have to hurry down to the Great Hall for food.

Ron, Neville, and Goyle were all sitting by the fire talking about Neville’s disastrous first Student Teaching day – but they were all smiles, so it mustn’t have been really that bad. Harry was jealous of their easy comradery, so he slipped past hurriedly. Every face he saw as he descended the stairs was carefree and open, in stark contrast to Harry’s now roiling nerves.

“Thank goodness… I’d about given up.” Hermione’s voice chimed as Harry turned the last corner. She must have been waiting for him. “Morning, Harry!” Her smile was genuine.

“Good morning, Hermione.” Harry felt himself relax a little in her presence. He had missed her.

“I’m sorry about Ron. He’s being more… stubborn about this than I thought he would be. How’s… Draco?” Hermione tried to ask casually, although Harry could tell it was a little forced.

“Sleeping. Someone beat his face in yesterday – and he refused to see Madam Pomfrey, the git.” Harry replied, trying to remain calm. “I’m just grabbing some breakfast for us and then I’ll be right back up. But it is good to see you, Hermione.”

Hermione looked shaken. “Oh… I’m sorry. Have you told McGonagall? Was it another student?”

“I haven’t mentioned it to her yet, but I plan to. Malfoy wouldn’t tell me much. Seemed more embarrassed now that I think about it than actually hurt. Said it was some Seventh Years.” Harry quickly piled some fresh fruit, toast, and cheese on two plates.

“I could tell her, if you’d like.” Hermione offered. Harry was touched.

“Would you? Then I could claim plausible deniability about the whole thing. Somehow I don’t think this is the first time he’s been bullied since coming back to Hogwarts.” Harry remembered the medicine flask Malfoy had retrieved from his trunk.

“I really am sorry, Harry. Both about this and… that things are so strained right now. That’s what I wanted to say. I’ll go tell McGonagall for you.” Hermione gave his shoulder a reassuring pat and then she made her way up to the high table while Harry escaped with his plates of food.

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Draco was digging through his trunk again when Harry returned to their room – wrapped in his dressing gown, but with his hair still thoroughly ruffled from sleep. It was quite an endearing sight, actually.

“Morning. I brought food.” Harry announced himself.

Draco’s cheeks grew red. “You really didn’t have to.”

“No, I didn’t. But here I am, just the same. Grapes or apples?” Harry set both plates on his own, still made bed.

“Um… in a minute. My head is killing me.” Malfoy went back to rummaging through his trunk. His Jothpar egg had been safely set aside on the floor in a nest of clothes. After a minute, Harry picked it up, pouch and all, and put it on.

“You don’t mind if I have a go with it, do you?” Harry asked. “I promise not to spill butter on it.”

Draco smiled despite himself. “Knock yourself out.” He retrieved what looked like a small tin from the bottom of his trunk and opened it up. “There you are, bloody thing.”

Harry watched silently as Malfoy dabbed white cream from the tin generously on his forehead and around his bruised eye. In just seconds, he sighed in obvious relief.

“What is that?” Harry asked.

“Potion concentrate. Potent stuff – but it works wonders. I was trying to perfect it back before… everything happened.” Draco supplied.

“That’s… brilliant. Feeling well enough for breakfast? I’m starving.” Harry patted the spot next to him on the bed – doing a passable job at faking joviality.

Malfoy obediently sat down next to him. Harry stole a quick kiss. Draco’s face was a bit more swollen than yesterday, but it didn’t look bad.

“Apple for me.” Malfoy reached over and grabbed the nearest plate.

They ate in companionable silence for a little while, although Harry didn’t really taste much of the meal. He wasn’t going to bring up their conversation from last night, but was waiting for Draco to initiate it. Once they got to the last few mouthfuls the atmosphere became more awkward – neither of them wanting to speak first, it seemed.

“Harry… about yesterday. It might take some time to explain… everything.” Malfoy was worrying his lower lip again.

“That’s alright. We’ve got time. And… I think we need this.” Harry admitted.

“I’m not as… strong as you are. Not as… reckless.” Draco said quietly. “Admitting fault is… difficult for me. It lets others see weaknesses to exploit.” He unconsciously wrapped his dressing gown tighter around himself.

Harry just nodded for Malfoy to continue, although he was rather baffled by this train of thought.

“I was expected to uphold the family name and our… respectability. But that is all rubbish now.” Draco said mournfully. “It isn’t something I can imagine you understand – needing to show off only our best, mingling with those in power to ensure our continued high social status. Mother
makes it look easy – almost like an art. It was a lot of… pressure to live under.”

Draco was right, Harry had no idea what that was like. He waited for Malfoy to continue.

“My father specifically told me to befriend you back in First Year. It was humiliating to be rejected, and worse still to have to owl my father about my failing. I feel like I was my father’s bloody puppet back then. I admired him so much.” Draco drifted off for a moment.

“I suppose… that’s probably not unusual. Although you are right – I don’t really understand.” Harry offered.

“When I did well, I was praised and given gifts and sent on holiday. I was spoiled – I know that now. But I thought everyone’s parents treated them that way. It was easy to think and behave just as my father wanted. Mother didn’t protest – although after our talk yesterday, I think she wanted to.” Draco was staring down at the hearthrug.

“You didn’t seem to have to do anything and people loved you anyway. I was insanely jealous. It was obvious you never had to endure an endless stream of tutors teaching you how to sit and walk and eat and dress. For a long time I couldn’t figure out why people thought you were special.” This admission was said with some bite.

“Draco… I never wanted fame. It was all by chance… something that happened so long ago I can only barely remember even the faintest memory of it. And I knew nothing of the Wizarding World until I came to Hogwarts. It was… unnerving to be given so much attention. I’ve always disliked it.” Harry countered.

“But you earned it. It seemed like every year you achieved yet another heroic feat – and it was natural for people to take note. Nothing I did was ever worth noticing compared to you.” Draco replied coolly. This was an old wound, one that he had carried around so long the pain of it was just a part of him now – Harry could tell, and it made him terribly uncomfortable.

“I think I was so vile towards you and your friends because it made me feel a little better to bring you down. I had a lot of time to just think, cooped-up in the Manor with… the Dark Lord. At first, back after the disastrous end of Fifth Year – I was proud that he arranged for me to join the Death Eaters so early. I thought he saw some potential in me. He had a clever way of talking – which I only later discovered to be a way he masked his true intentions. Flattery. I was so taken in by it. But… my mother saw through him. My appointment was a punishment on my family for my father’s failure. The mission I was assigned… I think he believed he was sending me to my death. Either by Dumbledore’s hand, or by the dementors of Azkaban.” Malfoy closed his eyes, obviously reliving an unpleasant memory.

This was the time Harry needed to ask for more, no matter how scary the reply. “Draco… when did you realize you had… put your trust in the wrong side?” He held his breath.

“You mean did I have any reservations about my actions Sixth Year? Am I sorry for nearly killing Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley – and putting everyone’s life at risk by bringing Death Eaters into Hogwarts?” Malfoy didn’t open his eyes.

“Yes.” Harry said.

“Yes.” Draco breathed out simply.

Harry waited for more. The silence drug on for a while, but neither of them seemed ready to break it. Harry put a hand on Malfoy’s knee and gave him an encouraging squeeze.
“After training with my aunt… just before the train to Hogwarts… the Dark Lord took me out on another mission. They touted it as an initiation ceremony. My aunt was thrilled. They raided a minor government official’s home… someone they thought they could use to get a foothold into the Ministry.” Malfoy’s voice began to break. “They… killed… the man’s wife. Slaughtered the family’s house elves. Sta…stack…stacked the bodies up and b…b…burned them in the… front garden. I had n…never seen anything like that.”

Harry’s stomach gave a turn, his mouth grew dry.

“I was mortified. Of course, I didn’t take part. I guess a part of me still hadn’t considered the reality of what my father actually did as a member of the Death Eaters. Saw what had happened to him as an injustice. I was proud of him up until that moment. But by then… I had the Mark… and the Dark Lord took up residence in our home. I was… trapped. My behavior on the train… the bravado. I was so scared that if I showed any weakness to any of my friends… word would reach back to him.” Draco’s voice had dropped to below a whisper, as if he was still frightened.

“But by then you could have gone to Dumbledore for help. Told someone.” Harry countered.

“I still saw Dumbledore as an enemy. Just because I was disillusioned by the Death Eaters didn’t mean I was ready to accept the other side. I could feel the… burn… through the Mark whenever he summoned his forces or went on more raids. And… I stupidly thought I could still turn everything around if I succeeded. I thought everything would go back to normal. I thought… he would leave us alone.” Here Draco scoffed.

Harry had surmised most of this already – but it was a relief, in a way, to hear it confirmed. “Ron… he doesn’t seem to believe you regret any of it.”

Draco gave a short, false laugh. “I soon realized what it meant if I failed in my mission. I began to suspect the Dark Lord’s real reasons for appointing me a bloody Death Eater. I was so scared – it made sense at first to have some kind of back-up plan. The opal necklace and the mead… I set them up hastily, at the same time. I didn’t stop to think what harm they could do in the wrong hands. Both could have killed anyone, even my own friends. I was… so, so stupid.” Malfoy choked back tears.

Harry wrapped his arms around him and waited for his breathing to calm down enough to continue. “I believe you. It doesn’t make what you did any better. But I saw what that strain did to you. I was there… on the Astronomy Tower. I was bound by Dumbledore… unable to interfere. In some ways… I was his puppet as much as you were Voldemort’s.”

Malfory shuddered at the name. “I regret… not taking Dumbledore’s hand.”

“He was dying anyway. Cursed. You’re not the only one with secrets that need telling.” Harry offered.

“He… what?” Malfoy looked stunned.

“And he knew. Snape told him everything. They planned it all together… in the end. I only found out later.” Harry hadn’t considered how desperately Draco needed to know more of the details of what had happened that night. It took hours to explain everything. They missed lunch.

Afterwards, Harry found himself stroking Draco’s arm. It was bare – the Dark Mark having vanished along with its master. It was almost as if he could sense Malfoy digesting all of this new information. The revelations must have been enormous.
“Dumbledore did all that… and still… you had to… die.” Malfoy whispered.

“I haven’t really decided how to feel about it myself, yet.” Harry admitted. He felt raw inside after divulging so much. This time it was Draco who wrapped his arms around Harry.

“We make a fine pair of puppets, don’t we?” Malfoy concluded.

“I suppose we do.” Harry answered.

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After being cooped-up for so long, and after such emotional revelations, both of them needed a break. They decided on taking a stroll on the grounds until dinner – since they were both rather hungry. It felt good to stretch their legs and breathe the fresh air. There was a bit of a chill in the air and the trees were starting to turn proper autumn colors.

“You know… while I’m glad we talked… you still haven’t told me about yesterday.” Harry mentioned as they began the return trip towards the castle.

Draco groaned. “You just won’t let that die, will you?”

“Nope.” Harry nudged Malfoy in the ribs.

“Alright… fine. Since you seem to know everything else.” Draco was starting to regain some of his confidence – or sass. It was encouraging. “Our meeting at the Ministry ran late, so it made sense to just go home to the Manor. My mother sent word to McGonagall. I’ve been using the fire in her office to get around. I was scared to tell my mother about us. I guess I shouldn’t have been. Her marriage to my father was somewhat… arranged. My father’s passing means she is free to be herself once more. She was always keen on making sure I didn’t end up the same way.”

“I suppose that is a small mercy, after all that has happened.” Harry acknowledged. They had reached the castle by now and were about to go into the Great Hall. “I’ll sit with you at dinner. If you don’t mind, that is?”

“Really? People will talk.” Draco replied.

“Let them. It’s not an announcement – just dinner.” Harry reasoned.

“If you insist.” But Malfoy couldn’t hide his smile. They did get some strange looks from almost everyone in the Great Hall as they took their seat, but no one was bold enough to say anything.

“So… what happened after the talk with your mother?” Harry tried to ignore everything else besides the glorious spread before him and his boyfriend.

“If you must know… I decided to apparate to Hogsmeade on the return journey, since I didn’t want to keep disturbing McGonagall. That was a mistake. Other students are… bolder when not on school grounds. A group of them decided to rough me up a little. I didn’t dare fight back in earnest… in case I lost my place here. But I was also… embarrassed to be bested by them.” Draco made sure only Harry could hear the last bit.

“Will you tell me who it was?” Harry tried.

“Certainly not. Either you will hex them yourself, or you will run to McGonagall about it. I don’t want any trouble. Getting to come back… I don’t want anything to jeopardize this chance.” Draco said firmly.
“Fair enough.” Harry wasn’t sorry at all that Hermione had already told McGonagall on his behalf.

“Professor Potter, sir. Why are you sitting at the Slytherin table?” The First Year, Catherine Burke asked rather suddenly. Little Madeline Gaunt sat next to her, fearfully, but also just as curious.

“Er… just Student Teacher Potter, thanks. The Headmistress told us we can sit where we like. And seeing as I’m bunking with… er… Student Teacher Malfoy, we decided to continue our chat over dinner. That’s all.” Harry tried to answer kindly.

Catherine Burke just gave him a disbelieving look. But Madeline Gaunt looked delighted.

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The strange looks continued all the way up to their Common Room. Harry was looking forward to escaping it all, but as luck would have it they were confronted again in the hallway to their room.

“You sure you know what you’re doing, Potter?” This came from Blaise Zabini.

“I have no idea what you mean.” Harry answered, ignoring him.

“I’m not blind Malfoy. Or deaf. This will come out sooner or later.” Zabini warned, before disappearing into his own room.

Harry’s face was hot. It seemed like their secret was quickly unraveling.

“He’s not one to snitch, if you are worried. Especially about relationships.” Malfoy tried to sound reassuring. “I’ve got plenty of dirt on him to be sure of it.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I did say I wanted to be honest should anyone ask.”

“That didn’t sound much like a question.” Draco parried.

“I guess we will have to just enjoy the quiet while it lasts. I’m not going to sneak around about this.” Harry said, determined.

“Of course not. You’re an idiot… you know that right?” Malfoy’s reply was without venom.

“Maybe.” Harry was keen on getting to their room and to give up talking for the day. Once the door was shut behind them, he pushed Draco up against the door and gave him a deep kiss.

Something hard and round stopped them from getting closer, however. Harry broke away and looked down at the Jothpar egg pouch that still hung from his neck. His brain finally clicked. He had been wearing it all day long. Out on their stroll over the castle grounds and all throughout dinner. By now, everyone would know he wasn’t in Hagrid’s class. It was kind of like an announcement after all.

“Shit. Well… bugger to keeping things quiet.” Harry removed the pouch gently. Draco seemed to catch on as well.

“Oh…” Was all his boyfriend managed in reply. “Hang on… what have you done to it?!” Draco suddenly sounded angry. He removed the egg from the bag to get a better look.

It was definitely larger and lumpier than it had been before. Harry laughed. “It’s starting to hatch! Luna said this is what her egg started to look like.”

“Are you certain? How long has it been like this?” Draco’s anger subsided. “I’m supposed to be
“Sorry… I’m not sure. I’ve barely done any magic all day. Maybe it was like this from being in your trunk? You didn’t notice anything different when you put it away?” Harry asked.

“All that is in there is my soaps, healing potions, and the cream. Nothing that would cause a significant reaction.” Malfoy looked uncertain.

“Luna exposed her egg to lots of plants. What is in your potions?” Harry was excited.

“Dittany… sage… willow… mostly plants. You really think that is what’s done it?” Malfoy was starting to be excited too.

“Potions is a subtle magic. Isn’t that what Snape always used to say? They must get exposure to magic in the wild somehow.” Harry supplied.

“Brilliant!” Draco kissed Harry thoroughly. “I still want to keep him covered while brewing during class, just in case, but fragrance and gentle plant extracts might be worth trying next.”

“So it’s a him, now? Do Jothpar’s even have gender?” Harry smirked.

Malfoy blushed. “I haven’t a clue.”

“No matter. Just don’t name him until after he’s hatched, okay? And I call the right to veto anything you pick.” Harry kept teasing. “Otherwise he’ll end up with a terrible, snobbish kind of name.”

Draco glared at him. “Authority not granted.” But he laughed as he said it.

“Let’s make him a nest, at least. I want you all to myself tonight.” Harry cooed affectionately.

Malfoy didn’t object to that.

Harry warded the room, heeding Zabini’s warning. Stolen kisses here and there over the last couple days were just not enough. He needed Draco in a way he had never needed anyone before.

“Shall we give my bed a turn?” Harry nodded towards his side of the room – which for once, seemed less messy.

“Yes… alright.” Malfoy’s cheeks were a bit pink.

Harry led the way, dragging his boyfriend by the hand. His prick already stirring in his trousers – which seemed awfully tight all of the sudden. They removed their robes, just like before, as well as their ties. They just looked at each other of a bit – waiting to see who would make the first move.

“May I?” Harry asked, finally, gesturing down to Draco’s shirt buttons.

“You first.” Draco said firmly, grabbing at Harry’s shirtfront and starting on his buttons instead. It didn’t take long before they were undone and Malfoy was gently peeling the sleeves off his shoulders. He kissed them both, one at a time.

Harry’s cock was fully hard now, in desperate need of some rearranging. He tried to be subtle about moving it around to a more comfortable position, but Draco noticed. They both laughed. Sex was just awkward sometimes – a reality that Harry was starting to understand.
“Is that for me?” Draco teased.

“Maybe.” Harry teased back, before kissing Malfoy long and deep. They were now pressed together so tightly, he could feel Malfoy’s heightened pulse.

“My turn.” Harry announced. He pulled away enough that he could get at Draco’s buttons. The shirt fell away easily, into a small puddle on the floor. The skin beneath was almost glowing in the low evening light. Harry kissed every part he could reach.

Spurred on by Malfoy, they migrated towards Harry’s bed. By now they were both breathing heavily. It was exciting to take things slow – to let things build. Harry kissed Malfoy again and again, relishing how right it felt. Neither of them had shaved that day, so their rough cheeks grated together and felt incredible scraping against bare flesh. Draco moaned when Harry sucked and nibbled gently at his throat, just below his ear. His hands caressing Malfoy’s lower back. They lower they crept, the louder Draco became.

“Lay down?” Harry suggested.

They both clambered onto the bed. Harry undid his pants, but left them on. Malfoy did the same. All at once Harry recalled seeing Draco lying like that once before, not long ago. Only there was a dangerously large pool of blood swirling around at the time. It made him still, like ice.

“What is it?” Draco asked, sensing the change.

“Er… sorry. I guess I just… I never really apologized for… that day… in Sixth Year. When I… when I cursed you.” Harry stammered.

Malfoy looked pensive. “I think you just did. Besides… I was about to…”

“You could have died.” He interjected.

Draco didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know… I didn’t know what the spell would do. Seeing you… like that. I felt as if… I deserved whatever came next.” Harry admitted.

“Well, that’s one way to spoil the mood.” Draco slid over and patted the bed next to him. “I forgive you. Now forget it and just lay here with me.”

Harry obeyed, sighing in relief.

It was hours later, in the middle of the night when Harry awoke – not having realized he had drifted to sleep cuddling Malfoy. Draco’s shallow, even breathing told him he wasn’t alone. But it wasn’t that which had awoken him.

From underneath the bed came a strange… scraping sound? It sounded almost like scissors. Harry carefully extricated himself from Draco’s embrace – not wanting to wake him. The sound was faint. He bent down to see if one of the house elves were about, but there was no one there. Harry checked on the Jothpar egg, just to be sure, but nothing seemed to have changed.

Harry chalked it down to an over-active imagination and stole a blanket from Draco’s bed to cover himself and his boyfriend back up for the duration of the night.
The Monster Revealed?

A few days later, after becoming more familiar with their new school routine, the number on the Owl Office key Harry dutifully kept in his pocket changed from red to green. He noticed during breakfast the day Draco agreed to sit with him at the Ravenclaw table with Luna. Malfoy had been avoiding Luna at all costs up until then, despite Harry’s reassurance that Luna harbored no ill will against him. Their interactions were amusing to witness after the initial awkwardness abated.

“Blast…” Harry murmured under his breath, both nervous about what the letter might contain – and too excited to wait all the way until the afternoon to see.

“Something wrong?” Luna asked airily.

“Oh… no, just have to run an errand to Hogsmeade after classes. Didn’t mean to interrupt… you were telling Draco about… er… what were they called again?” Harry brushed the question off.

“Winged fruits of Haloxylon. They come from the native region of the Jothpars. It isn’t used much in Western Magic, but you could ask Professor Sprout if she’s got any. Might be a worth a try if you are still keen on testing plant extracts.” Luna repeated herself.

“I think I’ve heard of it. What does it do?” Draco asked.

“The Egyptians used it as an anti-septic. Although my Papa swears it works wonders for his arthritic knees. Likes to put some in his morning tea. I don’t know where he gets his… but I could ask if there aren’t any in the Greenhouses.” Luna offered.

“That’s kind of you.” Harry replied, looking to Draco. It was his Jothpar egg, after all.

“That’s actually… pretty smart.” Malfoy admitted.

Luna shrugged. “A fresh Haloxylon sprig is supposed to charm beetles, too. I should tell Hagrid… he seemed worried about his last crop of cabbages.” She seemed to drift off into her own thoughts after that. Draco looked to Harry as if to ask if she was being serious or not.

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Ron and Hermione seem to have made up, but they were still keeping their distance from Harry. Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic look every now and then – and occasionally a genuine smile, even when he was with Malfoy. Harry was surprised how little things seemed to have changed after he started hanging around Draco in public. They never held hands or kissed outside of their room, of course – neither of them were ready for the kind of attention that would bring.

With classes finally over for the day, Harry was free to collect his letter from Charlie. He invited Draco to tag along, but his boyfriend refused. Hiking all the way to Hogsmeade and back before dinner was not his idea of fun, “no matter whose company the trek was to be endured.” Harry just called him lazy – their banter light hearted now, instead of spiteful.

Adonica was washing her windows this time and just waved at Harry from atop her ladder. A gentle spray of soapy water gushed from her wand, making too much noise for conversation. He was wearing a hat and a lumpy scarf Hermione had given him once to help conceal his identity, which he gratefully removed upon entering the Owl Office. While it was looking more like autumn every day, it was still too warm for so many layers.
This time the box that emerged from the wall held a thick, brown envelope. It felt like it was at least three full sheets of parchment, or more. Harry felt safe to assume he hadn’t been denied, at least. He wanted to read it right away, but also wanted to be alone somewhere safe to do so. And what if he needed to reply? Harry left the Owl Office, waved to Adonica again, but didn’t Apparate to the gate. Instead he walked down the lane towards the Shrieking Shack.

Harry didn’t go inside the shack, but he did hop the fence and found a fallen log to sit on to read his letter, away from any prying eyes. The woods were peaceful and quiet in the waning light of the day – dappled patches flickering ever so slightly in a mild breeze. Draco would be sorry he missed a chance to relax in such a scenic spot, Harry thought. Tearing the brown paper to open the letter seemed unusually loud in the stillness.

Charlie had included a small photograph of him and Nicolae, probably in some local Romanian pub. They had their arms around each other and they were laughing. They looked so happy. Harry pocketed the photo to share with Ginny later and began reading the long letter. The handwriting was atrociously similar to Ron’s, otherwise Harry might have had even more trouble reading it than he did. Occasionally a much neater hand would interject with details, which Harry assumed must have been Nicolae.

Most of the letter was sweet and made Harry feel much better about coming to terms with everything. Charlie promised to answer any questions that Harry might have, and act as a support when possible. Harry was relieved and was looking forward to meeting the pair properly in person someday. Perhaps at their wedding.

The last page proved that Charlie was both willing to answer any question Harry might have and also that he was positively shameless. Harry was glad for the privacy the woods offered, his cheeks felt like they were on fire. While he appreciated the information, it would still be some time yet before Harry felt comfortable even considering putting any of it to practical use. But he couldn’t wait to share the letter with Draco in any case… just to see his reaction.

The peaceful stillness of the woods seemed to shift as the sun began to set. The shadows grew longer and more sinister. It became too quiet – no rustling leaves or bird calls. Having no pressing need to reply to Charlie, Harry donned his hat and scarf and prepared to Apparate to the gate. But something stopped him. Very faintly, Harry could make out the scraping sound once again.

Something else made a sound in the bushes, as if another person was walking towards the Shrieking Shack from the opposite direction. Their footsteps were slow and uneven. The scraping sound grew louder too, along with a… whimpering. Was that labored, wheezing breath – or a moan of pain? Harry wasn’t sure, but he was suddenly regretting not having his Invisibility Cloak. He could Apparate away, he reasoned, should this new presence prove unfriendly.

There was a soft thump… and then the noises stopped. Harry drew his wand, but whatever or whoever was lurking in the trees did not advance. Perhaps they had Apparated away instead? Harry lit his wand but in the twilight it didn’t seem to do him any good. It seemed silly to keep looking around, especially when Harry had no idea what he was searching for. Again, perhaps it was just his imagination – it was probably just a local collecting firewood. Scolding himself for being paranoid, Harry disappeared.

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Draco had evidently had a busy afternoon himself. Harry found him crouched by the fire stirring a small caldron full of what looked like green goo. The Jothpar egg was nestled on top of a pile of clothes and bedding on Harry’s bed – looking larger and lumpier than ever. Despite how vile whatever the concoction was over the fire looked, the room smelled lovely. It was kind of like tea,
pine, and musk all wrapped together. Thoughts about Charlie’s letter quickly evaporated.

“What’s all this?” Harry asked, laughing.

Draco looked smug. “I went and asked Professor Sprout about needing a sample of Haloxylon. Its common name is Saxaul – if you can believe it. She didn’t have any, but it turns out I did – once I knew what to look for. It’s the main ingredient in the hair potion my mother bought for me at the start of term. I’ve been using it as shampoo now and again. Interesting smell, don’t you think?”

Harry had a flashback to jacking-off with the stuff. “Er… yes… very nice in fact.” His cheeks grew pink and he needed to sit down to hide a budding erection. He cuddled up to the Jothpar egg.

“Scent magic is a very… obscure art. The library barely had four books on the subject.” Draco pointed to a small pile at Harry’s feet. Harry wasn’t sure if he should be pleased or annoyed that Malfoy had started claiming Harry’s side of the room. “But it might be promising. It would certainly explain why up until now the excuse has been simple exposure to magic.”

“I thought the assignment was to document and observe. This seems like actively… intervening.” Harry found himself saying. He regretted it almost immediately.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “Which is why this experiment will be kept between us. Right?”

“Of course.” Harry agreed, cursing his newly discovered loyalty to a Slytherin.

“This is just a mixture to enhance the aroma, anyway. I’ve been drafting out ways Haloxylon can be substituted or incorporated into simple potions – once I get my hands on the real thing. The Winged Fruits are supposed to be… lovely.” Draco looked almost dreamy, as he took the caldron off the fire and onto the hearth to cool.

Harry’s brain was foggy. “I’m pretty sure whatever you’ve been up to is… affecting us. I can’t seem to… focus.” The room was fuzzy around the edges in Harry’s eyes now. He got up to crack a window.

“Aww… don’t do that. It’s for our little egg.” Draco protested, but he didn’t get up from beside the fire to stop Harry. The affection he had for the Jothpar egg seemed a bit too soppy.

“How much of your hair potion did you put in there?” Harry asked, with a shake of his head. They definitely needed to clear the air.

“All of it.” Draco was lazily stirring the concoction with a blissed-out expression on his face.

Harry reached the window, opened it, and took gulps of fresh air. “Yeah… I’m pretty sure you are high. I think that is enough experimenting for one day. I can’t take you down to dinner like this.”

Malfoy didn’t protest but tried, and failed, to give Harry a withering look.

Harry just laughed. “Clean this up. I’ve got something I want to share with you.”

“Is it about your Hogsmeade errand?” Malfoy abandoned the caldron and moved to Harry’s bed so that he could examine the Jothpar egg for any changes.

“Yes.” Harry was suddenly a little nervous about sharing all of the details with his boyfriend. “You remember that this… being gay… is still very new for me. I reached out to a friend to… sort of… help me feel… better about things. There are a lot of questions…” He could tell he wasn’t explaining it very well.
“Questions about what? Why couldn’t you just ask me?” Draco was starting to come out of his stupor.

Harry sighed, feeling exasperated. “Because I’m with you. I needed to know if what I am… what we are… is normal. How to proceed. There isn’t exactly a guide book on how to successfully date a Malfoy.”

“I think we missed dinner.” Draco replied, out of the blue.

Harry checked the time with his wand. “Er… yeah… I guess we did.”

“Well, who is this ‘friend’?” Malfoy was now stroking the Jothpar egg fondly. “You told them about us?”

Harry noted that Draco sounded a bit… hurt. “No, I didn’t mention you at all. It was more for myself, really. Learning to be comfortable in my own skin, I guess. But he sent me back a reply. It really is a great letter. Why don’t you read it?” Harry offered the letter and picture to Draco.

It was agony waiting for Draco to finish reading. Harry took up stroking the egg just to have something to do while Malfoy was busy. It was awfully lumpy. It almost looked like a curled up little creature, with a large, round head, small square body, and stubby little limbs.

“Oh…” Draco had gotten to the last page, Harry could tell by the color of his cheeks.

“Yeah… he answered a lot of… questions. I didn’t even ask for those.” Harry replied sheepishly.

Malfoy kept reading until the end, and then looked at the picture for a long time. Harry wasn’t sure what to say next.

“Do you think… that we can really do this? Make it work… long term.” Draco finally asked.

Harry was surprised by the question. “I hope so.”

“They look so… happy.” Malfoy was still looking at the photograph.

“I think they are. Ron said they are even thinking about getting married.” Harry added.

Draco finally put the picture down and looked at Harry with large, frightened eyes. “Is that what you would want… someday?” Malfoy’s look was piercing.

“Someday… yeah. I asked at the start if I could keep you. If we can make this work…” Harry trailed off.

“You wouldn’t want… kids?” Draco’s voice had dropped to a whisper.

Harry hadn’t anticipated sharing the letter taking a turn like this. “I grew up in a home where I wasn’t wanted. No child deserves that. If… someday… I decide along with my partner that we want children, I know there are kids out there in need of a real family.”

Draco looked thoughtful. “Blood was so important to my father. Do you think… maybe… they wouldn’t feel like they really belonged?”

“Those I consider family now… we aren’t related by blood.” Harry thought fondly of the Weasleys.

Malfoy sighed. “I think you were right about the potion. I still feel a bit fuzzy. Far too addled to be
talking about all this, anyway.” But Harry noticed his smile.

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After a quick trip down to the kitchens for leftovers – which turned out to be much more, as they should have expected from the house elves – Harry and Draco returned to their room to prepare for bed. They had fondled each other and Harry had given Malfoy several blow jobs by now, but they had yet to go further in their relationship. The last page of Charlie’s letter came to mind as they were changing into their night clothes.

“Do you think… maybe tonight we could…” Draco trailed off.

Harry was excited about the idea, but also extremely nervous. “You mean… take things further?”

Malfoy just nodded, his cheeks tinged pink.

“I’d like that.” Harry said simply.

“But if… you know… I don’t like it?” Draco asked quietly.

“Then we will stop.” Harry promised.

Malfoy still insisted on wearing his full pajamas to bed every night, but he had forgone wearing the dressing gown when it was just the two of them, for which Harry was grateful. Harry didn’t even bother with a shirt most of the time. If they were going to go further however, things would undoubtedly change.

“You said before… that you liked me being… on top.” Harry commented, trying to sound confident.

“I do.” Draco confirmed, fully understanding Harry’s question.

“Just checking.” Harry’s prick was already half-hard just at the thought.

Malfoy kissed him. It was one of the desperate, needy kisses that Harry had grown to love. They were a bit clumsy still, but it didn’t take long for them remember how they fit together best. Harry caressed Draco’s back and snuck a tantalizing feel of his boyfriend’s pert ass. Malfoy wrapped around Harry’s neck and carded his fingers through Harry’s hair.

Harry disengaged after a few moments more of slow and delicious snogging to undo his boyfriend’s front buttons. They were both hard now – pressed together through their clothes.

But a sound interrupted them. It came from several floors below. At first Harry thought it must have been a prank. A mighty CRACK! followed by several long screeches – not unlike a whistling firecracker – but far too loud. Absolute silence followed the noise before the alarms began.

Draco grabbed his dressing gown, threw it on along with the Jothpar bag, held his wand up, and crept behind Harry’s bed all before Harry could react. Screams of panic could be heard now by other students. If the sound below hadn’t already awoken everyone, the alarms certainly had.

Harry threw a shirt on and cracked the door open to peer out at the hall. “Come on, Draco! And bring my wand, would you?” Some of the other Eighth Year students were filing out in their night clothes as well, Hermione and Ron among them.

“What is it, do you think?” Draco looked frightened, but he brought Harry his wand anyway. It
was a pity they had been interrupted, Harry thought.

“Heard the same thing back in Third Year – there must be an intruder.” Harry tried to sound calm.

“And you want to go out… looking for them?!” Draco hadn’t followed Harry out into the hall.

“No… but we aren’t doing anyone any good locked away in our room. Come on!” Harry urged.

Malfoy reluctantly left the safety of their room and unconsciously shielded the egg he was carrying with his free arm, wand brandished high with the other.

“It definitely came from one of the lower levels.” Harry led the way down the stairs, trying to catch-up with his other friends. But somehow they didn’t descend all the way to the Main Entrance, as Harry had expected. Instead they began to pool together in a crowd as they reached the second floor.

“What is it?” Harry tried to push his way through. No one answered.

Ron and Hermione were standing in front, looking gobsmacked. Harry leapt out to join them. They were looking up.

“Bloody hell…” Ron cursed.

There were marks three meters up the wall… claw marks. They gouged through stone, paintings, tapestries, wooden beams, all effortlessly – all the way down the hall and on either side. The hall was easily three meters wide, or more. As if a giant armed with eight knives had walked through the castle with their arms outstretched.

Professor Meek was already there and Headmistress McGonagall joined her only seconds later. Neither of them spoke, both too shocked by the sight. These marks explained the screeching at least… but what about the initial blast? The same thought must have occurred to Professor Meek. She and Harry looked at each other and nodded.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Professor Meek started down the hall in a hurry to see where the marks might lead. Malfoy stayed behind, just as the Headmistress started ordering the students about to find the other teachers and check on the dormitories. Harry didn’t mind… Draco was safe with McGonagall.

Barely a few turns around the corner, Harry and Professor Meek found a pile of rubble that must have once been a statue. Behind it, a secret passageway – the stone edges torn and cracked almost like paper and glass.

“It must have needed a password, or some trick to open… and got blasted instead.” Hermione inferred.

“Careful… whatever it was may have back-tracked. No one is to go inside.” Professor Meek took up guard duty in front of the gaping hole. “You three report to the Headmistress.”

Harry wanted to argue, but Ron grabbed his arm. “Please tell me this is something you’ve cooked up with Flitwick?” Ron’s face was pleading – with no hint of a grudge. But Harry shook his head.

“Harry, I thought all this was over! I thought you were safe! I didn’t think… I didn’t want to fight. Not again.” Ron admitted.

Hermione reached out and grabbed Ron’s other arm, giving him support.
“Well… you’re still my best mate. Even if you sometimes take a bit to come round.” Harry offered, but he punched Ron’s arm away out of principle.

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It took some time to rally all the teachers and ensure that no one was harmed or missing. Classes the next day were cancelled so that everyone could try and recover. Harry was too on edge to think about going to sleep, however. Most of the Eighth Year students milled about their Common Room in little groups, talking. The fear was almost tangible.

“Whatever it was… it wasn’t human.” Hermione said for the third or fourth time. She had yet to supply an alternative explanation, which was starting to make that little crease between her eyes more prominent. Harry had hoped the subsequent search of the castle and grounds would have unearthed more clues, or the intruder themselves, but alas it had not.

“You don’t have another godfather we’ve never heard about, do you Harry?” Ron tried to jest, but it fell flat.

Draco stayed right beside Harry, but hadn’t contributed anything to their conversation. Harry reasoned he was probably still too shaken, or perhaps too nervous about being accepted by his friends. Their knees touched – reassuringly, but that was as far as they dared go. Harry was envious of Ron and Hermione, who held each other’s hands openly.

“I may have… a theory. But it would mean sharing… sensitive information.” Harry finally offered.

Hermione looked put out. “You’ve been holding back again? Well, I guess I haven’t really been keeping to my school year’s resolution… so it figures.” She scooted forward, ready for Harry to continue.

“Not here. Let’s go to our room.” Harry nudged Draco, got up, and tried to casually walk down the hall away from the crowd. His friends followed.

Harry hadn’t thought this through. Only one bed was rumpled and used, the other was stacked with Draco’s books. Before he could think about fixing it, Ron and Hermione were shutting the door behind them. Harry could tell that they noticed.

“You guys are… serious.” Ron muttered, eyes wide.

“Er… yes, we are.” Harry countered. Although he couldn’t keep himself from blushing.

“Forget that… spill! I want to know what’s going on.” Hermione interjected.

Harry had already shared Malfoy’s story about finding the Homunculi lab with Hermione, but he repeated it as if it was the first time for Ron’s sake. Hopefully, Draco would forgive him later. What he had not shared with anyone was the breach of the wards the Headmistress had warned him about.

“You liar. You told me it was some eager fan who tried to curse their way in for a story.” Malfoy interjected. For once, Ron and Hermione were as equally displeased with Harry for not sharing – something he did not expect.

“You had proof that someone was still after you and you didn’t think to tell us?” Hermione screeched.

“You are fucking nuts!” Ron added.
“Okay… okay. Was it too much to hope it would just blow over? Besides, that’s not what is important right now. The Headmistress said she went to go ask the Carrows in Azkaban about the Homunculus experiments, but that they didn’t respond. It was like their minds were… blank. She told me my idea about it being one of their experiments was bogus, but I couldn’t get the idea out of my head.” Harry reasoned.

“Blank?” Hermione looked perplexed.

“There weren’t any successful… experiments in the lab, though. And why would it try to break in, anyway, if the lab was already inside Hogwarts?” Draco reiterated.

They were all silent for a moment. It appeared that Harry’s idea wouldn’t pan out after all.

“Unless… oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!” Hermione started bouncing up and down. “If that’s possible we should tell the Headmistress right away!”

“Slow down, there ‘Mione. What is it?” Ron grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

“The Carrows could have been feeding them their own blood. Creating doppelgangers. Decoys. That would explain why their minds would appear blank. To really make it all… vanish. That is really difficult to achieve and impossible to reverse. You both saw the state Professor Lockheart was in at St. Mungo’s. And I did loads or research… for my parents.” Hermione supplied all at once. Her mind working much faster than anyone else’s.

It took a few seconds for the implication of her words to sink in.

“You mean to say what’s locked up in Azkaban… those are fully formed Homunculi?” Ron asked.

“That would mean the Carrows are still on the loose. They could be making more. That explains why they are trying to get in from the outside!” Harry supplied.

“The Carrows… are still… out there… making… more?” Malfoy was hyperventilating.

“Er… possibly. Easy there, Draco.” In the privacy of their own room, Harry had no qualms about taking his boyfriend into his arms. He seemed very frightened.

“Eww.” Ron complained. Hermione stomped on his foot. “Ouch!”

“But why… are they trying to get in?” Draco asked, clinging to Harry.

“To get revenge on Harry, of course. For killing their old boss, fucking Voldemort, for Christ’s sake!” Ron was hopping up and down on his good foot.

“Voldemort came back once before… they must not know about the Horcruxes. But all of them are gone now. Oh… sorry, I shouldn’t have…” Hermione looked at Malfoy, thinking she had slipped up.

“He knows, Hermione. I told him everything.” Harry reassured her.

“You did WHAT!” Ron sounded outraged, but his anger was short lived. “And the slimy bastard didn’t go running to the Prophet?” Ron looked Draco over skeptically.

“Of course not.” Malfoy straightened himself up and brushed Harry’s hands away.

“Hmmmm. Alright. You aren’t complete shit, then.” Ron dodged a kick from Hermione. “You’ve been hanging out with Gin too much, Hermione. Stop kicking. He knows I don’t like him.”
“Ron…” Harry started.

“And I don’t much like you, Ronald Weasley. But that doesn’t mean I like Harry any less. So stop being an ass.” Draco finished.

The room was silent for a moment.

“Er… right then. Let’s go tell McGonagall, shall we?” Hermione suggested. Things were starting to sort themselves out, it seemed.

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Luna’s Jothpar egg hatched a few days later, much to Draco’s displeasure – even though he was still one of only a few who had seen any change to their eggs at all. The Headmistress had listened to their theory and promised to check up on it, but they hadn’t received any word back yet. Everyone seemed more on edge – but no more frightening incidents occurred. Harry was delighted to be back on speaking terms with all of his friends. Hiding his affection for Draco proved rather difficult, however.

“I’m sure Hagrid isn’t going to think any less of your accomplishment if your egg isn’t the first… or even the second one to hatch.” Harry tried to console his boyfriend.

“I hate… not being first.” Malfoy admitted. “And this time… I really thought I had a chance.”

“What was it like, anyway? The Jothpar?” Harry asked, trying a different angle.

“Round and ugly.” Draco said spitefully. “Only you wouldn’t think so with how Luna treats the thing.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Does it like its new home, at least?” They were sitting at the Slytherin table for lunch in the Great Hall. Harry had yet to convince Malfoy to sit at the Gryffindor table.

“No. Apparently it sulks in that coop. Hagrid thinks it is because it is alone… no more of its own kind. Luna is trying to convince him to let her keep it in her room at night.” Draco stabbed at a piece of chicken a little too hard, making the fork scrape against the plate.

“Er… how is our… er… the egg anyway? Can’t be too far behind Luna’s in hatching.” Harry was starting to get irritated.

“See for yourself.” Draco handed the pouch over, which was now bulging. Harry put it around his neck and lifted the flap. There was a collective “aww” sound from further down the table, but he tried to ignore it. He suspected it was Madeline Gaunt, Catherine Burke, and their new friends – a crowd of Slytherin Second Years.

The Jothpar’s shape seemed fully formed with a head nearly the same size as the body. Moon-shaped slits for the eyes were just starting to appear, but if it had a mouth it must have been tucked under one of the four stubby limbs, still curled-up tight to its chest. It wasn’t cute… but Harry rather liked it anyway.

“How is your search for the Winged Fruits coming along?” Harry kept pestering Draco with questions, hoping one would stick and distract him from his black mood.

“Professor Sprout might have some Haloxylon by now… but getting them to bloom is tricky. And my old supplier hasn’t responded to my owl. Probably doesn’t want any more of my family’s business after… everything that has happened.” Draco’s mood was getting darker. Harry had to
“Why don’t we ask Neville, eh? Either finish that chicken or let what’s left of it Rest in Peace.”

Harry got up from the table, still wearing the Jothpar bag.

Malfroy glared at Harry, but put the last two bites in his mouth quickly and stood up as well. They walked over to the Gryffindor table to where Neville and Greg were sitting.

“Hey, Nev. Sorry to interrupt. We are just curious if Professor Sprout has had any Haloxylon arrive recently. Draco needs them for a project he’s working on.” Harry asked politely.

“I helped her bring a batch into the Q-shed this morning.” Goyle offered. “Hey… Malfoy.”

The old friends were stiff with each other, in a sad sort of way rather than out of any animosity. Draco looked down at his feet. “Hey… Goyle.”

“What’s a Q-shed?” Harry asked.

“He means Quarantine Shed. All new plants have to be thoroughly checked out for a day or two before being introduced to the rest of the Greenhouses. What varieties, Greg?” Neville supplied, ignoring the awkward air between Goyle and Draco.

“Er… *persicum* and *ammodendron*… I think.” Greg offered in return. Harry was taken aback.

“That would be White Saxaul and Black Saxaul, respectively. Good work, Greg!” Neville beamed. “Turns out he knows Latin better than I do.”

“I remember. We were… in the same class.” Draco seemed distracted. “You were awful. What happened?” His question seemed to sting a little, although Greg tried not to show it.

“Umm… I don’t have to know… how… how to spell… or write any of them down… in Herbology.” Goyle looked sheepishly at his half-eaten plate of food.

“We are working on that.” Neville added, looking daggers at Malfroy. It was clear that Greg had found a loyal friend. “Is that all?”

“Er… yes. Thank you!” Harry pushed Draco along out of the Great Hall.

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They walked in silence back towards their room to collect their things for the next class. Malfroy seemed thoroughly chastened, but Harry was worried it would make his boyfriend even more miserable.

“I can go with you… to the Greenhouses. After class.” Harry offered.

“Harry… do you think I’m selfish?” Draco asked instead of giving a reply.


“I’ve spent all day complaining about Luna’s stupid egg hatching first. Meanwhile Goyle… he’s really doing so much better without me. A part of me wanted him back. I thought he was my friend. But he was really more like… a pet. I kept him around to feel important. I needed him to be… stupid… to make myself feel smart.” Draco said all of this in monotone, staring blankly at Harry’s chest.
“Wow. That’s a lot to take on all at once.” Harry tried to pat Malfoy’s shoulder comfortingly. “Hey… I know a thing or two about trying to carry all the blame. I don’t think he would have stood behind you all those years if he didn’t want to. You must have given him something too. That’s just how these things work. It just wasn’t meant to last.”

Draco looked Harry in the eyes. “And what if we… aren’t meant to last?”

“Then I’m going to love every moment we get to share together. I grow being with you. And look at you… I’m so proud of who you are becoming.” Harry said truthfully, and kissed him chastely. And it seemed like the right thing to say.

Click… cha… ra… ta… ta… ta… ta.

The strange noise came from the little pouch, nestled between Harry and Draco.

“What the…?” Draco’s eyes were now full of tears, but he fought them back to peel the flap off of the Jothpar bag, just in time to see two eyes open for the first time. One was much larger than the other and they were huge ovals, taking up nearly the entire face – a little darker gray than its body. The rattling sound happened again as it cocked its head to the side.

“Awwww…. Wow! Look at him! He’s finally hatched!” Harry exclaimed.

“He’s… he’s… beautiful.” Draco was crying big, fat tears now, which landed on the poor thing’s head.

“You’re so damn emotional. Stop raining on him. Let’s put him on the bed.” Harry chided affectionately.

Forgetting completely about their next class, they carefully removed the little creature from the pouch and set it on the bed. It wobbled a bit at first, but soon could stand on its own and walk between Draco and Harry… rattling as it went. They had no idea if the rattle was supposed to be the way it communicated or if it was just a sound made when it moved. He didn’t seem to have a mouth, nose, belly button, or any other mark, blemish, or openings of any kind.

“How does he eat?” Harry suddenly wondered out loud. While he was just as taken with the little guy as his boyfriend… he would not describe it as beautiful.

“Oh, God. I don’t know! Let’s go find Luna.” Draco suddenly looked terrified.

“She’s probably in class… where we are supposed to be.” Harry reminded him.

“Well, fuck class! What if he’s starving? I wasn’t ready…. I only thought about him hatching… not about afterwards.” Malfoy dumped his bag unceremoniously out on Harry’s bed. “We will take him to Hagrid.”

“And if he’s teaching another class?” Harry asked.

Draco coaxed the little Jothpar into his empty bag along with one or Harry’s jumpers. “Then we wait until he’s bloody done teaching.”

“Language, Draco, he’s a baby. And he better not ruin that – it’s my favorite.” Harry laughed. “Are you going to name him?”

Malfoy’s cheeks were pink. “His name is Talatat. But I’ve been calling him Tal.”
“Well, that’s a weird one… but it seems to fit okay. I can’t believe you named him already.” Harry teased.

Ra… ta… ta… ta… ta… ta.

Malfoy laughed. “Come on, Tal. Let’s go see Hagrid.” Harry followed them out, smiling.
Kisses, Soft and Gentle

It turns out Jothpars are incredibly efficient creatures. They take in what they need by osmosis, or as Hagrid had to explain to Harry, absorbed through their skin. He was happy about Malfoy’s success in hatching the egg – but Harry could tell that his enthusiasm for the project was waning. The creatures weren’t all that interesting otherwise, and certainly not dangerous or frightening. Luna’s Jothpar didn’t seem to react to seeing Tal much. They just stared at each other and rattled for a few seconds and then walked their separate ways – Tal returning to Malfoy’s feet. The two creatures were almost identical, except their eyes were slightly different sizes and Luna’s was taller and thinner.

“Well… I guess this means Luna ought to just keep the little bugger. Same for you lot. But you can always leave them here in their pen during classes or at night.” Hagrid said, a tad mournfully.

“You mean… he can stay in our room?” Malfoy asked, not hiding his excitement in the least.

“I don’t see why not… if you want him.” Hagrid relented.

Malfoy scooped up Tal and beamed. Tal’s large eyes did seem a bit brighter when it was in his arms. Harry had once heard of imprinting and wondered if this was something similar.

“But if they just… soak things in, how does it… you know… expel the rest?” Harry finally asked.
“Ah… I don’t think it has to. It only takes in what it needs, see?” Hagrid supplied.

“And… so how do Jothpar eggs come about?” Harry wondered, a little quieter.

Hagrid laughed. “In the wild, Jothpars find small stones that have the right… potential. They carry
them around for months, helping the stones absorb magic and grow until they are too big to carry.
Then they leave them in a safe nest to develop on their own. Didn’t Malfoy tell you that?”

“No… he was too focused on the hatching to bother, I think.” Harry tried giving Draco a
disapproving look – but couldn’t quite manage it seeing as Tal was rattling contentedly and staring
back at him from his boyfriend’s shoulder.

“Honestly… when you started handing out rocks to everyone the first day of class… I was a bit…
skeptical. Sorry about that.” Draco said, blushing a little.

“Wouldn’t be the first time, eh?” Hagrid’s eyebrows rose.

“Er…” Malfoy suddenly looked frightened.

But Hagrid just laughed, a tad darkly. “All water under the bridge now. I reckon Harry told ya that
all worked out in the end. And the Headmistress gave me her word I would be within my rights to
let the next creature that took a dislike to ya leave more than a wee scratch.”

Draco blanched and Harry laughed until his sides hurt.

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While Harry was supportive of Draco’s new obsession with Tal, it got old fairly quickly. For one
thing, Jothpars apparently didn’t do anything except stare, occasionally rattle, and follow you
around. Harry could only imagine that in the wild the creatures must just congregate in fields and
look up at the sky – having no link to any other being to worry over. He found them boring, to be
honest.

Malfoy, however, found them fascinating – as did Luna. Draco was still insisting that they must be
reacting to scents or subtle, wild magic that witches and wizards can’t perceive. Tal went
everywhere with Draco, even to the tables at the Great Hall for meals. Only once did Harry see
Talatat actually eat. The creature stuck its tiny arm in Malfoy’s pumpkin juice for a few seconds
and that was it.

“Did you see that?!” Draco asked Luna, excitedly. They had been sitting at the Ravenclaw table for
almost every meal for days now. Luna had decided she wanted her own Jothpar to live a normal
life and only brought it in from the Hagrid’s coop sometimes at night. She also didn’t name it – a
decision which Harry soon began to agree with.

Tal then rolled into a ball and looked very much like a normal rock had somehow found itself on
the table amongst all the food. This, Harry and Draco had decided, was how Jothpars slept. Tal
didn’t mind at all when Malfoy picked it up and slipped him, still curled up, into his robes for safe
keeping.

Despite Hermione’s slight aversion to the Care of Magical Creatures, she found herself drawn in as
well. She and Ron were sitting beside Harry at the Ravenclaw table as if they had always been
there. Harry could tell that Ron didn’t much care for the Jothpars. He had said they looked far too
much like garden gnomes, which were just pests.

“Fascinating. I think I saw some of these last year. You know… when we were camping. I didn’t
know what they were… or if my eyes were playing tricks on me.” Hermione admitted. Harry nodded, remembering how boring it got at times, keeping watch while on the run.

“Hagrid did say he saw them sometimes when he was growing up. He called them Urks, I think…” Harry added. The distraction of the Jothpar hatching having successfully re-routed everyone’s thoughts away from the frightening break-in the previous week. Only two other students had managed to hatch their Jothpar eggs so far, but those stayed in Hagrid’s coop all the time.

“I’m going to pick up some more rocks from the edge of the forest to place in their little yard down at Hagrid’s later, if anyone would like to join me.” Harry thought Luna was keen on starting a wild population of Jothpars on the school grounds.

“Do you know what sort of rocks they like?” Hermione asked, obviously curious.

“No idea, really. Although I’m beginning to suspect the rattling sound they make might be made from the original stone they came from that has come loose inside them. All of their… voices… seem similar in tone. So I’ve been clinking stones together to try and match their rattle.” Luna shrugged.


“I think the rattle is how they speak. Tal shakes himself into a right tizzy sometimes. I wish I knew what it was he was trying to say.” Draco finally resumed his meal, now that everyone else was finishing up.

Harry groaned inwardly. Tal had decided to make a racket for a several nights in a row now – which meant he hadn’t been able to spend any significant time alone with Malfoy. He was going to suggest to Draco later that Tal could spend the night in his pen for a change – if he was brave enough.

“I’ve got to grade papers for Flitwick.” Ron excused himself. Harry was reminded that he had yet to polish his notes for his next Defense class the following day and escaped as well with a subtle squeeze of Draco’s shoulder and a nod to his other friends. They hardly seemed to notice and started discussing going down to the greenhouses to check how Tal would react to the new Haloxylon plants.

Harry and Ron walked up the stairs in silence for a while. Things had almost gone back to normal between them. Ron and Malfoy still didn’t like each other, but they didn’t let it get in the way either. And while it was beginning to be glaringly obvious to those close to Harry and he and Draco were a couple, they still hadn’t gone public.

“At least it isn’t a Blast-Ended Skrewt, mate.” Ron clapped Harry on the back.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, rather bewildered.

“It is hard to… share… at first. I can tell it bothers you.” Ron said cryptically.

It started to click. “Oh… you mean… you think I’m jealous… of Tal?” Harry slowly turned it into a question, all while mulling over the implication.

“Malfoy will come back… eventually.” Ron was smirking.

Harry glared at his best friend, but didn’t deny it. Was Ron actually trying to… console him? In his relationship with Draco Malfoy?
“Ginny knows by the way.” Ron continued. “Told me about the letter you both sent to Charlie. Sorry it wasn’t me, Harry.”

Harry gulped, audibly. “She… knows?”

“Yeah. Thinks you’re an idiot… but she isn’t mad.” Ron was still smiling, proudly. “So… did you get a letter back yet?”

“Er… yes. He sent a picture too, I was meaning to share with you and Ginny. Charlie’s really great.” Harry wasn’t about to share the actual letter with anyone else.

Ron nodded. “Told you.” They had reached the phoenix door entrance to the Common Room, which he held open for Harry.

“Thanks.” And Harry meant it.

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Draco got back late from traipsing around the grounds and the greenhouses with Luna and Hermione, so Harry relented on letting Tal stay in their rooms for another night. But once classes were over the following day and the weekend was upon them, Harry tried to put his foot down.

“Draco… tonight… I was hoping it could be… just the two of us.” Harry mentioned in a whisper as they were finishing their pudding. They were at the Slytherin table this time, where it was much easier to have a private conversation.

Malfoy’s cheeks turned pink. “Oh?”

“Tal would be safe in Hagrid’s coop… just for the night.” Harry suggested, trying to be subtle. It took a moment, but Draco finally agreed, catching Harry’s hint. “Alright.”

Harry was elated. They walked down to Hagrid’s hut and left Talatat in the yard with the three other Jothpars just as it was getting dark, all of which just ratted and stared at them blankly. They didn’t seem to follow any sleeping schedule – curling-up only when they needed to, day or night. Jothpars seemed to be rather simple creatures. Harry envied them a little.

They ascended the castle to their room in a bit of a rush, so that when they finally closed their bedroom door they were both breathing heavily. Harry put up wards to keep them from being overheard, or interrupted once he got his wind back. Draco stood by, awkwardly, but with a grin on his face just as big as Harry’s. They could tell tonight was going to be… special.

“They ascended the castle to their room in a bit of a rush, so that when they finally closed their bedroom door they were both breathing heavily. Harry put up wards to keep them from being overheard, or interrupted once he got his wind back. Draco stood by, awkwardly, but with a grin on his face just as big as Harry’s. They could tell tonight was going to be… special.

“Can we…?” Harry started to ask.

“Yes.” Malfoy answered, before Harry had finished.

They came together for one of those needy kisses that Harry had grown to love. Kissing had always been fun… but knowing that they were going to be doing more made them less careful. Their teeth clinked together more than once. They laughed and kissed some more. Their nerves about having sex had either been abandoned several floors below or dissolved into the familiarity of their intimate embrace.

Harry grew bolder and groped Draco’s ass without shame, making his partner moan. Malfoy bucked his clothed, hardening member against Harry’s in a slow pattern. They were still in their robes, much to their mutual annoyance. Regrettfully, they parted – but just long enough to pull their
robes off, discard their shoes, and make their way to their shared bed.

Undressing while laying down and kissing turned out to be harder than Harry thought. They managed to get one piece of clothing off between them before coming together again. Every new exposed area of bare skin was kissed and caressed. It took ages, but it was heavenly. Draco was blushing a dark red by the time Harry managed to free him of everything except his pants – which were doing a poor job of keeping his hard cock in check.

“I want to see you. All of you.” Harry tried to ease Draco’s embarrassment. Harry removed his own underwear, glad to finally be free.

“Er… I want… that too. God… you’re beautiful.” Malfoy was breathing heavy. Perhaps the blush wasn’t all about being exposed then.

Harry slowly slipped Draco free of his last item of clothing and just took it all in. Draco was much lighter than Harry, almost ghostly. But he was firm in just the right places, with an impressive, broad chest for being so tall and thin. Harry traded between kissing down Malfoy’s neck and up his inner thigh, until Draco was moaning again.

“You’re such a… tease.” Malfoy complained. “And just because I like you on top doesn’t mean I don’t want… to kiss you… all of you, too.”

Harry groaned at the thought. “Ok. Your turn.” He nudged Draco over and flopped down beside him so that Draco could roll on top. Their pricks were pushed hard against each other, causing both of them to shiver and moan. Malfoy explored Harry as thoroughly as he had himself just moments before.

“Ok… I’m not… going to last… if we don’t…” Harry tried to explain.

Draco was rocking his hard cock into Harry’s groin as he kissed his neck, finding the rhythm they could both feel in their bones – blood rushing and breaths catching.

“How… how are we going to do this?” Malfoy stopped rocking.

“Well… Charlie did give us some good advice.” Harry reminded his partner, grinning.

Draco rolled his eyes. “I know. But I’m not keen on trying anything quite that exciting just yet. I just want… to feel you in me.”

The admission affected Harry more than he thought it would. He had to focus hard on the ceiling for a moment so that he wouldn’t cum right then and there – his prick bouncing against his stomach with waves of need.

“Yeah… me too. Let’s switch again. I’ll… prepare you.” Harry finally breathed out. By now their excitement about what was coming overrode any embarrassment. He extricated himself from the bed and found his wand on the floor, Draco stayed on his hands and knees.

It took just a few moments of neat spell work for Harry to prepare Draco – the appropriate charms burned into his mind from Charlie’s letter. To Draco’s credit, he didn’t squirm at all as Harry worked. Once everything was clean, warm, and wet, Harry dropped his wand back onto the floor and climbed back onto the bed behind his boyfriend. The next part would be tricky.

“Are you ready?” Harry asked. “Tell me if you need me to stop.”

Draco just nodded and pushed his ass out further, wanting more. So Harry found the tight pucker of
Malfoy’s ass just behind his relaxed ball sack and pushed one finger gently into the entrance. After some resistance, it slipped inside easily enough. Draco whimpered, but didn’t tell Harry to stop.

“Come on, Draco. Relax for me. I want to see your face when I fuck you. Relax.” Harry found himself stroking his partner’s back and both butt cheeks as he slipped his finger in and out in a steady pattern, letting Draco get used to the sensation.


Harry laughed. “Well, that’s a relief. It’s supposed to feel good, though. Tell me when you are ready for more.”

It took a little while longer before Draco was relaxed enough to give Harry the okay. Harry slid a second finger in. But Draco arched his back and tensed.

“What is it? Should I stop?” Harry asked, worried.

“No! Don’t stop. I just need to… yeah… keep going.” Draco arched further, changing the angle that Harry’s fingers were steadily going in and out. He started moaning louder. “Ough… ough… yeah…”

Harry’s cock, which had softened a bit during his preparation of Draco, quickly hardened back up, standing at attention from the sounds coming from Malfoy’s lips. He started experimenting with his fingers, moving them around a lot to stretch the hole even larger.

“Are you ready?” Harry’s skin felt hot, burning with need.

“Yeah… yeah.” Draco was starting to move his hips in time with Harry’s thrusting fingers. Harry slowly pulled them out and used the warm lube that coated them to prepare his dick. It was sweet torture trying to apply enough without giving in to the temptation to take his cock into his hand and start pumping.

Harry lined himself up with Malfoy’s entrance. “I’m going in now. Relax.” Malfoy had tensed up a bit. Surprisingly his cock slid in without too much resistance. He went slow, letting Malfoy adjust. He didn’t buck, even though he wanted to, desperately.

“Fuck!” Draco cursed, but out of bliss rather than pain. Harry had prepared him well.

“Moving now.” Harry slid slowly back out, leaving his tip inside, and went back in. This time he went further, all the way to the hilt. Harry moaned this time. He was inside Draco. The warmth and caress of skin around his cock was almost unbearably satisfying.

“I… want to see you.” Draco pleaded.

Harry kissed his lover’s back, right between his shoulders. “It might be… harder. But I want that too.” He gently pulled his cock out of Malfoy’s ass, allowing him to turn onto his back. Draco’s prick was leaking but softer than it had been before. The new sensations were obviously good, but he needed more.

“Lift your legs up.” Harry helped position them both again. Draco’s knees hooked around Harry’s shoulders. Pressing his dick against Draco’s tight ass was a little more challenging, but it went inside without too much trouble. Draco was gasping. “You still okay?”

“Yeah… just… something I’m going to need to get used to, is all. Its better this way… seeing your face.” Malfoy caressed Harry’s cheek and brought him down for a kiss.
Harry began bucking immediately. “Draco… I’m not going to… last. You feel… so good.”

“Go on then. I don’t mind.” Malfoy purred into Harry’s ear.

“Fuck!” Harry couldn’t take it slow anymore. He started thrusting. It was utter bliss being able to come undone looking into Draco’s smug face. “Fuck… Draco…. Oh… oh… oh…” Harry came.

Draco’s eyes widened as he felt Harry’s warm seed spill into him in four long spurts. It started leaking out onto the sheets. He was so aroused, he wouldn’t be far behind. Harry was slow to come down, but wanted it to be just as good for his lover. Draco hadn’t touched his cock, so Harry did, gently.

“Oh… oh… oh… Harry, I just need… a little… more…” Malfoy was bucking now, into Harry’s hand, just as Harry’s softening cock slid out of him. Harry kissed Draco’s neck and quickened the pace.

“Fuck!” Draco’s load was explosive. It painted Harry’s chest, Draco’s cheek, and got all over the pillows and bedding. It dribbled down Harry’s fingers and stuck to the blond, curly hair surrounding Draco’s prick.

Spent, Harry helped Malfoy lay down – unhooking him from his shoulders, and flopped down by his side, trying to avoid any wet patches.

“Wow.” Draco said, still catching his breath.

“Wow.” Harry repeated. Although it didn’t seem like enough for what had just happened.

“That was just… wow.” Draco babbled.

“So you said.” Harry teased.

“Shove off.” Malfoy slapped at Harry, good naturedly.

“I thought I just did.” Harry laughed.

“Fuck. Harry. We are doing that again. Later.” Draco snuggled into the crook of Harry’s shoulder.

“Fine by me.” But Harry wasn’t sure if his boyfriend heard him however, as he had fallen asleep.

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Harry was dreaming. It was a strange dream. Plenty of people were there that he didn’t like, but all the same he was happy. The Dursleys were there, puttering on about the weather with Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. They were all sitting at Grimmauld Place and Kreacher was serving them tea. Harry knew that Draco was just upstairs and would be down in a moment. He thought perhaps that was why he was happy. The gloomy house, terrible company, and boring conversation didn’t mean a thing.

Draco finally emerged and strode confidently into the room, looking incredibly handsome in an emerald green and ivory suit. His face lit up when he caught sight of Harry watching him. In just a moment he would start to speak… Harry was sure of it. But something else was making a terrible racket. Harry looked around for the noise, drifting back into reality…

*Rata…ta RATA…TA!!! Rata…ta RATA…TA!!!*

Harry groaned. It was just Tal then, being terribly rude.
“Oh do keep him quiet, Draco.” Harry rolled over to see why Draco hadn’t woken up yet. They were both naked. Harry remembered why.

He also distinctly recalled leaving Talatat down at Hagrid’s coop. Draco was rubbing sleep from his eyes, finally stirring from all the noise.

“How on earth…?” Harry began. His wards were still in place as well. The Jothpar had somehow managed to escape the pen, climb to the Fourth Floor of the castle, and break into the wards. “Tal? Where are you? What’s gotten into… you…?” Harry’s voice fell to a whisper with the look of terror on Malfoy’s face.

He was looking at the door. Or… where the door used to be.
The door to their room was splintered, but hanging in the air all in pieces. They rained down in slow motion, without making a sound. There were long, thin, claw-like fingers on either side of the doorframe. Whatever had broken the door was trying to bend it's massive form to crawl inside. It was at least twice as tall as a normal man, but half as thin, with dagger-like points where his feet should have been.

“Move… Draco, move!” Harry yelled, breaking the spell.

Several things all happened at once. There were screams from down the hall as the intruder alarms were triggered. Draco scooped up Tal, his wand, and his dressing gown from the floor and sprinted for the bathroom. The creature in the doorway turned so that Harry could see its face.

It might have been human once. The neck was impossibly thin and long. Its mouth was curled into a maniacal grin, sporting far too many teeth. But it was the eyes that haunted Harry the most. They were yellow, luminous almost, and looked horribly afraid. What was this monstrous thing afraid of?

“Harry!” Draco called from the bathroom doorway. Harry wrenched his gaze away from the creature at the door and looked down for his wand. It must have rolled away somewhere. He couldn’t wait to look for it and run to the bathroom to escape. The creature started forwards and made the most horrible sound Harry had ever heard.

“Sss-ss-SS-ss-SS-ssse!” If they were words they were too drawn out and gravely to make out. It reached a hand out to rip Harry into pieces, which Harry barely avoided by falling out of the bed, running to the bathroom, and shutting the door. There was mighty crash as the bed was crushed into matchsticks. Draco sealed the door with four or five very powerful locking spells.

For a second all they could do was cling to each other while trying to remember how to breathe. The intruder had returned, and this time it had made it to its goal.

“Draco…” Harry couldn’t begin to choose which question to ask first.

“It was Tal. He woke me up. And then the… the door…” Draco was going into shock.

“Hold it together. You’re the only one with a wand.” Harry heard a terrible scraping at the door. “We don’t have time… it will be through in a second. Listen!” Harry tied his ratty orange towel around himself. Monster or no, he wasn’t about to be gored wearing nothing at all. “Under my bed. There is a trap door. Secret passage. We need to get that thing out of here!”

“What? What… is… it?” Draco seemed to be taking too long to process everything.

“Draco – listen to me! Help me get to the trapdoor. I’ll lead it out while you get help.” All Harry could think about was how much that creature had no place inside Hogwarts. It would hurt… kill… anyone that tried to come to their aid. Ron. Hermione. He had to get it out.

“O…ok…okay.” Malfoy finally managed, nodding drunkenly. Harry had to help him into his dressing gown. The door started to buckle and groan.

“Blast it back. Give me enough time to get to the trapdoor. Then run!” Harry pleaded. He tossed Talatat into the tub. The poor thing couldn’t climb over the tall, slick sides - but at least he would
be safe there.

“Blast it… back? But, Harry…” Draco started, but the door gave a loud crack – they didn’t have time.

“Now!” Harry urged Malfoy on.

The spell should have worked better. The blast Draco unleashed blew the door…and much of the wall…back against the creature. But somehow it didn’t seem to bother that strange, slim figure with the cruel smiling mouth and yellow eyes. It was the moment of surprise that allowed Harry to jump out and push his bed out of the way to reveal the trapdoor.

“Run, Draco!” Harry called out. Draco was sending curses like mad at the monster, but they just bounced off. It was enough of a distraction, however, for Harry to pull the door open, revealing a narrow, stone staircase that lead down into darkness.

“Oo… Ouch… iiiitTt… bbb-BbuurRnnsssss!” The creature wailed. “I’m over here, skinny!” Harry called, hoping the monster would take the bait.

The creature turned to look at Harry, but there was something in his eyes that stopped him from running down the dark stairs as fast as possible. By now there were other people at the splintered door blasting curses at the thing as well, but they were just as unsuccessful as Draco. The creature slowly turned away from Harry…and focused back on Draco.

“No!” Harry picked up debris off the floor and chucked it as hard as he could at the creature. “No! It’s me you want. Leave him alone!” But he knew now, it wasn’t true. The creature was about to grab ahold of Draco with its massive, pointy hands. It would cut him to ribbons so easily.

“Dddrrrr-RrraAacccC-cooOo.” The creature called. It still flinched back at the curses flying from the doorway, but not enough to dissuade it from moving forward.

“Harry!” Draco called out, looking more frightened than Harry had ever seen him. Worse than that day in the Room of Requirement when Crabbe had died.

Harry pummeled the creature with everything he could reach. And then, desperate, he tried to pull it away from Draco by hand. But it just lifted one of its incredibly long, razor sharp legs and kicked. Harry felt the leg pierce his body, but he was still trying to pull it away. So instead he clung to the creature’s leg, even as it tore through his side and out his back.

The spells from the doorway ceased and there were people screaming. Harry just hung on tight. As long as he didn’t let go, it couldn’t get to Draco. But his grip grew weaker as the leg became slick with blood.

“Harry! No!” Draco was screaming his name, and Harry couldn’t seem to remember why. “Let him go! Let him go!”

Harry’s thoughts grew too cloudy to remember what it was he was supposed to be doing. But he trusted Draco…so he let go.

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He was so afraid.
Draco knew, as soon as the creature turned back to look at him, that it was never after Harry. The Carrows were feared, even among the Death Eaters. Their loyalty to the Dark Lord was absolute. They kept the rest of them in line… and disposed of any who betrayed them.

This creature… a homunculus… was one of their creations. Its purpose wasn’t to seek revenge… but to discipline one of their own – a wayward child that had lied so that the Chosen One could live. Someone who knew their secrets…

Harry tried desperately to get the monster’s attention. Draco saw the kick coming a second too late. He screamed out Harry’s name, but his limbs wouldn’t obey him. He was paralyzed with fear. Despite all the blood, he didn’t think the wound was fatal. Harry would live if he got help quickly.

“Let him go! Let him go!” Draco yelled, trying to think of a spell that would pierce the strange shield the creature seemed to have obtained. Almost as if…

Draco understood. Giant’s blood. The Carrows had given the growing homunculus fucking giant’s blood! The Death Eaters hadn’t been able to kill Hagrid who was only part giant, what chance would he have cursing a mutant creature pumped full of the stuff? He would need to immobilize it. Capture it.

But with those claws… it would have to be strong – something metal. He would need time. Time he didn’t have.

“Hermione!” Draco yelled over the gasps and cries of those still grouped together by the door. “The Carrows used giant’s blood! Find a way to restrain it! And save Harry!” He caught a glimpse of frizzy brown hair amid the throng of people spilling into the room, before dodging the creature’s outstretched arm and diving down the trapdoor entrance.

For a moment of frantic running, he thought his plan wasn’t working. Would the creature pick them all off, one by one, before taking up the chase and following him? But then there was a clatter of pointed feet and a scrape of claws against the walls and he knew it was on the stairs. Draco picked up the pace, willing himself to go faster.

The narrow stairs came to an end and there was a tunnel-like passageway that twisted and turned ahead for a while. Without the light of his wand guiding the way, Draco knew he would have been lost and killed. Harry never would have made it out in the dark. Thoughts of Harry, bleeding out on the floor of their room made his eyes burn with tears. He ran anyway.

“Dd-ddrrrRrraaacccC-cooOo.” The horrible sound of his name coming from the creature’s mouth kept him from losing it. There was light ahead. Not far to go now. He ran harder.

There were only a few stairs that lead up to a grate, partially covered by bushes on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Moonlight shone down as Draco pulled himself up out of the exit and out onto the grass. His lungs were burning, but the thing behind him would be there any moment. Where should he run next? He hadn’t thought that far ahead.

The lake was glittering, reflecting the castle off of a nearly smooth surface. The grounds were pale silver – all except for a warm orange glow from Hagrid’s cabin. The grate rattled. Draco ran for it.

“Hagrid! Hagrid, wake-up! Hagrid!” Draco screamed. “Fuck! Wake-up, Hagrid!”

Hagrid must have been up already, since he emerged out of his cabin within seconds. But Malfoy’s relief was short lived as the homunculus grabbed at his legs, causing him to trip – his wand went flying. Out in the open instead of in the cramped passageway below, it was much faster than him
and had caught up easily.

“Ffffttiiii-lliinnNnnallllllly!” The monster swiped at Draco, leaving long gashes all along his right side. He screamed in pain and fear. He was going to be torn apart.

*Thwwwwuuuunk. Thwwwwuuuunk.*

More blows never came. Two of Hagrid’s crossbow arrows had hit their mark and the man himself was charging forward like a bull. Throwing his bow aside, he tackled the creature easily, bending its spindly arms back until they cracked. The thing howled in pain.

Draco heard cries coming from more people running over the grounds from the castle to help keep the monster pinned down. He could make out Professor Meek leading the way. They had chains. Within moments it was all over.

It was at that point that Draco’s body began catching up with how much pain he was in. His dressing gown, at least what was left of it, was more red than white. His body wouldn’t stop shaking. Several people were crowding around him now, but he couldn’t make out their faces.

“Harry! Is he… is he… okay? Harry? Where’s Harry?!” Draco knew he was losing it.

Eventually, someone pressed something cool to his lips. He was so thirsty that he gratefully lapped it up… only to drift away into darkness.

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Harry woke first.

He should have been used to waking up in the Hospital Wing. Everything was blurry, but he could make out enough to recognize the space. He searched the nightstand for his glasses, but they weren’t there. He tried to sit up, but his side ached like mad. He stopped trying to move. What was it this time? Another bludger? He couldn’t quite remember.

“Madam Pomfrey?” Harry tried to ask. His throat was so dry, however, it only came out as a dry, crackly whisper. He needed a drink… and where were his glasses?

He had left them… back on Draco’s nightstand… in their room. Harry remembered why his side was so tender. He had recently been impaled. “Madam Pomfrey?!” Harry yelled, still dry and crackly, but louder this time. Was Draco alright? What had happened to the creature?

“Coming… coming, Mr. Potter. Don’t move. Hold still!” She materialized out of the blur, pushing him back down onto the bed. “Drink this.” She pushed a glass of water to his lips.

Harry spluttered. “Wha… he… oh…” But he finally gave in and drank.

“I’m sure you are full of questions. But let me check you over before I let the Headmistress in to explain, alright.” Madam Pomfrey insisted.

“Where is Draco? What happened?” Harry questioned her anyway.

“All in good time, Mr. Potter. Now hold still!” She did a few spells on his tender and aching side, removed a large white bandage and replaced it with a brace that wrapped all the way around his waist. Harry didn’t recognize the clothes he was wearing. It made him terribly… uncomfortable.

“Please… just tell me… is everyone… okay?” Harry needed to know. His plea must have touched
“Everyone is alive, Harry. We got it.” She patted him on the head. “You’ve done enough. Rest.”

“Er… my glasses?” Harry asked.

“Miss Granger is bringing them. She should be here soon… along with the Headmistress.” And with that, Madam Pomfrey retreated to attend to another bed further along the room.

How long had he been out? There was morning sunshine filtering in through the windows, but that didn’t mean much. Harry squinted, trying to make out who was in the other bed, but they were too far away to tell.

Waiting was pure torture. The brace helped him move to a sitting position without too much pain, however. It felt like ages before the doors opened and more people came in. He thought he could tell Ron and Hermione were among them.

“What happened?” Harry demanded, squinting at all of the newcomers, trying to make them out. He probably looked ridiculous.

“Here Harry.” Hermione handed him his glasses. He gratefully put them on. It was a relief to see Headmistress McGonagall, Professor Meek, and Hagrid.

“Thank you, Hermione.” Harry said, trying to be polite. “Well?”

“Well… first you should know that the game is up, mate. The whole school knows you’ve been shagging Malfoy.” Ron said, forcing a laugh.

Harry groaned. “That doesn’t matter. I love him. Is he… is he alright?”

Harry’s admission seemed to shock McGonagall and Meek into embarrassed smiles. But no one was forthcoming with an answer. Harry looked over to the other bed. It was Draco.

“What’s wrong with him?! Is he going to be okay?” Harry tried to push the covers away and climb out of bed, but Hermione stopped him.

“He’s fine, Harry. Just got cut up a bit… and pushed himself too hard. He’s recovering. Honestly, your wounds were worse…” She trailed off.

“Let me see him?” Harry begged.

“He should wake up soon. Then you can see him. We were bringing you news of the creature.” McGonagall interjected, commanding his attention.

Harry could tell Draco was breathing evenly – sleeping peacefully. “Oh, alright.” Harry turned his attention back to the Headmistress, rather reluctantly.

“It has been destroyed. It was a mercy really. It may have had giant’s blood, but its body was… fragile.” Here she glanced towards Hagrid, who looked contrite. “We have reported this to the ministry. They have been trying to develop a test to see if Miss Granger’s hypothesis was true about the Carrows currently in Azkaban. Even remains of a successful homunculus should speed their work along – and the attack validates that there exists at least one very dangerous witch or wizard still at large.”

“We know they are out there now… and what their weapons look like. It won’t be long.” Professor
Meek added.

The giant’s blood was a surprise, but it made sense. Harry found himself still feeling pity for the creature. It didn’t really have a choice. It was created for a dark and twisted purpose and sent to hunt down and kill at the whim of its masters. If there was any spark of humanity left to it, he hoped it was at peace. “Thank you… for telling me.”

“And you should know we fished a rather odd creature out of your bathtub.” Hagrid interjected. “Don’t worry… he’s in the pen now. Luna’s looking after him.”

“Tal! Oh, Hagrid! It was Tal that warned us about the creature. How did he get all the way up to our rooms?” Harry felt like gifting the little creature all the pumpkin juice it could ever want.

“The bloody things went on rattling for ages in the middle of the night. But there were just the three of them when I checked. Woke me up. Good thing they did too.” Hagrid admitted.

“Why is that?” Harry asked.


“Draco is the one who realized the Carrows had used giant’s blood. He… sort of shouted it at us before… diving into the trapdoor.” Hermione started.

“I thought he was running away at first… but then the creature followed him down. Gave us time to form a plan and get supplies. Probably saved our lives, really.” Ron admitted reluctantly.

“He got that thing to chase him down the secret passage?” Harry was shocked. It had been his plan at first… a stupid plan, now that he thought about it. And Draco had followed through with it.

“As I knew where they would be coming out… I directed everyone to converge at that location, while I went in after them with a few of your classmates from the this side… just in case.” McGonagall added.

“But in the end, Draco was faster. He yelled to Hagrid for help… just in time.” Hermione finished lamely. Harry could tell there had been some left out.

“How bad?” Harry braced himself.

“Harry… he was cut, but not deeply. It was all the bleeding that we had to worry about. He wasn’t exactly wearing armor.” Hermione tried to soften the blow.

“Nor were you when we were able to get to you. Afraid your towel didn’t make it.” Ron sniggered. While Harry blushed deeply, he was reminded that this was why he loved his best friend. “Loaned you some of my things while the house elves were… cleaning everything up.”

“Draco won’t be sorry to know it’s gone. He hated it.” Harry joined in on the laughter.

“Thought you might want this back, though.” Ron produced Harry’s wand from his back pocket. Harry was relieved to see it had survived intact.

“Thanks, mate.”

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Draco woke second.
Harry was sitting beside him looking like he was going to fall asleep. Tal was curled up in his lap. Unless his boyfriend had taken to carrying around an odd lump of rock. He smiled at the thought, wanting to turn over and go back to sleep.

But then he remembered the creature. His eyes flew open. “Er…. Harry! You’re… okay.” Draco had a small coughing fit. His throat felt like sand.

“Course I am. Barely a scratch.” Harry’s bravado was a bit forced, but he offered Malfoy a glass of water from the nightstand anyway. Cool water helped a lot.

“Liar. And I’m not dead. I suppose that means we won.” Draco sat up slowly.

“Never do that again, by the way.” Harry said, scolding. “I like your ass just as it is, thank you very much.”

“I could say the same to you.” Draco parried, glaring back at Harry. Tal woke up and jumped over to Malfoy’s bed. He stomped around a lot and rattled until Harry and Draco couldn’t help but laugh.

“Sorry we worried you, little guy.” Harry captured the creature in his arms again. “How do you spoil something that only takes in what it needs? We should thank him for saving our lives.”

“I have no idea. But we will find a way. Clever boy. Must have some magic of his own, like house elves. Or maybe he just uses what he has absorbed? Anyway… we know he can escape out of danger easily enough if he can break into the castle to save us.” Draco said fondly.

“Your mother was here earlier, by the way. I think she is out speaking with McGonagall at the moment. She will be happy to see you’re awake.” Harry provided, sounding a bit nervous.

“Is that why you haven’t kissed me yet?” Draco asked.

Harry obliged with a deep kiss, full of meaning. “No. You should also know that I can snog you whenever and wherever you like now. Everybody knows about us.”

Malfoy groaned. “Just don’t leave me when you start getting howlers about boning a Death Eater.” His flippant reply masked real anxiety – Harry could tell that now.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere.” Harry assured him.

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News of the capture of the real Carrows came just before Christmas. Preparations for their NEWT exams were well under way, and with all the extra work of Student Teaching to juggle as well, none of the Eighth Year students went home for the holidays. The news of Harry and Draco being together had finally died down out of the papers. They also discovered that Jothpars really did not like the cold. If they were left outside at Hagrid’s they curled up to hibernate. Draco disapproved.

“Where they come from it doesn’t snow at all!” He complained.

“But they have been surviving in Britain for decades! Honestly, they are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves.” Harry bantered back.

Draco pouted. “We still haven’t spoiled him properly. Keeping him warm in the castle seems like the least we can do.”
“Oh, alright. Tal can stay.” Harry relented – cursing under his breath.

They still fought occasionally, but it was never long before they forgave each other. And somehow Draco seemed to always get his own way in the end. At least Draco would finally sit with Harry at the Gryffindor table now and then. No one complained, since word had spread about how Draco had lead the homunculus out of the castle – they found him brave. Thankfully, no more attacks were reported, although a few homunculus sightings had been. Whether or not there really were more out there remained a mystery, however.

“Happy Christmas Eve, Draco.” Harry kissed his boyfriend in their room. The house elves had gifted them an enormous bed months ago that replaced the one that had been destroyed and Harry’s unused one. They had been changing into their nightclothes and preparing to sleep.

“Hmmm. Harry?” Draco asked, pulling away from the kiss.

“Yes?”

“Is it alright if I give you your present now?” Draco looked excited.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. “Is it you? Because you shouldn’t bother with the wrapping. I like you better without any.”

Draco laughed. “Then you’ll love your present. And no, it isn’t me.” He went to his trunk and rummaged around for a bit before returning with a soft brown package.

“This doesn’t mean I’m letting you open yours early, you know.” Harry teased, but took the package and worked it open anyway. He was confused at first. It was a long, deep red, quilted… dressing gown.

“Now you have no excuse to be improperly dressed in the mornings. No matter who comes to visit – friend or monster.” Draco laughed.

Harry laughed too. “Does this mean you don’t like my new towel? You were finally warming up to seeing me in it after my morning showers.” He teased.

“Oh, I don’t mind that. Just so that it is me who gets to do the looking. I’d rather keep you for myself, thanks.” Malfoy gave Harry an affectionate peck.

“Okay. So long as I can keep you too.” Harry kissed him back.

THE END

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